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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Acedia, loneliness, and the mandatory celibacy of Catholic parish clergy: a theological-sociological exploratory analysis

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Abstract

This article utilizes the analytical concept of acedia as the fundamental theoretical framework and applies a systematic literature review of peer-reviewed materials and documents on spiritual sloth, spiritual dryness, Catholic clerical celibacy, social bonding and communal spirituality. This article explores how the Catholic parish clergy's mandatory celibacy intensifies loneliness and facilitates the spiritual sloth of parish clergy or what is theologically known as acedia. Unlike religious priests who live in religious communities, parish clerics fundamentally live, work, and pray alone in the parish, without strong communal support from fellow priests, bishops, and lay parishioners; thus, making them prone to loneliness, a main component of acedia. This article argues that mandatory celibacy further deprives parish clerics of the social and spiritual support necessary to enhance diocesan clerical spirituality and strengthen spiritual resistance against acedia. It recommends a structural adjustment in the social and spiritual life of parish priests, creating small communities of priests situated in similar territory or districts to allow them to live and work as a team with strong social and spiritual support in the spirit of "living baptismally" to overcome priestly acedia.

Keywords

Celibacy, Acedia, Clerical Spirituality, Loneliness, Catholic Parish Clergy, Social Bonding, Diocesan Priesthood

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Introduction

The concept of acedia has recently garnered attention from some practical theologians and Catholic scholars in relation to the priesthood (e.g., [McAlinden, 2014, 2015](#); [Collingridge, 2019](#); [Büssing, Starck, and van Treeck, 2021](#)). Acedia is a Medieval theological concept that originated from the Greek *accidie*, which literally means “no caring” (a-, not; kedos, care). Although unable to capture its true meaning, it is popularly translated in English as sloth ([Miles, 1985](#)). Cardinal Quillet sees acedia as spiritual sloth, sadness, and a disgust with the things of God, driving monks to leave their monastic cells and abandon their intimacy with God ([Nault, 2013](#)).

Acedia is one of the several Christian notions of spiritual dryness in theological literature. Ignatius of Loyola (1914), for instance, used the term “spiritual desolation” for dryness in prayer. St. John of the Cross called spiritual dryness the “dark night of the soul”, a form of spiritual purification for Christians ([Büssing, Starck, and van Treeck, 2021](#)). But the ascetic monk Evagrius Pontifikus (345–399), who popularized this concept in Catholic theological literature, views acedia as spiritual sloth, emotional fatigue, tired or even bored negligence that reduces prayer resulting in abandonment of spiritual life ([Büssing, Starck, and van Treeck, 2021](#)). Acedia is also associated with the group of feelings and behaviors that were considered unusual, undesirable, and indicative of a need for remedial attention. In the words of John Cassian (ca. A.D. 360–435), acedia is a weariness or distress of heart, akin to dejection ([Jackson, 1986](#)).

In Catholic priesthood, acedia has been connected to “a loss of taste or lack of care for the spiritual life leading eventually to questioning both the meaning of the spiritual life and priesthood” ([Tomlinson, 2019](#): 177). It is a serious spiritual crisis, a “sense of carelessness, indifference, apathy, weariness, and discouragement that encourages priests to leave the priesthood or degrade their sacred vocation” ([McAlinden, 2015](#): 269). There have been significant attempts to connect acedia to the current problems of Catholic priesthood (e.g., [McAlinden, 2014, 2015](#); [Morris, 2019](#); [Tomlinson, 2019](#)), but no research has considered mandatory celibacy as a primary contributory factor behind it. Thus, [Morris \(2019: 20\)](#) is correct when he claimed that no qualitative research has been done to focus on the clergy experiences of acedia. Specifically, there is a dearth of literature that analyzes the connection between clerical acedia and mandatory celibacy of parish clergy using both theological and sociological approaches. Owing to lack of integration of the social sciences in Catholic theology, most studies and literature on Catholic clerical celibacy (e.g., *Sacerdotalis Caelibatus* [Priestly Celibacy], 1967; [Daly, 2009](#); [Selin, 2016](#)) and acedia focus more on its spiritual aspects (e.g., [Nault, 2013](#); [McAlinden, 2014, 2015](#); [Tomlinson, 2019](#)), thus tending to disregard their sociological and structural dimensions. Spiritual realities have structural and communal components, and thus require sociological analysis. As [Dawson \(2013\)](#) argues, material and spiritual factors interpenetrate one another so completely in a culture that they form an inseparable unity, so that religion and life become one. [Starkloff \(1994\)](#) warned that there are “webs of meaning” that constitute cultural systems and cautioned theologians against isolating individuals from their own authentic environment. Thus, applying both the theological and sociological approaches can provide a holistic understanding of the dynamics of clerical acedia or spiritual sloth in actual social practice. This article aims to explore the spiritual and sociological factors behind the loneliness and laziness in clerical spiritual life: Does mandatory celibacy facilitate the current problem of loneliness and acedia or spiritual sloth among Catholic parish clerics? Specifically, it aims to explore how celibacy intensifies loneliness of Catholic priests in the parish and diminishes the communal aspect of clerical spirituality. It also intends to provide some recommendations on how Catholic parish clergy can overcome acedia and spiritual sloth if the Catholic Church does not allow married priesthood in the future.

Both acedia and celibacy denote loneliness and isolation for the parish clergy. The detachment diocesan priests experience from communal activity and support in the parish can provide a fertile ground for symptoms of priestly acedia. Absolute chastity for diocesan priests implies social isolation without a family or intimate support group which normally provide social bonding and spiritual support to inhibit sin and deviance. It also results in an unregulated life without intimate social bonding and common spiritual activities with fellow priests in the presbytery or religious community, which is normally experienced by religious clerics in the Roman Catholic Church (RCC) ([Aschenbrenner, 2002](#)). Sociological studies have shown that social bonding is one of the crucial factors for the inhibition of deviance (e.g., [Akers and Cochran, 1985](#); [Hirschi, 2009](#); [Liljeberg et al., 2011](#)). When members of the community form local social ties, their capacity to resist rule-breaking behavior increases because they can recognize strangers and are more apt to engage in guardianship behavior against victimization ([Skogan, 1986](#): 216).

Aside from lack of social bonding, clericalism in the Roman Catholic Church (RCC) is also blamed for clerical abuses such as clerical sexual abuse (CSA) (e.g., [Papesh, 2004](#); [Wilson, 2008](#); [Neuhaus, 2008](#); [Plante, 2020](#)) that can result in degradation of clerical spirituality and acedia. [Shaw \(2008\)](#) defines clericalism as “an elitist mindset, together with structures and patterns of behavior corresponding to it, which takes it for granted that clerics—in the Catholic context, mainly bishops and priests—are intrinsically superior to the other members of the Church and deserve automatic deference.” It sees the clergy as a privileged class in the Church and gives an impression to the laity that bishops and

priests know best, resulting in the reluctance to acknowledge or report the clerical misconduct. Other studies also consider psychological factors such as the psychological past and formation of the priest as a factor in CSA. The 2011 national research commissioned by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) on CSA, the John Jay College of Criminology study, for instance, largely blames the problematic past and psychological formation of priests and seminarians as encouraging CSA (John Jay College, 2004).

Despite these external and internal factors that cause CSA and degrading of clerical spirituality, the RCC considers the abusive priest himself as ultimately responsible for committing CSA. Bishops and Church officials continue to view CSA in terms of personal sin and the moral fault of the priest (Doyle, 2006). CSA is sometimes preceded by the neglect of clerical prayer and spiritual life by the priest which can lead to acedia and weakening of his spiritual resistance against CSA (Cross and Toma, 2006). Acedia can encourage priests to degrade their vocation by committing clerical abuses such as CSA or by leaving the priesthood. The acedic condition manifests itself “in carelessness about the disciplines that nurture the spiritual life, presenting as a variety of psychosomatic symptoms: lack of self-care, emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and a diminished sense of accomplishment” (Tomlinson, 2019, 177). Cases of CSA are usually precluded by a collapse of clerical prayer life (Cross and Thoma, 2006). Thus, the priest can be seen to be responsible for any CSA which can be attributed in part to neglect of prayer life that leads to acedia and erosion of spiritual strength against the temptation of CSA. Mandatory celibacy for parish clergy also takes away the mutual support and communal spirituality that can strengthen the priest’s prayer life against acedia and clerical abuse.

Absolute privacy, which is a result of clerical celibacy, can potentially influence crimes in the parish such as CSA because of the absence of behavioral monitoring by brother priests (John Jay College, 2004). And when clerical ascetical discipline of the priest is weak due to neglect and lack of social bonding and communal spirituality, priests can become vulnerable to acedia resulting in the weakening of spiritual resistance against CSA and other serious sins. The power from not being under the surveillance of others is a social factor why religious leaders such as priests have the potential to engage in serious crimes such as sexual abuse (Capps, 1993). The autonomous lifestyle of celibate diocesan priests can be argued to be conducive to acedia and CSA. Wortley and Smallbone’s research (2006), for instance, revealed that CSA is usually committed in a private setting. Detachment from community surveillance in this sense can be seen to facilitate clerical misconduct with the absence of effective guardians.

This article explores how the mandatory celibacy for parish clergy greatly facilitates loneliness and clerical acedia among parish clerics in the RCC and proposes some structural reform to overcome it. It is divided into three major sections. The first section briefly discusses how celibacy deprives parish priests of the basic human need for social bonding and mutual support needed to lead a normal human and spiritual life to resist acedia. The second section explains the negative effect of mandatory celibacy on the clerical spirituality of Catholic parish clergy, which already lacks communal dimension, arguing that spirituality has both personal and social dimensions. The final section recommends some structural adjustments on how the parish clergy can overcome acedia despite mandatory celibacy in the RCC. Overall, it argues that mandatory celibacy, which deprives parish priests of mutual support, intimacy, and direct social control of their clerical behavior, can greatly facilitate acedia in Catholic diocesan priesthood. Compared to religious priests, diocesan clerics generally live alone in the parish without any intimate social bonding with their fellow priests and parishioners in the parish, thus making them prone to loneliness and acedia.

Methods

This article used the qualitative research approach and fully utilized documentary data from published theological, sociological, and social science literature on acedia, clerical spirituality, loneliness, and mandatory celibacy for Catholic priests. It also cited some of the RCC’s official teachings and the Code of Canon law to briefly clarify the ecclesial understanding of celibacy, clerical spirituality, and Catholic priesthood. The textual data are largely collected from church documents, as well as from peer-reviewed journal articles and books. They were then organized according to the main themes and keywords of the study such as celibacy, acedia, clerical spirituality, loneliness, Catholic parish clergy, social bonding, and diocesan priesthood. These were then systematically classified and composed using the inductive, deductive, and comparative methods to achieve the study’s research objectives.

Mandatory celibacy as facilitating loneliness and acedia

The practical theologian Martin McAlinden (2014) sees loneliness and isolation as two of the major contributors of acedia in the Catholic parish priesthood. He blames the doctrine and practice of celibacy for Catholic clergy as a major facilitator of clerical isolation that can lead to the experience and development of acedia (Collingridge, 2019). Although described by the RCC as “a precious gift from God” (Code of Canon Law 1983, para. 277) and as a “brilliant jewel in the crown of the priesthood” (*Sacerdotalis Caelibatus* [Celibacy of the Priest], 1967, para. 1) that facilitates priests’ full devotion to their Church ministry (Isacco, Sahker, and Krinock, 2016), mandatory celibacy can also heighten the loneliness of parish clergy who normally live alone in the parish without intimate support groups.

Some scientific studies have already revealed several negative effects of celibacy in Catholic priesthood in contemporary times (e.g., Wills, 2000; Scheper-Hughes and Devine, 2003; Doyle, 2006; Mayblin, 2018), and it is mostly associated with the alarming problem of loneliness, a key component of acedia (Rausch, 1992; Hoge, 2002; John Jay College, 2004). Hoge's (2002) study involving newly ordained priests, for instance, confirmed the difficult and demoralizing clerical life and ministry because of loneliness, which can have a direct effect on their decision to stay within or leave the priesthood. Declan Moriarte, a former parish priest in Ireland for 40 years, for example, published an article explaining why celibacy and loneliness constituted a major reason of why he left the priesthood. His personal testimony below also shows serious symptoms of acedia as celibacy and loneliness drove him to question God's presence and leave the priesthood:

It took many years finally to make the decision to leave the priesthood. It was at times an intense feeling of loneliness and constant self-questioning along with self-doubt. I sought advice, I entered therapy, I hated myself, I hated my indecision, I felt depressed, I felt angry with myself, and I felt God had vanished when my need was greatest ... Celibacy/sexuality is often seen as the only factor in the decision to leave the ministry. For myself celibacy meant loneliness, lack of intimacy, lack of emotional growth and lack of maturity. Yes, it was a major factor in my decision to leave. I had become convinced that my call to the priesthood was valid, but the imposition of celibacy was not (Moriarte, 2016: 34-35).

Another former priest, Jonathan Morris, who joined the Fox News in the US, also cited celibacy as a major reason why he left the ministry:

Taking that step was something I had considered often and at length in years past and discussed with my spiritual guides. While I loved and thrived in so many aspects of my ministry, deep in my interior I struggled for years with my vocation and with the commitments the Catholic priesthood demands, especially not being able to marry and have a family (Morris, 2019, para. 2) .

In another study by Hoge, Shield, and Griffin (1995), loneliness is also found to be one of the main sources of stress for priests, together with other factors such as lack of support, encouragement from fellow priests, and lack of leadership (Raj and Dean, 2005). Unlike religious priests who live with their religious communities, diocesan clerics live autonomous lives with limited social bonding and communal prayer activities with their bishops and fellow priests in the presbytery.

Celibacy creates a solitary life for parish clerics that can lead to spiritual dryness and acedia. It hinders the human and spiritual growth of secular priests in the deregulated environment of the parish. The early data of the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) survey at the University of Chicago showed that belief in the personal value of celibacy was waning among Catholic priests who believed that the restriction on marriage can be so costly to human growth that they leave the ministry to restore consonance between sexuality and spirituality (NORC, 1972). A study by Bauman *et al.* (2019) that analyzed data sets of 2,531 priests in Germany confirmed that low commitment to celibacy is also connected to spiritual dryness and loneliness. Its regression analyses also revealed that loneliness as an inability to be alone is connected to spiritual dryness (Bauman *et al.*, 2019).

Philip Sheldrake (1994) argues that the celibacy is only a reflection of the superstructure of celibate culture that sees human intimacy as a distraction of one's attention from God. Following Karl Marx's theory, reality has been divided into two main strata: The base or the material infrastructure or economic system and the superstructure or the dominant idea systems in society such as culture that reflect the base. For Marx, dominant beliefs are only a reflection of the material reality in society (Williams, 1973). Thus, in the RCC, the dominant belief on the centrality of celibacy in the priesthood is only a reflection of the clericalist culture that primarily sees human sexuality as lust and distraction, dividing the priest's attention in the ministry if he is married or having a sexual relation. But this view is opposed by Sheldrake who contends that the newer understandings of sexuality are focused on human connection rather than lust (Sheldrake, 1994). To him, the problem of celibacy is not only about a deprivation of sexual intercourse but also a denial of the positive values of relatedness and collaboration which are at the heart of sexuality. Clerical celibacy, therefore, alienates priests from human positive values of intimacy, relatedness, and mutual support which are crucial in the development of a healthy human sexuality (Sheldrake, 1994).

In the absence of a family and intimate group support in the parish, a celibate life is suited for religious priests who live in religious or monastic communities, but not for diocesan priests who usually live alone in their parishes. In fact, during the early years of the RCC, celibacy was practiced by monastic priests with strong asceticism and involved in religious communal life (Scheper-Hughes and Devine, 2003). But practicing celibacy in contemporary environments with a high level of social alienation can intensify the loneliness of the parish clergy. In the contemporary world, celibacy seems little more than cultural survival of the priesthood than an aid to spiritual growth for priests (Scheper-Hughes and Devine, 2003). Currently, Catholic diocesan priests, especially in the US, serve complex communities in highly urbanized

settings. These communities are “increasingly multicultural and multiethnic because of changing immigration patterns set off by the globalization process and the availability of accessible travel. The pre-modern, modern, and postmodern worlds exist side by side, each demanding attention” (Hoge, 2002: ix), making clerical life and pastoral work in the parish more complex and stressful for priests. At present, many priests are assigned as pastors in multiple parishes. This implies that parish structures change as society becomes more complex (Froehle, 2007). Mandatory celibacy complicates Catholic priestly life. It restricts the pool of eligible candidates for priesthood and diminishes its quality. Daly (2029), for instance, argues that currently the population of priests is fast decreasing and is headed for extinction in Europe and in the Americas. “Worldwide, the number of Catholic priests has ‘flatlined’ at about 400,000 for the last 50 years ... In the U.S., priestly vocations declined drastically by 40 percent because of celibacy” (Daly, 2019, para. 12).

Celibacy and the communal aspect of parish clerical spirituality

Spirituality is recognized as a resource to cope with burdening life events and chronic illness. It has both personal and communal dimensions. Monks of the early Christian era who experienced *acedia* live isolated lives and become neglectful of their communal rules on prayer. Nurturing personal spirituality needs some form of communal activities to strengthen it. Stark *et al.* (1980, 1982), concluded that communities displaying high levels of religious integration (“moral communities”) are the most effective in promoting conformity to the moral order. Enhancing the priest’s private spirituality also requires role modelling, communal prayer, and imitating the strong religiosity of fellow priests. Social support theory suggests that religious groups can promote positive behaviors through peer and adult modeling (Smith, 2003; Wallace and Forman, 1999). Social support can be a treatment for strain and can directly reduce anxiety (Beehr and McGrath, 1992). Thus, if diocesan priests of nearby parishes can live together as a small intimate community, social support can treat a lot of clerical problems such as loneliness, neglect of prayer, and even sexual abuse. Currently, the diocesan community of priests called a *presbytery* is a loose religious community which cannot provide strong peer support and modeling to support the spiritual formation of priests.

Mandatory clerical celibacy does not only facilitate loneliness but also diminishes the communal aspect of spirituality and encourages solitary spiritual life that can lead to spiritual negligence and *acedia* for parish clerics with the absence of communal monitoring and support for individual spirituality. A priest’s intimacy with God is crucial for their psychological health which can inhibit loneliness and *acedia*. Isacco *et al.* (2016), for instance, discovered that priests’ relationship with God has a positive effect on their psychological well-being. Catholic priests are less likely to be burned out, for instance, compared to people in other professions because of their strong relationship with God (Rossetti and Rhoades, 2013). Rossetti and Rhoades (2013) also discovered that a relationship with God is among the highest factors related to priests’ happiness in a sample of 2,482 priests.

But achieving a strong relationship with God is not only a personal effort but also a communal one. With celibacy and the absence of an intimate group such as the family, which the RCC’s calls the domestic church, a healthy spirituality requires a mutual support, role modelling, social bonding, and communal spiritual activities to deepen priests’ relationship with God. Absolute privacy, created by celibacy, isolation, and increased workload in the parish, can lead to spiritual sloth, negligence, spiritual dryness, and eventually *acedia*. *Acedia* is a state that lacks mutual care between parish clerics, bishops, and the lay community in the parish and diocese with the current celibate parish priesthood. It is “an unhealthy clerical discipleship where there is a lack of care or support for the priest by the community, or a lack of encouragement of the laity or unwillingness on their part to get involved in the pastoral life of the parish” (McAlinden, 2015: 273). In an *acedic* parish community, diocesan clerics can become lukewarm or neglectful of their spiritual duties without guardianship and companionship of fellow celibate priests. The local lay community is also apathetic towards the personal and spiritual needs of their parish priests, thus contributing to the serious vocational crisis that can encourage priests to leave the priesthood or commit clerical sexual abuse (CSA) as celibate priests and spiritual leaders (McAlinden, 2015).

CSA threatens the existence of the Church, destroying the credibility of the entire institution and some of its leaders (Orobator, 2011, 7). The CSA in the RCC started to emerge publicly in the United States (US) in 1984 with the publicized case of Fr. Gilbert Gauthier, a diocesan priest of Lafayette who committed a series of child sexual abuse crimes between the 1970s to 1980s (Ballano, 2020). This was followed by a series of reports on CSA by Boston Globe and other media outlets on more than 3,700 clerics, mostly diocesan, who abused more than 16,000 victims (Bishop Accountability, 2011). Later, a Pennsylvania investigation by a grand jury also showed more than 300 diocesan priests abused 1,000 children over a period of 70 years (Goodstein and Otherman, 2018). Some studies indicated that CSA is facilitated by the absolute privacy of priests where victims were alone with predator clerics in the parish or rectory (e.g., Garland and Argueta, 2010; Wortley and Smallbone’s research (2006). Absolute privacy, primarily caused by clerical celibacy in the parish, can facilitate CSA because of the absence of behavioral monitoring by brother priests (John Jay College, 2004). And when clerical ascetical discipline is weak owing to the lack of social bonding and communal spirituality, priests can become

vulnerable to various sins such as CSA (Cross and Thoma, 2006). Susan Collingridge (2019) aptly describes the solitary life of typical contemporary lone-working priests in the parish without a strong support of the laity and fellow priests:

They will work alone and eat alone. They will pray alone and sleep in an otherwise empty house. Not only that, but with fewer priests being ordained, today's priests are both isolated as lone clergy in the presbytery, and also managing an increased workload (Collingridge, 2019: 122).

McAlinden (2015, 269) argues, “[i]f the church as institution or the parish community is acedic then its ability to care for clergy is diminished. If clergy perceive the church not to care, then a logical parallel process is priestly acedia”, which can encourage priests to degrade their vocation, resulting in various forms of abuse such as CSA. And this is usually precluded by a collapse of clerical ascetical discipline (Cross and Thoma, 2006).

Overcoming loneliness and acedia in parish priesthood

Allowing optional celibacy or married priesthood can provide the parish clergy with an intimate support group such as the family, which can be considered as the priest's *domus ecclesiae* or domestic church, to minimize loneliness, isolation, vocation crisis, and prevent serious symptoms of acedia. Despite calls to amend the rules on celibacy, the RCC currently remains adamant to allow it. Thus, to resist acedia, some structural adjustments must be made to minimize the loneliness of diocesan priests in their parishes. As Collingridge (2019: 118) argues, “the priests’ need for intimacy is not a naïve return to their families of origin to gain greater support. Rather, it is through a maturing personal awareness that they are able to be part of that family network in a healthy way”. Thus, Friedman (1985) recommends that parish clerics must live together in the presbytery as family-like groups with professional and spiritual support, companionship with peers and social interaction, to fight the sin of acedia. Living alone in the parish can lead to loneliness, a major component of acedia or spiritual sloth. Without a communal life, clerical diocesan spirituality can become individualist, lacking in public spirituality and role modeling of fellow priests. As shown in the study, isolation can lead to neglect of prayer life, spiritual dryness and eventually acedia. Thus, an alternative structure must be built in the parish where lay leaders and priests in nearby parishes meet regularly for communal prayer and social support.

The parish clergy in the contemporary world is largely living and ministering alone in the parish or community with mandatory celibacy, thus making them prone to isolation and acedia. In this regard, greater social bonding is necessary for parish clergy to cope with the stress and pressure of priestly ministry. The parish clergy’s “commitment to a single life must be met with an equally strong facilitation of opportunities for meaningful close interaction and partnership for them, not just as professional clergy, but as human beings” (Collingridge, 2019: 118). The RCC needs to create alternative structures such as small communities of priests living in the same territory or district, with priests working as team in the ministry, imitating the communal life of religious priests.

Furthermore, addressing the solitary and acedic diocesan spirituality requires what McAlinden (2015) calls “living baptismally”. This implies establishing a flourishing priestly and lay discipleship in the parish with a commitment to collaborative ministry that provides mutual care. This entails a holistic conversion, “[f]aithfulness to prayer, celebrating the sacraments with meaning, commitment to nurturing spiritual practices which foster one’s relationship with God and oneself” (McAlinden, 2015: 274). Being baptized into a community demands the development of ways to pray with others and to grow spiritually. Thus, to become part of a flourishing parish community that is resistant to acedia implies establishing more parish spiritual communal activities such as a joint parish recollection or retreat between priests and lay leaders. A regular sharing of faith experiences in the parish between priests and lay leaders can also be a meaningful way to foster a strong spiritual community to counteract acedia.

Finally, “living baptismally” demands a resilient spirituality that overcomes the limitations of spiritual formation and the anomic spirituality structure in the diocesan ministry. It requires creative ways to fill the gap between the monastic spiritual training in the seminary and the unregulated and individualist structure of clerical parish spirituality to “remain in one’s cell” and overcome the snares of acedia. “The sacrament of baptism offers a model for priestly living in the contemporary world which considers crises and acedia as invitations to renewed discipleship rather than despair” (McAlinden, 2015: 273), bearing in mind Christ’s promise in the Gospel to His faithful disciples that He will prepare a place for them in His Father’s house (John 14:4).

Conclusion

This article has illustrated that mandatory celibacy among Catholic priests, especially for parish clergy, intensifies loneliness and isolation of parish priests who generally live autonomous life in the parish. Mandatory celibacy also magnifies the solitude and seclusion of diocesan clerics who normally live and work alone in their parishes. Celibacy creates a solitary life for diocesan priests which can lead to lack of spiritual role modelling of fellow priests, spiritual dryness, and eventually acedia. It hinders the human and spiritual growth of the parish clergy in the deregulated

environment of the parish. Celibacy can also diminish the communal aspects of spirituality and encourage an individualist spiritual life which can result in spiritual negligence, sloth, and acedia for parish clerics with the absence of communal monitoring and support. In this case, the RCC must reevaluate the relevance of mandatory celibacy of the parish clergy in contemporary times as several empirical and scientific studies have shown its negative effect on the priest's spiritual, social, and psychological life. Christ only recommends optional celibacy to his disciples. Celibacy is not a dogma but only a disciplinary measure which can be abolished. In the light of the growing clerical problems such as sexual abuse, which is precluded by a weakening of clerical asceticism, acedia, and loneliness, it is time for the RCC to consider allowing married priests or optional celibacy for parish clergy.

If optional celibacy or married priesthood is not allowed by the RCC soon, the Catholic hierarchy of bishops needs to create alternative structures to allow greater social and spiritual intimacy for parish priests in order to avoid loneliness and acedia. This article recommends the creation of small clerical communities of diocesan priests situated in similar districts or territories to enhance social bonding, mutual support, and communal spirituality to strengthen the spirituality of the parish clergy against acedia. Lastly, by applying both theological and sociological perspectives to understand how celibacy greatly contributes to the loneliness and acedic life of priests in the parish, such as the lack social support and mandatory celibacy that facilitate it, this study departs from other studies on acedia. Unlike previous studies, this research provides an empirical assessment using sociological and social science theories and methods on the spiritual phenomenon called acedia or spiritual sloth in relation to mandatory celibacy in the Catholic diocesan priesthood.

Data availability

All data underlying the results are available as part of the article and no additional source data are required.

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Lluis Oviedo

Theology Faculty, Antonianum University, Rome, Italy

The article offers a good systematic review on the topic of acedia in Catholic celibacy clergy. From this point of view the article is exhaustive and there is few we can add.

My own empirical work on consecrated men in the Catholic Church tells me about some more circumstances to take into account. Indeed, the main thesis that the article advances is that loneliness in diocesan clergy would be a main cause of distress and even abuses. There is some evidence that points in that direction, especially for the cases of abuses, but there are surely more factors involved. Indeed, it is quite intriguing that many priests in the communitarian religious life choose in the last years to leave this condition to become diocesan lonely priests; as if this other option would be perceived as more convenient. Other factor the article does not considers is the growing "homosexualization" in several areas of Catholic clergy, which adds another level of complexity.

In my opinion we need much more empirical research, beyond reviewing the available studies, to better address this question, and to help people in that condition to cope with it.

Is the work clearly and accurately presented and does it cite the current literature?

Yes

Is the study design appropriate and is the work technically sound?

Partly

Are sufficient details of methods and analysis provided to allow replication by others?

Partly

If applicable, is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?

Not applicable

Are all the source data underlying the results available to ensure full reproducibility?

No source data required

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results?

Yes

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: Studies of religious life, secularization and religious revival

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard, however I have significant reservations, as outlined above.

Reviewer Report 08 March 2022

<https://doi.org/10.5256/f1000research.58187.r121467>

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Mark Regnerus

Department of Sociology, University of Texas at Austin, Austin, TX, USA

This is an interesting article, but is basically a literature review aimed at supporting one thesis—that celibacy contributes to acedia, and with it additional problems that plague priests.

I'm familiar with the argument, but I had supposed there would be an empirical assessment of sorts, but the "data" here are just previous studies purported to be the data for a "qualitative research approach." Don't call it research per se; call it a literature review, a "state of the science" of sorts. (That said, it's a pretty strong and ranging literature review.)

Some pressing questions, observations, and criticisms:

It's redundant. The reader is told at least seven times that living alone in a parish predicts loneliness, and in turn leads to spiritual sloth (or acedia).

There is a tacit causal assumption that this process contributes to criminal sexual abuse (of either sex, though most of the recent troubles have concerned the molestation of pre- and adolescent boys) despite the fact that the various reports about such (John Jay, etc.) have taken pains to distance themselves from implying that celibacy contributes to such—so far as I can tell. The fact is—there is not ample research on this. It's a difficult matter to study.

Acedia, as I understand it, is considered a personal vice. The article implies this about priests—that they are prone to it, but then elevates it to a congregational-level trait, even a diocesan one.

I agree that "behavioral monitoring by brother priests" (page 4) is a safeguard. It's also not failsafe

by any stretch. I'm aware of numerous incidences of priestly misconduct by men who *were* monitored by fellow priests.

There's a causal order concern I have. The author blames celibacy, and claims it causes loneliness, which in turn prompts acedia. But others perceive a different etiology to it—that our habits (of thought, practice, etc.) can invite acedia, which in turn fosters despair (of God's love and mercy) and sadness. Reinhard Hutter (2012, *First Things*) notes that such a sadness “that will always cause problems.” Hence, the causal order may not be as obvious as the author suggests.

The author poses an interesting answer—the end of priestly celibacy—that is arguably unnecessary if the Church enables the formation of the author's back-up plan: the formation of communities for priests to live in. So is the problem a lack of access to marriage to a woman (and then a family)? Or is the problem lack of brotherhood? They are both forms of companionship, and both rich in satisfactions. But they are quite different. So then basically, is this about sex or is it about fellowship of a sort? I think the author points more frequently to the latter, but nevertheless considers the former the central problem.

Fewer of the globe's men and women are marrying, and at later and later ages. Hence, it can hardly be said that the population of priests is rapidly declining **because** marriage has become more pivotally important in the society around them. No, celibacy has lost cultural respect among many, while the presumed pleasures of access to sex (variety? consistency?) seem too important to forego. Basically, the priestly shortage is a complex thing. Moreover, because of clergy sexual abuse (again, mostly of boys), the barrier to the priesthood has shifted in many locales—to include evidence of a stable heterosexual orientation (see the Dallas Charter).

Moreover, some priests do live in fellowship with other priests. The author seems to presume (page 3 of the pdf) a “lack of social bonding” is the reality in the Church. It may be for plenty of priests; it is not for many others. They form friendships with fellow priests, even those who don't live with another priest, and/or they form friendships with parishioners' families. Will this solve the acedia challenge? For many, yes. But it doesn't rid one of temptation. Celibacy is a challenge even for the sociable priest. While the author blames celibacy for fostering acedia, other observers (like Hutter) blame pornography for the same. Would a spouse render pornography less attractive? Not by much, according to real data on the subject.

Bottom line is: celibacy is difficult, but hardly impossible. Sociability and friendship are important. Acedia is corrosive. But this study, lacking an empirical test, can only lean on previous studies to impugn celibacy. We can't actually know from this study what is to blame for acedia (which is not a simple thing to measure, either.)

Is the work clearly and accurately presented and does it cite the current literature?

Partly

Is the study design appropriate and is the work technically sound?

No

Are sufficient details of methods and analysis provided to allow replication by others?

No

If applicable, is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?

Not applicable

Are all the source data underlying the results available to ensure full reproducibility?

Partly

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results?

No

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: Sexual relationship behavior, marriage, religion, and methodology.

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to state that I do not consider it to be of an acceptable scientific standard, for reasons outlined above.

Author Response 04 Apr 2022

Vivencio Vivencio, Polytechnic University of the Philippines, Manila, Philippines

Dear Dr. Mark Regnerus,

Peace of Christ!

Thank you so much for reviewing this article, primarily from a sociological point of view. It is a privilege to have you as a reviewer for this article. I am posting my response here with the hope that you consider changing your final verdict.

First of all, this article is not a literature review but qualitative secondary research that aims to explore a new research question on the relationship between celibacy, loneliness, and acedia using both theological and sociological approaches. It also attempts to "inculturate" (Inculturation is a buzzword in the Catholic Church which refers to the process of adapting the Christian faith in society as well as the adoption of the social sciences for evangelization) or adapt some sociological perspectives on the current theological issue of spiritual sloth and celibacy. For the distinction between a literature review and secondary analysis research see <https://sru.soc.surrey.ac.uk/SRU22.html>

Second, this article adopts an emic perspective on the diocesan clerical formation and lifestyle, and pastoral background on the central issue. I believe that Dr. Regnerus missed the big difference in communal life between religious and diocesan priests. As a former diocesan and Jesuit seminarian for 10 years, I am aware of how diocesan spirituality and imposed celibacy can make parish clergy very lonely, lacking communal support from fellow priests and their bishops which really lead to spiritual sloth, while religious clergy generally has strong spiritual and communal support, although the Jesuit communal life is more similar to diocesan clerical life. The issue of loneliness and acedia is not more about the lack of sexuality in marriage but largely as a consequence of the solitary life due to celibacy. In

the sociology of deviance, social bonding in a primary group such as the family is crucial against deviance. Although not an assurance that acedia and clerical abuse can be abolished, married priesthood can contribute a lot to more guardianship against sexual abuse. I discussed this in my Springer book on clerical sexual abuse (<https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-981-13-8825-5>). Since I am aware that the Catholic Church is still not open to the married priesthood after the Amazon Synod in Rome, I recommended in this article the social bonding of diocesan priests who live in a common district to form a communal life.

In this article, I really attempt to incorporate sociological perspectives to explain a more theological issue on celibacy and acedia in the Catholic Church. Many of my publications are attempts to "inculturate" or provide the empirical foundation and sociological analysis on church issues which are predominantly dominated by spiritual and theological perspectives of theologians in Catholic research and literature. With the foregoing, I hope that Dr. Mark would consider changing his overall judgment on this article. I am willing to revise this version following his other comments for this article. Thank you and God bless!

Sincerely,
Dr. Vivencio Ballano

Competing Interests: No competing interest.

Reviewer Report 07 March 2022

<https://doi.org/10.5256/f1000research.58187.r125422>

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Edward Vacek

Loyola University New Orleans, New Orleans, LA, USA

The Catholic Church is going through crisis times. One area is a challenge to the idea and practice of priestly celibacy. The New Testament indicates that even St. Peter, the putative first pope, was married. In his letter to Timothy (4:1-16), St. Paul rejects those "who forbid marriage....For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer." Through the first 1000 years of the Church's history, priest were able to marry. Martin Luther and other Reformers held that celibacy was a mistake and they encouraged marriage for priests. Eastern Orthodox priests, who are currently in communion with the Roman Catholic Church, can and do marry. Even now, Protestant married priests who convert to Catholicism are able to remain in their marriage. So there is no intrinsic contradiction with Catholic priests being married. Non-marriage for Catholic priests is a discipline, not a dogma.

However, Jesus, by his own example and teaching, did offer an invitation to celibacy. He praised those who “became eunuchs” for the sake of the Kingdom (Matt 19:12). St Paul (1 Cor. 7:27) similarly urged the advantages of remaining celibate, in order to dedicate oneself to God’s work.

The present article by Vivencio Ballono argues for an intermediate arrangement for priestly living. While it seems that the author would prefer making priestly celibacy optional in the Catholic Church, he offers a provisional alternative. Reflecting the insight of Genesis 2:18 (it is not good to be alone), his essay reflects mainly on the down sides of the single life. Jesus gathered around him 12 and more disciples who traveled with him. He sent his disciples out in pairs (Lk 10:1). So the wisdom of companionship is very important for many priests. But not all.

Many diocesan priests live solitary lives. The author calls attention to this and to the isolation that some diocesan priests feel. This is an important issue for the health of the priests and for the sense of community that is so much a part of Christian living. He proposes an alternative.

He recognizes that companionship is also important for priests. But questions are often raised when a priest gets too close to a few parishioners, particularly female congregants. The author proposes one worthwhile alternative, namely, that several priests in a region live communally. Their commitment to one another would be occasioned not by shared vows, such as in religious orders, but rather by the unity of priestly brotherhood. Their commitment likely would not be permanent, but provisional, since the bishop could and likely would pick one or other priest to serve in a different area of the dioceses. Their commitment to their own parish likely would be somewhat diminished.

Instead the author emphasizes the negative aspects of living alone. He neglects for the most part the positive aspects of priestly life, such as deep involvement in remedying or improving the lives of parishioners. He also overlooks the advantages of, e.g., a quiet evening after a full day of service. Many priests are happy introverts. He does not take into consideration the difficulties of living together. As one Jesuit saint remarked, “My greatest mortification is communal life.”

The living arrangements of Catholic priests changed greatly in New Testament times and down the ages. In the middle of the last century, many priests served with two or more other priests in the same parish. The great decrease in the number of priests makes that no longer possible. The author proposes another alternative that is worth trying.

See the attached file for detailed comments on the article: [Detailed comments from Edward Vacek](#).

Is the work clearly and accurately presented and does it cite the current literature?

Yes

Is the study design appropriate and is the work technically sound?

Yes

Are sufficient details of methods and analysis provided to allow replication by others?

Yes

If applicable, is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?

Not applicable

Are all the source data underlying the results available to ensure full reproducibility?

Yes

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results?

Partly

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

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