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Exploring Secular Mental Health Approaches: Basis for Mental Health Program

Jeffrey J Benlayo Rpm CHRA ^{1*}, Araceli B Paster ²

¹⁻² Pamantasan ng Cabuyao, Cabuyao, Laguna, Philippines

* Corresponding Author: Araceli B Paster, PhD, CHRA, CSPE, CRS

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Abstract

This study explored the lived experiences of 12 Augustinian priests as they reconciled their spiritual vocation with secular mental health approaches. Using a qualitative phenomenological design, data were gathered through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using thematic analysis. Findings revealed that priests see mental health as holistic inner integration of mind, heart, and spirit. Spirituality and psychological practices were perceived as complementary through discernment. Community life served both as support and as a strain, while cultural values, stigma, workload, and confidentiality influenced their help-seeking behaviors. Despite persistent barriers, openness toward mental health is increasing. The study proposes COR UNUM, a faith-integrated program supporting holistic, preventive, and sustainable mental health care.

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1. Introduction

Mental health has become an increasingly important global issue, affecting people across all sectors of society, including religious professionals. In the Philippines, cultural beliefs and stigma still influence how mental health is perceived and addressed. While spirituality remains a primary way to cope, relying solely on it can limit access to professional mental health services. Augustinian priests, as pastoral caregivers, face significant emotional and psychological challenges. Their roles include counseling, conflict resolution, and supporting vulnerable individuals, tasks that can lead to stress, burnout, and emotional exhaustion. Meanwhile, secular mental health methods such as counseling, mindfulness, and therapeutic techniques provide evidence-based tools for managing psychological distress. However, conflicts can arise when these approaches are viewed as conflicting with spiritual beliefs. This study explores how Augustinian priests reconcile these dual roles. Specifically, it examines their lived experiences of combining spirituality with secular mental health practices, the challenges they encounter, and the factors influencing help-seeking behaviors.

2. Method

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design to examine the lived experiences of Augustinian priests. The approach focused on understanding how participants interpret and integrate secular mental health practices within their spiritual vocation.

2.1. Problem formulation

This study aimed to explore the lived experiences of Augustinian priests as they integrate their spiritual vocation with secular mental health approaches. Specifically, it sought to answer the following questions:

What is the lived experience of Augustinian priests in reconciling their spiritual vocation with the use of secular mental health approaches?

Consequently, it also answered the following corollary questions:

1. How do Augustinian priests' personal experiences and relationships with others influence their use of secular mental health approaches within their spiritual and socio-cultural contexts?
2. What themes will emerge from the testimonies of Augustinian Priests in their secular mental health approach?
3. Based on the findings of the study, what program may be proposed?

2.2. Literature search

A review of relevant literature on clergy mental health, secular mental health approaches, spirituality, and cultural influences has been conducted to reinforce the study's theoretical foundation. The sources included journal articles, books, and studies on psychospiritual integration, Filipino cultural values, and the bioecological framework. These references helped develop the interview questions and analyze the findings.

2.3. Data evaluation

The data for this study were collected from twelve (12) Augustinian priests selected through purposive sampling. All participants met the inclusion criteria of having at least three years of ministry experience and active involvement in pastoral or related roles. The collected data were thoroughly evaluated for relevance, consistency, and depth of response. Verbatim transcripts were reviewed to ensure accuracy and

completeness. Nonverbal cues and participant observations were also considered to support interpretation.

2.4. Data analysis and interpretation

The study employed reflexive thematic analysis based on Braun and Clarke's framework. The process included:

- Familiarizing oneself with the data through repeated reading of transcripts
- Coding significant segments
- Developing themes by identifying recurring patterns
- Refining and interpreting the themes

The identified themes were examined within the bioecological model to understand how personal, relational, cultural, and institutional factors influence priests' mental health experiences. The interpretation focused on capturing shared meanings and lived experiences rather than making broad generalizations.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Results

The findings of this study highlight key themes that reflect the experiences of Augustinian priests as they navigate the intersection of spirituality and secular mental health practices, which are further examined in relation to existing literature.

Table 1: Summary of Emerging Themes from the Study

No.	Theme	Description
1	Mental Health as Holistic Inner Integration	Mental health is a holistic, integrated state involving the mind, emotions, and spirituality, in which inner harmony is important to personal well-being. For priests, this integration is not just a theoretical idea but a real part of their lives that supports their identity and calling. Instead of seeing mental health as separate from spiritual life, participants highlighted that psychological balance and spiritual groundedness are interconnected and mutually supportive. This view frames mental health as the foundation for genuine ministry, where self-awareness, emotional control, and spiritual harmony help priests serve others effectively and meaningfully.
2	Discerned Integration of Spirituality and Secular Mental Health Practices	Spirituality and secular psychological approaches are seen as complementary, and can be combined through deliberate discernment. Participants acknowledged that while spirituality offers meaning, purpose, and moral guidance, psychological methods provide practical tools for understanding and managing emotions. This integration isn't automatic; it requires careful reflection to ensure that secular strategies align with religious values and beliefs. Through this process, priests can adopt counseling, mindfulness, and other therapeutic practices without jeopardizing their faith, leading to a balanced approach that considers both spiritual and psychological aspects of well-being.
3	Community Life as Both Supportive and Emotionally Demanding	Religious community life plays a dual role in shaping mental health, functioning both as a source of emotional support and as a setting for interpersonal challenges. On one hand, shared routines, communal prayer, and brotherly relationships provide stability, a sense of belonging, and opportunities for emotional release. These elements foster a supportive environment that helps reduce stress and build resilience. On the other hand, the realities of communal living, including conflicts, misunderstandings, and differing personalities, can also cause emotional strain. This dual nature emphasizes the complexity of community life, where support and stress coexist, requiring priests to continually adapt and grow emotionally.
4	Emotional Labor and Relational Influence on Mental Health	The demands of ministry involve significant emotional effort, as priests regularly deal with the struggles, challenges, pain, and concerns of others. This ongoing exposure to others' emotional burdens can build up over time, leading to fatigue, stress, and vulnerability to burnout. Participants recognized that this part of ministry requires intentional coping strategies, including setting boundaries and practicing self-care. At the same time, personal relationships — especially with family, friends, and trusted confidants — act as vital sources of emotional support. These relationships offer safe spaces for expression and help mitigate the psychological impact of pastoral duties, thus maintaining overall well-being.
5	Cultural and Spiritual Frameworks Shaping Help-Seeking	Help-seeking behaviors among priests are influenced by the interaction of Filipino cultural values and Augustinian spiritual formation. Cultural norms such as <i>hiya</i> (a sense of shame), endurance, and emotional restraint often discourage the open expression of distress and delay seeking professional help. While these values foster resilience and self-discipline, they can also reinforce silence and internalization of struggles. Conversely, Augustinian spirituality highlights interiority, self-reflection, and personal awareness, encouraging individuals to honestly engage with their inner experiences. Together, these cultural and spiritual factors form a complex framework that both restricts and supports priests' approaches to mental health and help-seeking.

6	Persistent Barriers Rooted in Stigma, Time, and Institutional Constraints	Despite increasing awareness of mental health, several ongoing barriers still limit access to proper support. Social expectations that priests should embody strength and resilience help foster stigma and fear of judgment, making it hard to admit vulnerability. Concerns about confidentiality within institutions further discourage openness, as priests may worry their struggles could be misunderstood or leaked. Moreover, busy schedules and heavy workloads reduce chances for rest, reflection, and professional help. These external pressures are intensified by internal resistance, in which accepting the need for help becomes a personal hurdle, underscoring the complex challenge of seeking help in religious settings.
7	Growing Openness and Changing Perceptions of Mental Health	A gradual shift toward greater openness and acceptance of mental health is emerging within the priesthood. Participants observed that younger priests are more willing to discuss emotional struggles and seek support, reflecting generational differences in attitudes toward mental health. This shift has been further influenced by shared experiences, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, which exposed vulnerabilities and made conversations about well-being more normal. As a result, mental health is increasingly seen as a legitimate concern rather than a sign of weakness. This changing perspective indicates a cultural transformation within religious communities toward greater awareness, acceptance, and proactive engagement with mental health.
8	Preference for Practical, Faith-Compatible Secular Mental Health Strategies	Priests prefer practical, accessible psychological strategies that can be adapted to their spiritual beliefs. Techniques like mindfulness, breathing exercises, and counseling are valued for their effectiveness in managing stress and increasing self-awareness. However, these practices are not adopted without critique; instead, they are adjusted to ensure they align with religious values and spiritual commitments. Participants stressed that these strategies do not replace spiritual practices but rather complement and deepen them. This integrative approach reflects a pragmatic mindset, embracing mental health interventions that support both psychological well-being and spiritual growth.
9	Need for Holistic, Preventive, and Institutional Mental Health Support	There is a strong and consistent call for developing holistic and preventive mental health support systems within religious institutions. Participants highlighted the importance of creating safe, confidential spaces where priests can openly share their struggles without fear of judgment or repercussions. In addition to individual coping strategies, there is an acknowledged need for structured programs that address mental health proactively, emphasizing prevention over crisis intervention. These programs should combine psychological support with spiritual formation to ensure interventions are culturally sensitive and relevant. This theme emphasizes institutions' responsibility to cultivate environments that promote lasting well-being and support the holistic growth of their members.

4. Discussion

The findings of this study highlight that the mental health experiences of Augustinian priests are shaped by a dynamic interaction among spirituality, psychological practices, cultural influences, and institutional contexts. Instead of being opposed, spirituality and secular mental health approaches are integrated through discernment, reflecting a holistic view of well-being. This supports the idea that religion and mental health are not mutually exclusive but can be meaningfully combined in practice (Koenig, 2012; Richards & Pargament, 2024)^[10].

The concept of mental health as holistic inner integration reflects the multidimensional nature of well-being among religious individuals. Participants stressed the interconnectedness of mind, emotions, and spirituality, suggesting that psychological health is inseparable from spiritual identity. This view aligns with studies showing that spirituality contributes to resilience and overall well-being (Pargament, 2013; Gonçalves *et al.*, 2015)^[7, 4]. Additionally, this integrated approach reinforces the idea that mental health is essential for effective ministry, as emotional stability enhances compassion, presence, and pastoral care (Rossetti & Rhoades, 2013)^[11].

The findings also demonstrate how spirituality and psychological practices are actively evaluated and adopted by priests, who aim to align secular approaches with their faith. This supports the idea that spiritually integrated psychotherapy can effectively address both psychological and spiritual concerns (Pargament, 2013)^[7]. Likewise, research indicates that combining faith-based frameworks with psychological interventions enhances coping, resilience, and well-being among clergy (Hays & Shepard Payne, 2020). Participants' recognition that prayer alone may not always address all psychological concerns aligns with the argument that clinical issues often require structured interventions

beyond spiritual coping (Koenig, 2012; Boateng *et al.*, 2024)^[1].

At the relational level, community life—both supportive and emotionally demanding—aligns with existing literature on religious living. Shared routines and communal practices foster emotional support, identity, and stability (Schneiders, 2011)^[12]. However, interpersonal tensions and conflicts are also common, contributing to stress and emotional strain (Ferrari, 2002)^[3]. These findings highlight the dual role of community as both a protective and challenging factor for mental health.

The study emphasizes the emotional effort involved in priestly ministry, where ongoing engagement with others' struggles can lead to emotional exhaustion. This aligns with research on clergy burnout, which identifies emotional demands and role expectations as primary stressors (Maslach & Leiter, 2022; Rossetti & Rhoades, 2013)^[5, 11]. At the same time, the importance of social support systems supports findings that personal relationships act as protective factors against burnout and improve psychological health (Priestley & Hodge, 2021)^[9].

Cultural and spiritual factors further influence mental health practices. Filipino values such as *hiya* support research showing that cultural norms can discourage emotional expression and help-seeking (Tuason *et al.*, 2020; Nadal, 2021)^[14, 6]. Yet, the role of Augustinian spirituality in fostering interiority and self-awareness is aligned with studies that highlight spirituality's positive influence on self-reflection and emotional processing (Dein, 2020)^[2]. This creates a complex framework where cultural restraint and spiritual openness coexist.

Despite growing awareness, barriers to help-seeking still exist. Stigma, privacy concerns, and heavy workloads limit access to mental health care. These findings agree with research indicating that clergy often hesitate to seek support

due to fears of judgment and privacy issues (Vogel *et al.*, 2020; Priestley & Hodge, 2021) ^[15, 9]. The expectation for priests to always appear strong further emphasizes these barriers, fostering a culture of silence about mental health.

Encouragingly, the study shows increasing openness toward mental health, especially among younger priests. This aligns with recent research indicating a gradual rise in awareness and acceptance of mental health issues among clergy (Boateng *et al.*, 2024) ^[1]. The COVID-19 pandemic's role in normalizing discussions of vulnerability is also supported by studies that highlight its psychological impact and influence on coping strategies (Pirutinsky *et al.*, 2021) ^[8].

Furthermore, the preference for practical, faith-compatible mental health strategies reflects an adaptive coping style. Techniques such as mindfulness and grounding methods have been shown to improve emotional regulation and reduce stress, especially when integrated with spiritual frameworks (Trammel *et al.*, 2025) ^[13]. This supports the view that faith-compatible interventions can enhance both psychological and spiritual health.

Finally, the results emphasize the importance of holistic, preventative, and institutionally supported mental health approaches within religious settings. Participants called for systems that promote openness, ensure confidentiality, and approach mental health proactively rather than reactively. These insights underscore the need to develop structured, culturally sensitive interventions that address priests' real-life experiences and support their long-term well-being.

5. Conclusion

This study finds that the mental health experiences of Augustinian priests are grounded in a holistic view of well-being, in which psychological, emotional, and spiritual aspects are deeply interconnected. Instead of seeing secular mental health approaches as conflicting with their faith, priests use discernment to integrate spirituality with psychological practices in a meaningful and appropriate way. The findings indicate that while priests recognize the importance of mental health for effective ministry, they encounter significant obstacles. These include cultural expectations, stigma, confidentiality concerns, heavy workloads, and resistance to vulnerability within themselves. Conversely, positive developments, such as greater openness to mental health, particularly among younger clergy, point to a gradual shift toward increased acceptance and awareness within religious communities.

The study also highlights the crucial importance of community, relational support, and faith-compatible coping strategies in maintaining mental health. However, it clearly states that individual efforts alone are insufficient to address the complex mental health needs of priests. There is a critical need for structured, preventative, and institutionally supported programs that foster safe spaces, guarantee confidentiality, and offer holistic care.

Considering these findings, the study presents the *COR UNUM* mental health program, a faith-centered framework designed to support the well-being of Augustinian priests. Based on the principle of "one heart," the program emphasizes the integration of mind, heart, and spirit through core elements such as mental health education, psycho-spiritual reflection, counseling, peer support, and the incorporation of wellness practices into retreats and training programs. Each element reflects the lived experiences of Augustinian priests while remaining relevant within the

Augustinian context. This demonstrates that the program is both academically sound and tailored to the specific needs identified in the study.

The study also recommends integrating the *COR UNUM* program into Augustinian formation and ministry support, emphasizing the importance of confidentiality and leadership openness to mental health care. It further encourages mental health professionals to develop faith-sensitive approaches in collaboration with religious communities. The program also aims to reduce stigma, build resilience, and foster a culture of openness and support within the religious community. Additionally, it calls for future research to evaluate faith-based programs and examine mental health practices across different religions.

Overall, this study confirms that promoting mental health among priests requires both personal and institutional efforts. By integrating psychological and spiritual approaches within a supportive environment, religious institutions can better meet their members' mental health needs and maintain the well-being necessary for effective ministry.

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