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

[version 1; peer review: awaiting peer review]

[Vivencio Ballano](mailto:voballano@pup.edu.ph)

https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2013-6429

[Author details](https://f1000research.com/articles/10-1195/v1)

**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

**Corresponding author:** Vivencio Ballano

Competing interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Grant information: The author(s) declared that no grants were involved in supporting this work.

**Copyright:**  © 2021 Ballano V. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

**How to cite:** Ballano V. Acedia, loneliness, and the mandatory celibacy of Catholic parish clergy: a theological-sociological exploratory analysis [version 1; peer review: awaiting peer review]. *F1000Research* 2021, **10**:1195 (<https://doi.org/10.12688/f1000research.54681.1>) **First published:** 24 Nov 2021, **10**:1195 (<https://doi.org/10.12688/f1000research.54681.1>) **Latest published:** 24 Nov 2021, **10**:1195 (<https://doi.org/10.12688/f1000research.54681.1>)

**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](https://f1000research.com/articles/10-1195/v1#ref33 ref32); [Collingridge, 2019](https://f1000research.com/articles/10-1195/v1#ref12); [Büssing, Starck, and van Treeck, 2021](https://f1000research.com/articles/10-1195/v1#ref7)). 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](https://f1000research.com/articles/10-1195/v1#ref34)). Cardinal Quellet 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](https://f1000research.com/articles/10-1195/v1" \l "ref38)).

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](https://f1000research.com/articles/10-1195/v1" \l "ref7)). 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](https://f1000research.com/articles/10-1195/v1" \l "ref7)). 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](https://f1000research.com/articles/10-1195/v1#ref26)).

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](https://f1000research.com/articles/10-1195/v1#ref59): 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](https://f1000research.com/articles/10-1195/v1" \l "ref32): 269). There have been significant attempts to connect acedia to the current problems of Catholic priesthood (e.g., [McAlinden, 2014, 2015](https://f1000research.com/articles/10-1195/v1#ref33 ref32); [Morris, 2019](https://f1000research.com/articles/10-1195/v1#ref36); [Tomlinson, 2019](https://f1000research.com/articles/10-1195/v1#ref59)), but no research has considered mandatory celibacy as a primary contributory factor behind it. Thus, [Morris (2019](https://f1000research.com/articles/10-1195/v1#ref36): 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](https://f1000research.com/articles/10-1195/v1#ref9); [Daly, 2009](https://f1000research.com/articles/10-1195/v1#ref14); [Selin, 2016](https://f1000research.com/articles/10-1195/v1#ref49)) and acedia focus more on its spiritual aspects (e.g., [Nault, 2013](https://f1000research.com/articles/10-1195/v1#ref38); [McAlinden, 2014, 2015](https://f1000research.com/articles/10-1195/v1#ref33 ref32); [Tomlinson, 2019](https://f1000research.com/articles/10-1195/v1#ref59)), thus tending to disregard their sociological and structural dimensions. Spiritual realities have structural and communal components, and thus require sociological analysis. As [Dawson (2013)](https://f1000research.com/articles/10-1195/v1#ref16) 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. [Starkcloff (1994)](https://f1000research.com/articles/10-1195/v1#ref55) 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](https://f1000research.com/articles/10-1195/v1" \l "ref2)). Sociological studies have shown that social bonding is one of the crucial factors for the inhibition of deviance (e.g., [Akers and Cochran, 1985](https://f1000research.com/articles/10-1195/v1#ref1); [Hirschi, 2009](https://f1000research.com/articles/10-1195/v1#ref22); [Liljeberg *et al.,* 2011](https://f1000research.com/articles/10-1195/v1#ref29)). 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](https://f1000research.com/articles/10-1195/v1" \l "ref53): 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](https://f1000research.com/articles/10-1195/v1#ref41); [Wilson, 2008](https://f1000research.com/articles/10-1195/v1#ref62); [Neuhaus, 2008](https://f1000research.com/articles/10-1195/v1#ref39); [Plante, 2020](https://f1000research.com/articles/10-1195/v1#ref42)) that can result in degradation of clerical spirituality and acedia. [Shaw (2008)](https://f1000research.com/articles/10-1195/v1#ref51) 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](https://f1000research.com/articles/10-1195/v1#ref27)).

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](https://f1000research.com/articles/10-1195/v1#ref18)). 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](https://f1000research.com/articles/10-1195/v1#ref8)). 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](https://f1000research.com/articles/10-1195/v1#ref59), 177). Cases of CSA are usually precluded by a collapse of clerical prayer life ([Cross and Thoma, 2006](https://f1000research.com/articles/10-1195/v1#ref8)). 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](https://f1000research.com/articles/10-1195/v1#ref27)). 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](https://f1000research.com/articles/10-1195/v1#ref10)). The autonomous lifestyle of celibate diocesan priests can be argued to be conducive to acedia and CSA. [Wortley and Smallbone’s research (2006)](https://f1000research.com/articles/10-1195/v1#ref63), 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)](https://f1000research.com/articles/10-1195/v1#ref33) 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](https://f1000research.com/articles/10-1195/v1" \l "ref12)). Although described by the RCC as “a precious gift from God” ([Code of Canon Law 1983](https://f1000research.com/articles/10-1195/v1#ref11), para. 277) and as a “brilliant jewel in the crown of the priesthood” (*[Sacerdotalis Caelibatus](https://f1000research.com/articles/10-1195/v1" \l "ref47)* [[Celibacy of the Priest], 1967](https://f1000research.com/articles/10-1195/v1" \l "ref47), para. 1) that facilitates priests’ full devotion to their Church ministry ([Isacco, Sahker, and Krinock, 2016](https://f1000research.com/articles/10-1195/v1" \l "ref25)), 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](https://f1000research.com/articles/10-1195/v1#ref61); [Scheper-Hughes and Devine, 2003](https://f1000research.com/articles/10-1195/v1#ref48); [Doyle, 2006](https://f1000research.com/articles/10-1195/v1#ref18); [Mayblin, 2018](https://f1000research.com/articles/10-1195/v1#ref31)), and it is mostly associated with the alarming problem of loneliness, a key component of acedia ([Rausch, 1992](https://f1000research.com/articles/10-1195/v1#ref44); [Hoge, 2002](https://f1000research.com/articles/10-1195/v1#ref23); [John Jay College, 2004](https://f1000research.com/articles/10-1195/v1#ref27)). [Hoge’s (2002)](https://f1000research.com/articles/10-1195/v1#ref23) 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](https://f1000research.com/articles/10-1195/v1" \l "ref30): 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](https://www.foxnews.com/category/us/religion/roman-catholic) demands, especially not being able to marry and have a family ([Morris, 2019](https://f1000research.com/articles/10-1195/v1#ref36), para. 2) .

In another study by [Hoge, Shield, and Griffin (1995)](https://f1000research.com/articles/10-1195/v1#ref24), 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](https://f1000research.com/articles/10-1195/v1#ref43)). 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](https://f1000research.com/articles/10-1195/v1#ref37)). A study by [Bauman *et al.* (2019)](https://f1000research.com/articles/10-1195/v1#ref4) 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](https://f1000research.com/articles/10-1195/v1#ref4)).

[Philip Sheldrake (1994)](https://f1000research.com/articles/10-1195/v1#ref50) 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](https://f1000research.com/articles/10-1195/v1#ref52)). 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](https://f1000research.com/articles/10-1195/v1#ref50)). 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](https://f1000research.com/articles/10-1195/v1#ref50)).

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](https://f1000research.com/articles/10-1195/v1#ref48)). 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](https://f1000research.com/articles/10-1195/v1#ref48)). 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](https://f1000research.com/articles/10-1195/v1#ref23): 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](https://f1000research.com/articles/10-1195/v1#ref20)). 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](https://f1000research.com/articles/10-1195/v1#ref15), 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)](https://f1000research.com/articles/10-1195/v1#ref57 ref56), 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](https://f1000research.com/articles/10-1195/v1#ref54); [Wallace and Forman, 1999](https://f1000research.com/articles/10-1195/v1#ref60)). Social support can be a treatment for strain and can directly reduce anxiety ([Beehr and McGrath, 1992](https://f1000research.com/articles/10-1195/v1" \l "ref6)). 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)](https://f1000research.com/articles/10-1195/v1#ref25), 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](https://f1000research.com/articles/10-1195/v1#ref45)). [Rossetti and Rhoades (2013)](https://f1000research.com/articles/10-1195/v1#ref45) 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](https://f1000research.com/articles/10-1195/v1" \l "ref32): 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](https://f1000research.com/articles/10-1195/v1" \l "ref32)).

CSA threatens the existence of the Church, destroying the credibility of the entire institution and some of its leaders ([Orobator, 2011](https://f1000research.com/articles/10-1195/v1" \l "ref40), 7). The CSA in the RCC started to emerge publicly in the United States (US) in 1984 with the publicized case of Fr. Gilbert Gauthe, a diocesan priest of Lafayette who committed a series of child sexual abuse crimes between the 1970s to 1980s ([Ballano, 2020](https://f1000research.com/articles/10-1195/v1" \l "ref3)). 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](https://f1000research.com/articles/10-1195/v1#ref5)). 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](https://f1000research.com/articles/10-1195/v1#ref46)). 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](https://f1000research.com/articles/10-1195/v1#ref21); [Wortley and Smallbone’s research (2006)](https://f1000research.com/articles/10-1195/v1#ref63). 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](https://f1000research.com/articles/10-1195/v1#ref27)). 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](https://f1000research.com/articles/10-1195/v1#ref8)). Susan [Collingridge (2019)](https://f1000research.com/articles/10-1195/v1#ref12) 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](https://f1000research.com/articles/10-1195/v1" \l "ref12): 122).

[McAlinden (2015, 269)](https://f1000research.com/articles/10-1195/v1#ref32) 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](https://f1000research.com/articles/10-1195/v1#ref8)).

**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 ecclesia* 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)](https://f1000research.com/articles/10-1195/v1#ref12) 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)](https://f1000research.com/articles/10-1195/v1#ref19) 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](https://f1000research.com/articles/10-1195/v1" \l "ref12): 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)](https://f1000research.com/articles/10-1195/v1#ref32) 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” ([McAlainden, 2015](https://f1000research.com/articles/10-1195/v1" \l "ref32): 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](https://f1000research.com/articles/10-1195/v1" \l "ref32): 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 ascetism, 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.

**References**

* Akers RL, Cochran JK: Adolescent marijuana use: A test of three theories of deviant behavior. *Deviant Behavior.* 1985; **6**(4): 323–346. [Publisher Full Text](https://doi.org/10.1080/01639625.1985.9967683)
* Aschenbrenner G: *Quickening the Fire in Our Midst: The Challenge of Diocesan Priestly Spirituality.* Chicago, Illinois: Loyola Press; 2002.
* Ballano V: Catholic laity, clerical sexual abuse, and married priesthood: A sociological analysis of Vatican II’s lay empowerment. *Cogent Social Sciences.* 2020; **6**(1). [Publisher Full Text](https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2020.1813438)
* Bauman K, Frick E, Jacobs C, *et al.*: Spiritual dryness and celibacy of priests—discernment of ongoing spiritual journeys from relational and psychosocial immaturities. *Pastoral Psychology.* 2019; **68**: 605–617. [Publisher Full Text](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11089-019-00886-1)
* Bishop Accountability: *Data on the crisis: The human toll.* Bishop Accountability.Org; 2011. [Reference Source](http://www.bishop-accountability.org/AtAGlance/data.htm)
* Beehr TE, McGrath JE: Social support, occupational stress, and anxiety. *Stress, Anxiety & Coping.* 1992; **5**(1): 7–19. [Publisher Full Text](https://doi.org/10.1080/10615809208250484)
* Büssing A, Starck L, van Treeck K : Experience of spiritual dryness and acedia symptoms in seventh-day adventists. *Journal of Religion and Health.* 2021; **60**: 1261–1280. [PubMed Abstract](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/33136232) | [Publisher Full Text](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-020-01092-7) | [Free Full Text](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7997817)
* Cross R, Thoma D: The Collapse of Ascetical Discipline and Clerical Misconduct: Sex and Prayer. *The Linacre Quarterly.* 2006; **73**(1): 1–114. [Publisher Full Text](https://doi.org/10.1080/20508549.2006.11877771)
* *Sacerdotalis Caelibatus* [Priestly Celibacy]: 1967 *Encyclical of Pope Paul VI on the Celibacy of the Priest.* Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana; [Reference Source](https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_24061967_sacerdotalis.html)
* Capps D: Sex in the parish: Social-scientific explanations for why it occurs. *Journal of Pastoral Care.* 1993; **47**: 350–361. [Publisher Full Text](https://doi.org/10.1177/002234099304700403)
* Code of Canon Law: Chapter III: obligations and rights of clerics.1983. [Reference Source](https://www.vatican.va/archive/cod-iuris-canonici/eng/documents/cic_lib2-cann208-329_en.html#CHAPTER_III)
* Collingridge S: Priest’s integrated relationships and an ecosystem of power. Morris Wayne M, editor. *Acedia and the Transformation of Spiritual Malaise.* Chester, UK: Chester University Press; 2019; pp 115–125.
* Daly B: Priestly Celibacy: The Obligations of Continence and Celibacy for Priests. *Compass: A Review of Topical Theology.* 2009; **43**(4): 20–33. [Reference Source](http://compassreview.org/pdf/summer09.pdf)
* Daly B: The Priesthood is being Crucified by the Cross of Celibacy. *National Catholic Reporter.* 2019 July 15, 2019. [Reference Source](https://www.ncronline.org/news/accountability/priestly-diary/priesthood-being-crucified-cross-celibacy)
* Dawson C: *Religion and Culture.* Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press; 2013. [Publisher Full Text](https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt3fgpgd)
* Doyle TP: Clericalism: Enabler of Clerical Sexual Abuse. *Pastoral Psychology.* 2006; **54**(3): 189–213. [Publisher Full Text](https://doi.org/10.1007/S11089-006-6323-X)
* Friedman EH: *Generation to generation: family process in church and synagogue.* New York, NY: Guilford Press; 1985.
* Froehle BT: Catholic Pastoral Sociology in the United States since Vatican II: Making a Path by Walking. *US Catholic Historian.* 2007; **25**(4): 85–116. [Publisher Full Text](https://doi.org/10.1353/cht.2007.0001)
* Garland DR, Argueta A: How Clergy Sexual Misconduct Happens: A Qualitative Study of First-Hand Accounts. *Social Work & Christianity.* 2010; **37**: 1–27.
* Goodstein L, Otterman S: *Catholic priests abused 1,000 children in Pennsylvania, report says.* The New York Times; August 14, 2018. [Reference Source](https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/14/us/catholic-church-sex-abuse-pennsylvania.html)
* Hirschi T: *Causes of Delinquency.* New Brunswick, USA: Transaction Publishers; 2009.
* Hoge DR: *The first five years of the priesthood: a study of newly ordained Catholic priests.* Collegeville: Liturgical Press; 2002.
* Hoge DR, Shields J, Griffin DL: Changes in satisfaction and institutional attitudes of Catholic priests. *Sociology of Religion.* 1995; **56**(2): 195–213. [Publisher Full Text](https://doi.org/10.2307/3711763)
* Isacco A, Sahker E, Krinock E, *et al.*: How religious beliefs and practices influence the psychological health of Catholic priests. *American Journal of Men’s Health.* 2016; **10**(4): 325–337. [PubMed Abstract](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/25617141) | [Publisher Full Text](https://doi.org/10.1177/1557988314567325)
* Jackson S: *Melancholia and Depression: From Hippocratic Times to Modern Times.* New Haven; London: Yale University Press; 1986. [Publisher Full Text](https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1xp3stn)
* John Jay College of Criminal Justice: *The Nature and scope of sexual abuse of minors by Catholic priests and deacons in the United States 1950–2002.* USCCB; 2004. [Reference Source](http://www.bishop-accountability.org/reports/2004_02_27_JohnJay/)
* Liljeberg JF, Eklund JM, Fritz MV, *et al.*: Poor school bonding and delinquency over time: Bidirectional effects and sex differences. *Journal of Adolescence.* 2011; **34**(1): 1–9. [PubMed Abstract](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/20417551) | [Publisher Full Text](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.adolescence.2010.03.008)
* Moriarte D: Leaving the Priesthood. *The Furrow.* 2016; **67**(1): 34–38.
* Mayblin M: A brilliant jewel: sex, celibacy, and the Roman Catholic Church. *Religion.* 2018; **49**(4): 517–538. [Publisher Full Text](https://doi.org/10.1080/0048721X.2018.1525774)
* McAlinden M: Fighting the Noonday Demon—Priests and Acedia. *The Furrow.* 2015; **66**(6): 336–343. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24636037>
* McAlinden M: Living Baptismally. *Practical Theology.* 2014; **7**(4): 268–279. [Publisher Full Text](https://doi.org/10.1179/1756073X14Z.00000000046)
* Miles ET: Acedia in the Catholic church today. *Modern Age, A Quarterly Review.* 1985; **29**(3): 200.
* Morris W, editor. *Acedia and the transformation of spiritual malaise: essays in honour of Martin McAlinden.* Chester, UK: University of Chester Press; 2019. *Fox News* (June 10, 2019). [Reference Source](https://www.foxnews.com/opinion/jonathan-morris-my-decision-to-leave-the-catholic-priesthood)
* NORC (National Opinion Research Center): *The Catholic priest in the United States. Sociological investigations.* Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference; 1972.
* Nault J: *The noonday devil: acedia, the unnamed Evil of our times.* San Francisco: Ignatius Press; 2013.
* Neuhaus RJ: Clerical Scandal and the Scandal of Clericalism. *First Things.* 2008. (March 2008). [Reference Source](https://www.firstthings.com/article/2008/03/clerical-scandal-and-the-scandal-of-clericalism)
* Orobator AE: Preface: Saint John Mary Vianney and the search for an authentic model of priestly living and ministry.Tambudzai IA, Ugwuanyi CC, editors. *Priestly Ministry in Africa: Reflections by Seminarians and Priests.* Nairobi, Kenya: Paulines Publications Africa; 2011; pp. 7–9.
* Papesh ML: *Clerical Culture: Contradiction and Transformation.* Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press; 2004.
* Plante TG: Clericalism Contributes to Religious, Spiritual, and Behavioral Struggles among Catholic Priests. *Religions.* 2020; **11**(5): 217. [Publisher Full Text](https://doi.org/10.3390/rel11050217)
* Raj A, Dean KE: Burnout and depression among Catholic priests in India. *Pastoral Psychology.* 2005; **54**: 157–171. [Publisher Full Text](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11089-005-6200-z)
* Rausch TP: *Priesthood Today.* New York: Paulist Press; 1992.
* Rossetti S, Rhoades C: Burnout in Catholic clergy: a predictive model using psychological and spiritual variables. *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality.* 2013; **5**(4): 335–341. [Publisher Full Text](https://doi.org/10.1037/a0033639)
* *Sacerdotalis Caelibatus* [Celibacy of the Priest]: Encyclical of Paul VI on the celibacy of priests.1967. [Reference Source](http://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vienc24061967sacerdotalis.html)
* Scheper-Hughes N, Devine J: Priestly celibacy and child sexual abuse. *Sexualities.* 2003; **6**(1): 15–40. [Publisher Full Text](https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460703006001003)
* Selin G: *Priestly Celibacy: Theological Foundations.* Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press; 2016. [Publisher Full Text](https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1bpmbbd)
* Sheldrake P: Celibacy and clerical culture. *The Way Supplement.* 1994; **77**. Retrieved April 15, 2021. [Reference Source](https://www.theway.org.uk/back/s077Sheldrake.pdf)
* Shaw R: On Clericalism. *Mary Foundation.* 2008. (May 6, 2008). [Reference Source](https://www.catholicity.com/commentary/rshaw/03580.html)
* Williams R: Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory. Macguigan, editor. *Raymond Williams on Culture & Society: Essential Writings.* London: Sage Publications; 1973; (pp.119–138). [Publisher Full Text](https://doi.org/10.4135/9781473914766.n8)
* Skogan W: Fear of crime and neighborhood change. Reiss AJ, Tonry M, editors. *Communities and Crime.* Chicago, Illinois.: University of Chicago Press; 1986; **8**. : (pp. 203–229). [Publisher Full Text](https://doi.org/10.1086/449123) [Reference Source](http://www.skogan.org/files/Fear.of.Crime.and.Neighborhood.Change.1986.pdf)
* Smith C: Theorizing religious effects among American adolescents. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion.* 2003; **42**(1): 17–30. [Publisher Full Text](https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-5906.t01-1-00158)
* Starkcloff CF: Inculturation and Cultural Systems (Part 1). *Theological Studies.* 1994; **55**(1): 66–81. [Publisher Full Text](https://doi.org/10.1177/004056399405500105)
* Stark R, Doyle DP, Kent L: Religion and delinquency: the ecology of a lost relationship. *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency.* 1982; **19**(1982): 4–24. [Publisher Full Text](https://doi.org/10.1177/002242788201900102)
* Stark R, Doyle DP, Kent L: Rediscovering moral communities: church membership and crime. Hirschi T, Gottredson M, editors. *Understanding Crime: Current and Research.* Beverly Hills, CA: Sage; 1980; pp. 43–52.
* Tomlinson A: Acedia: diagnosis and remedy. *The Expository Times.* 2019; **131**(4): 177–178. [Publisher Full Text](https://doi.org/10.1177/0014524619886784)
* Wallace JM, Forman TA: Religion's role in promoting health and reducing risk among American youth. *Health Education & Behavior.* 1999; **25**(6): 721–741. [PubMed Abstract](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/9813744) | [Publisher Full Text](https://doi.org/10.1177/109019819802500604)
* Wills G: *Papal sin: structures of deceit.* New York: Doubleday; 2000.
* Wilson GB: *Clericalism: The Death of Priesthood.* Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press; 2008.
* Wortley R, Smallbone S: Applying Situational Principles to Sexual Offenses against Children. *Situational Prevention of Child Sexual Abuse. Crime Prevention Studies.* Wortley R, Smallbone S, editors. Monsey: Criminal Justice Press; 2006; vol. **19**. .