

Psychological Assessment and Vocational Perseverance in Catholic Religious Life Formation: An Integrative Review

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Abstract: Catholic religious life in many regions, particularly in Africa, reflects a growing paradox in which increasing numbers of candidates enter formation, yet many fail to persevere to final vows. Although psychological assessment is widely used in admission and formation processes, evidence on its effectiveness in predicting long-term vocational perseverance remains limited, especially when it is not supported by structured follow-up interventions. This study synthesized existing research on psychological assessment and vocational perseverance in Catholic religious formation, focusing on emotional maturity, psychological vulnerability, attrition patterns, and the role of ongoing formative support, while also identifying gaps in African context. An integrative review methodology guided by Whittemore and Knaff (2005) was employed, drawing on 28 peer-reviewed studies published between 2019 and 2026 sourced from PsycINFO, Scopus, PubMed, Web of Science, ATLA Religion Database, and Google Scholar. The studies included qualitative, quantitative, mixed-method, and review designs and were analysed thematically using Self-Determination Theory and Person-Environment Fit Theory. Findings revealed five key themes: psychological assessment as a central tool in vocational selection; emotional maturity and psychological resilience as strong predictors of perseverance; psychological vulnerabilities, particularly attachment insecurity, as key contributors to attrition; the importance of follow-up interventions such as counselling, mentoring, and psycho-spiritual accompaniment; and the interaction between person-environment fit and intrinsic motivation in shaping vocational outcomes. Psychological assessment was found to be necessary but insufficient when used in isolation without continuous formative support. The study recommends integrated formation models combining assessment with ongoing developmental interventions, standardised assessment practices, and stronger institutional policies, especially in African contexts, alongside future longitudinal research. It concludes that vocational perseverance is a multidimensional process shaped by psychological readiness, motivation, relational security, and environmental fit, and cannot be secured through assessment alone without sustained formation support.

Keywords: Psychological Assessment, Vocational Perseverance, Religious Formation, Emotional Maturity, Attachment Theory, Self-Determination Theory, Person-Environment Fit, Attrition, Catholic Religious Life.

1. Introduction

Catholic religious life has historically been understood as a

lifelong vocation grounded in spiritual commitment, communal living, evangelical counsel, and apostolic mission. Within the Roman Catholic tradition, men and women who enter religious institutes undertake a process of human, spiritual, intellectual, and pastoral formation intended to prepare them for lifelong consecration through vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. The Catholic Church has consistently emphasized that authentic vocation requires not only spiritual zeal but also sufficient human maturity, emotional stability, interpersonal capacity, and psychological integration (John Paul II, 1992). Ecclesial documents such as *Pastores Dabo Vobis* (John Paul II, 1992) and Guidelines for the Use of Psychology in the Admission and Formation of Candidates for the Priesthood (Congregation for Catholic Education, 2008) underscored the importance of psychological maturity in vocational discernment and formation long before psychological assessment became widely institutionalized in formation programs. These foundational perspectives established the theoretical basis for integrating psychological sciences into religious formation processes.

In recent decades, Catholic religious institutes across the world have increasingly adopted psychological assessment as part of pre-admission screening and formation process. This development reflects broader shifts within the Church toward holistic human formation and the recognition that psychological well-being significantly influences vocational commitment, community integration, and perseverance in consecrated life (Francis & Crea, 2019). Contemporary formation approaches increasingly acknowledge that spiritual commitment alone may not adequately sustain lifelong vocation in the absence of emotional resilience, psychological stability, healthy identity formation, and adaptive interpersonal functioning (Rossetti, 2011). Studies conducted in different religious and vocational contexts have demonstrated that personality structure, emotional maturity, self-regulation, resilience, and motivational orientation are associated with long-term commitment and vocational persistence (Francis & Crea, 2019; Park et al., 2021).

The growing use of psychological assessment within Catholic Religious formation has also been influenced by increasing awareness of mental health concerns, interpersonal

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dysfunction, trauma histories, addiction vulnerabilities, and affective immaturity among candidates entering seminaries and religious institutes (Crea *et al.*, 2021). Psychological screening tools are therefore increasingly utilized to evaluate emotional adjustment, personality traits, coping patterns, vocational motivation, and relational capacity prior to admission into formation programs. Contemporary psychological literature supports the view that personality characteristics and emotional stability are important predictors of long-term adaptation and commitment within demanding vocational environments (Lee *et al.*, 2020). For example, Francis and Crea (2019) found that among Catholic seminarians in Italy, intrinsic vocational orientation was positively associated with conscientiousness and emotional stability, suggesting that psychological dispositions may influence vocational persistence and adaptation. Similarly, broader psychology of religion research has linked psychological well-being, self-regulation, cognitive flexibility, and resilience with sustained religious commitment and adaptive functioning (Wilt *et al.*, 2020).

The integration of psychology into religious formation has become even more significant in the contemporary era due to increasing concerns about attrition and vocational instability within religious institutes. Across many parts of the world, Catholic congregations have reported rising rates of temporary withdrawal, perpetual vow postponement, and early vocational exit among candidates and professed members (Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate [CARA], 2020). Although attrition in religious life is multifactorial, scholars increasingly recognize the contribution of psychological vulnerabilities, unresolved trauma, emotional immaturity, poor interpersonal adjustment, unrealistic vocational expectations, and inadequate support systems (Rossetti & Rinehart, 2020). Recent empirical studies suggest that psychological well-being and supportive formation environments significantly influence perseverance in religious communities (Park *et al.*, 2021). For instance, research conducted among members of religious communities in the Catholic Diocese of Eldoret, Kenya, demonstrated that structured psychological and supervisory support systems contribute positively to psychological well-being and adaptation within community life (Kiptoo & Barasa, 2023). These findings reinforce contemporary arguments that psychological assessment alone may be insufficient unless accompanied by structured follow-up interventions such as counselling, mentoring, accompaniment, and psycho-spiritual support (Crea *et al.*, 2021).

The African context present unique dimensions to the discussion of vocational perseverance and psychological assessment. Catholic religious life in Africa continues to experience substantial vocational growth compared to declining vocations in many Western regions (CARA, 2020). However, the growth in vocations has simultaneously generated challenges related to formation capacity, psychological preparedness, intercultural adaptation, emotional maturity, and vocational sustainability (Okure, 2021). In Kenya specifically, many religious institutes have increasingly embraced psychological screening during admission and formation processes as part of broader efforts to improve candidate

suitability and reduce attrition (Muthoni, 2022). Nevertheless, despite the growing institutional use of psychological assessment, there remains limited empirical synthesis regarding its effectiveness in predicting perseverance within African religious contexts.

Existing literature within Africa remains fragmented and unevenly distributed. Much of the available research focuses on psychological well-being, spirituality, stress management, community life, or vocational experiences rather than specifically examining the relationship between pre-admission psychological assessment and perseverance outcomes (Njoroge, 2021). Furthermore, many studies remain descriptive, qualitative, or institution-specific, with limited longitudinal or predictive analysis. Consequently, there is insufficient consolidated evidence regarding whether psychological assessment meaningfully predicts long-term perseverance, whether identified psychological vulnerabilities correlate with attrition, and whether follow-up interventions improve vocational stability in religious institutes. This represents a significant gap because religious institutes continue investing resources in psychological screening despite limited empirical clarity regarding its long-term effectiveness.

The growing emphasis on holistic human formation within the Catholic Church further strengthens the need for empirical synthesis in this area. Human formation is increasingly regarded as the foundation upon which spiritual, pastoral, and intellectual formation rest (Congregation for the Clergy, 2016). Psychological assessment therefore functions not merely as a gatekeeping mechanism but as a formative tool intended to identify strengths, vulnerabilities, and developmental needs requiring accompaniment throughout formation. Recent scholarship in psychology of religion and vocational studies emphasizes that perseverance is influenced by multiple interacting factors including emotional regulation, relational competence, resilience, motivational orientation, self-awareness, spiritual integration, and environmental support systems (Wilt *et al.*, 2020; Park *et al.*, 2021). Yet there remains insufficient integrative understanding regarding how these factors collectively influence perseverance in Catholic religious life, particularly within African contexts.

The present integrative review is therefore necessary for several reasons. First, it seeks to synthesize emerging empirical evidence regarding psychological assessment and vocational perseverance in Catholic religious formation. Second, it aims to identify psychological factors associated with perseverance and attrition within religious life. Third, the review examines the role of follow-up interventions in sustaining vocational commitment after assessment. Finally, the review seeks to identify methodological, contextual, and geographical gaps within existing scholarship, particularly in relation to African context where empirical evidence remains comparatively limited.

This review is significant for religious institutes, formators, psychologists, pastoral practitioners, and scholars of religion and psychology. Findings may contribute to strengthening admission policies, improving formation practices, enhancing psycho-spiritual accompaniment, and informing evidence-

based approaches to vocational discernment and support. The review may also contribute to broader discussions concerning human formation, mental health, and vocational sustainability within consecrated life. In addition, by identifying gaps in existing literature, the review may provide justification and direction for future empirical studies examining the predictive validity and formative usefulness of psychological assessment in religious institutes, especially within sub-Saharan Africa.

The aim of this integrative review is to examine empirical evidence regarding psychological assessment, psychological well-being, and vocational perseverance within Catholic religious formation, with particular attention to the role of follow-up interventions and the gaps that exist within African context.

2. Theoretical Framework

This integrated review is anchored on two complementary theoretical perspectives, namely Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and Person–Environment Fit (P–E Fit) Theory. These frameworks are particularly appropriate for examining psychological assessment and vocational perseverance in Catholic religious life because they jointly account for both internal motivational processes and the degree of compatibility between the individual and the religious formation environment. Together, they provide an integrated explanation for vocational commitment, adaptation processes, and attrition outcomes in consecrated life.

A. *Self-Determination Theory (SDT)*

Self-Determination Theory (SDT), developed by Edward L. Deci and Richard M. Ryan, is a prominent framework for understanding human motivation, psychological development, and well-being (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2017). Originating from empirical studies on intrinsic motivation, the theory explains how social and environmental conditions shape motivation, psychological health, and behavioural regulation. SDT argues that humans are inherently oriented toward growth and well-being when three basic psychological needs, autonomy, competence, and relatedness are satisfied. Autonomy refers to experiencing volition and self-endorsement of actions, competence involves feeling effective in managing challenges, and relatedness concerns meaningful connection and belonging. When these needs are supported, individuals develop intrinsic motivation, internalized values, and psychological well-being; when thwarted, they experience disengagement, distress, and withdrawal (Ryan & Deci, 2017).

Empirical research consistently supports SDT across multiple domains, including education, healthcare, organizations, and religious life. Meta-analyses and cross-sectional studies show that autonomous motivation is positively associated with persistence, resilience, and well-being, whereas controlled motivation is linked to burnout and attrition (Howard *et al.*, 2021; Slemp *et al.*, 2018). In the psychology of religion, intrinsic religious motivation and internalized belief systems are associated with stronger psychological adjustment and sustained religious commitment (Wilt *et al.*, 2020). Similarly, research on clergy and religious candidates indicates that

individuals with higher internalized vocation and emotional integration tend to show greater vocational stability and lower attrition risk (Crea *et al.*, 2021).

Within Catholic religious life, SDT is particularly relevant because it explains sustained commitment in structured, demanding environments. Religious life involves communal living, celibate commitment, obedience, and mission, all requiring long-term psychological investment. Autonomy in this context refers not to independence but to the degree to which individuals internalize their vocation as self-endorsed rather than externally imposed. Candidates with internally motivated vocations are more likely to persevere, while externally regulated commitment increases vulnerability to withdrawal.

Competence is equally critical in formation settings, where individuals must adapt to spiritual, intellectual, emotional, and communal demands. SDT-informed research shows that perceived competence enhances persistence, whereas feelings of inadequacy contribute to disengagement and dropout intentions (Vansteenkiste *et al.*, 2020). In religious formation, competence is reflected in emotional regulation, academic performance, interpersonal skills, and spiritual discipline.

Relatedness is central due to the communal nature of religious life. SDT consistently identifies belongingness as a strong predictor of well-being and sustained engagement (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Weak relational integration, unresolved conflict, or isolation can significantly undermine vocational stability and increase attrition risk.

Recent SDT research further emphasizes that supportive social environments enhance need satisfaction and adaptive functioning, reducing turnover intentions (Howard *et al.*, 2021). In religious formation, such environments either facilitate or hinder vocational integration and perseverance.

Applied to formation processes, SDT provides a strong rationale for psychological assessment in identifying intrinsic motivation, emotional regulation, interpersonal functioning, and resilience, all linked to need satisfaction. It also supports follow-up interventions such as counselling, mentoring, and psycho-spiritual accompaniment, which enhance autonomy through vocational clarification, strengthen competence through skill development, and foster relatedness through relational support. In this way, SDT offers a coherent explanation of how assessment and formation practices promote vocational perseverance.

B. *Person–Environment Fit (P–E Fit) Theory*

Person–Environment (P–E) Fit Theory is a key framework in vocational and organizational psychology that explains behaviour and outcomes through the congruence between individuals and their environments. Its foundational roots are associated with vocational psychology, particularly Holland's work, while its modern development has been advanced by Schneider and colleagues in organizational psychology (Kristof-Brown *et al.*, 2005; Schneider, 1987). The theory proposes that positive outcomes such as satisfaction, commitment, and effective functioning occur when there is alignment between an individual's characteristics, such as

personality, values, abilities, and needs, and environmental demands, values, and structures. In contrast, misfit leads to strain, dissatisfaction, maladjustment, and increased withdrawal or turnover intentions.

Empirical evidence strongly supports the predictive validity of P–E Fit. Meta-analytic findings show that higher levels of fit are associated with increased job satisfaction, stronger organizational commitment, and reduced turnover intentions (Kristof-Brown *et al.*, 2005; Verquer *et al.*, 2003). Similarly, research in vocational psychology indicates that individuals are more likely to persist in demanding professions when their personal attributes align with role expectations (Lee *et al.*, 2020). In psychology of religion and clergy studies, vocational misfit has been identified as a major contributor to burnout, disengagement, and attrition in religious contexts (Rossetti & Rinehart, 2020). More recent evidence further reinforces these relationships by showing that person–organization fit significantly reduces turnover intention, partly through meaning in work, and is influenced by ethical climate conditions (Wnuk & Chudzicka-Czupala, 2026).

Within Catholic religious life, P–E Fit Theory is especially relevant due to the highly structured nature of religious institutes, which require alignment with specific spiritual, relational, and behavioural expectations. These include celibate communal living, obedience, structured prayer, apostolic mission, intercultural living, and lifelong commitment. Vocational discernment in this context therefore involves assessing whether an individual’s psychological, emotional, and personality characteristics align with these demands.

The theory further clarifies three interrelated dimensions of fit in formation contexts. Person–job fit refers to alignment between individual abilities and vocational demands such as emotional maturity and resilience. Person–group fit concerns compatibility within the religious community, including interpersonal functioning and capacity for communal life. Person–organization fit involves alignment between personal values and the charism, mission, and spiritual identity of a religious institute. Deficiencies in any of these dimensions increase vulnerability to maladjustment and attrition (Kristof-Brown & Guay, 2011).

P–E Fit Theory also provides a strong conceptual basis for psychological assessment in religious formation. Pre-admission screening functions as an applied tool for evaluating emotional, cognitive, and relational characteristics to identify potential misfit before entry. This helps anticipate challenges related to emotional instability, communal conflict, or vocational dissatisfaction.

Additionally, the theory explains attrition as a consequence of persistent misalignment between individuals and their environments, resulting in chronic stress, identity conflict, and reduced motivation. It also frames follow-up interventions, such as counselling, mentoring, and psycho-spiritual accompaniment, as mechanisms that enhance fit by improving coping capacity, interpersonal functioning, and environmental adaptation, thereby strengthening long-term vocational stability.

C. Complementarity of SDT and P–E Fit

The integration of Self-Determination Theory and Person–Environment Fit Theory provides a comprehensive and multidimensional framework for understanding vocational perseverance in Catholic religious life. While SDT explains internal psychological processes related to motivation, need satisfaction, and identity integration, P–E Fit theory explains external compatibility between the individual and the structural and relational demands of the religious environment.

Together, these theories offer a more complete explanation of vocational outcomes. SDT accounts for why individuals initially choose and sustain a vocation through internalized motivation and psychological need fulfilment, whereas P–E Fit explains whether individuals are capable of successfully adapting to and functioning within the concrete demands of religious life. In combination, they provide a robust theoretical foundation for examining psychological assessment, vocational perseverance, attrition, and the role of formation interventions.

This dual-theoretical framework is therefore highly appropriate for the present study, particularly in the context of Catholic religious institutes in Africa, where empirical research on psychological assessment and vocational perseverance remains limited but increasingly necessary for evidence-based formation practices.

3. Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of this study is built around six interrelated constructs that explain vocational outcomes in Catholic religious life: psychological assessment, emotional maturity, psychological vulnerabilities, follow-up interventions, perseverance, and attrition.

A. Psychological Assessment

Psychological assessment in the context of religious formation refers to the systematic evaluation of cognitive, emotional, relational, and personality functioning of candidates before and during their formation journey. It typically includes structured interviews, psychometric testing, personality inventories, and clinical evaluations aimed at determining emotional stability, maturity, coping capacity, and vocational suitability. Within vocational psychology, psychological assessment is increasingly understood not merely as a gatekeeping tool but as a developmental and formative process that informs accompaniment and intervention strategies (Vansteenkiste *et al.*, 2020).

In the tradition of vocational psychology of religious life, Rulla and colleagues emphasized that psychological assessment is essential for identifying the underlying motivational structure of candidates, particularly the distinction between “conscious motivations” and “deep motivational dispositions” that may not be immediately visible. Their empirical work demonstrated that discrepancies between idealized vocational identity and actual personality structure often emerge during formation, making early psychological assessment crucial for predicting long-term perseverance (Rulla *et al.*, 1976).

Recent studies in psychology of religion and vocational adjustment support this view by showing that psychological

screening is associated with improved adaptation and reduced attrition when combined with ongoing formation support. However, contemporary literature also cautions that psychological assessment should be ethically administered and integrated into holistic formation processes rather than used in isolation as an exclusionary mechanism (Crea *et al.*, 2021; Howard *et al.*, 2021).

B. Emotional Maturity

Emotional maturity refers to the capacity of an individual to regulate emotions, maintain stable interpersonal relationships, integrate affective experiences, and respond adaptively to stress and responsibility (Nag *et al.*, 2026; Schwaba *et al.*, 2022). In the context of religious life, emotional maturity is a critical determinant of vocational stability because candidates are required to live in community, adhere to structured authority, and maintain long-term commitments involving celibacy, obedience, and poverty (Pratista, 2023). Furthermore, emotionally mature individuals demonstrate resilience, self-control, and interpersonal adjustment, qualities that are essential for sustaining vocational commitment and stability in demanding communal and spiritual environments (Ciroi *et al.*, 2026; Medici *et al.*, 2023).

From a psychological perspective, emotional maturity is closely related to self-regulation and identity integration. Contemporary research indicates that individuals with higher emotional maturity demonstrate greater resilience, better interpersonal functioning, and stronger commitment in high-demand environments (Lee *et al.*, 2020). In religious formation, emotional maturity is often assessed through behavioural observation, interpersonal interactions, and psychological testing.

Rulla work provides a deeper interpretive lens, arguing that emotional maturity is inseparable from vocational identity integration. He suggested that many difficulties in religious life arise when emotional development does not align with vocational ideals, resulting in internal conflict between affective needs and institutional expectations. This misalignment can manifest as dependency, rigidity, avoidance of intimacy, or difficulty in communal life (Rulla, 1986).

Recent empirical studies in clergy psychology further support the importance of emotional maturity in vocational perseverance, showing that emotionally stable individuals are more likely to sustain long-term religious commitments and less likely to experience burnout or attrition (Rossetti & Rinehart, 2020).

C. Psychological Vulnerabilities

Psychological vulnerabilities refer to underlying cognitive, emotional, and relational patterns that increase the risk of maladaptation, stress, or attrition in religious life. These vulnerabilities may include unresolved trauma, maladaptive coping mechanisms, personality disorders, and insecure attachment patterns, all of which can negatively affect emotional regulation, interpersonal functioning, and long-term vocational commitment (Radetzki *et al.*, 2023; Smith & South, 2024). Research further indicates that early life trauma and

insecure attachment are associated with heightened psychological distress, impaired coping strategies, and difficulties in maintaining stable relationships and adaptive functioning (Coelho *et al.*, 2026; Musetti *et al.*, 2022). Additionally, maladaptive personality traits and attachment insecurity have been linked to emotional instability, detachment, and vulnerability, which may hinder adjustment to the communal and disciplined demands of religious life (Migalova *et al.*, 2025; Stevenson *et al.*, 2019).

Attachment theory is particularly relevant in understanding psychological vulnerability. Developed by John Bowlby, attachment theory posits that early relational experiences with caregivers shape internal working models of self and others, which influence emotional regulation and interpersonal relationships throughout life (Bowlby, 1988). In adulthood, insecure attachment patterns, such as anxious or avoidant attachment, are associated with difficulties in trust, intimacy, and emotional regulation (Evraire *et al.*, 2022; Scigala *et al.*, 2022). Individuals with anxious attachment often experience fear of abandonment and excessive reassurance-seeking, whereas avoidant attachment is linked to emotional distancing and discomfort with closeness and dependence (Uccula *et al.*, 2022; Partridge *et al.*, 2022).

In the context of religious life, attachment insecurity may manifest as excessive dependency on authority figures, difficulty forming stable community relationships, emotional withdrawal, or fear of abandonment. Recent psychological studies in vocational settings confirm that insecure attachment styles are associated with higher levels of stress and greater likelihood of withdrawal from demanding relational environments (Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2016; Wilt *et al.*, 2020).

Rulla *et al.* (1976) contributed significantly to this area by demonstrating that many candidates entering religious life carry unresolved psychological conflicts that become more pronounced under the demands of communal living and lifelong commitment. They argued that without adequate psychological integration, these vulnerabilities often surface during formation, leading to crises of identity and eventual attrition.

D. Follow-Up Interventions

Follow-up interventions refer to structured psychological, pastoral, and formative support mechanisms provided after psychological assessment and throughout formation. These include counselling, mentoring, spiritual direction, psycho-educational programs, and clinical interventions where necessary. Their primary aim is to support psychological integration, emotional healing, vocational clarification, and interpersonal adjustment.

Contemporary research emphasizes that psychological assessment alone is insufficient unless accompanied by continuous developmental support. Studies in vocational psychology show that structured interventions significantly improve adaptation and reduce dropout rates in high-commitment professions (Howard *et al.*, 2021). In religious life, follow-up interventions are increasingly viewed as essential

components of formation rather than optional supports.

Rulla's integrative model strongly supports this view by emphasizing that vocational identity is dynamic and requires ongoing integration of affectivity, values, and motivations. They argued that formation processes must facilitate continuous psychological maturation, particularly in addressing unconscious conflicts and emotional immaturity that may not be fully captured during initial assessment (Rulla, 1986).

Empirical studies in clergy and religious contexts confirm that individuals who receive consistent psychological and pastoral support demonstrate higher levels of resilience, better community adaptation, and greater vocational stability (Rossetti & Rinehart, 2020). Thus, follow-up interventions function as mediating mechanisms that enhance both emotional maturity and person–environment adaptation.

E. Perseverance

Perseverance in religious life refers to the sustained commitment of an individual to remain in a religious institute through temporary vows to final profession and lifelong service. It reflects not only endurance but also deep psychological integration, stable motivation, and alignment between personal identity and vocational calling.

From a psychological standpoint, perseverance is influenced by intrinsic motivation, emotional regulation, relational stability, and environmental support. Self-determination research shows that individuals with high autonomous motivation and strong internalized values are more likely to persist in demanding life commitments (Howard *et al.*, 2021; Ryan & Deci, 2017). Similarly, vocational psychology research indicates that perseverance is strengthened when individuals experience alignment between personal values and environmental demands (Kristof-Brown *et al.*, 2005).

In religious life, perseverance is also closely linked to spiritual integration and meaning-making. Studies in psychology of religion demonstrate that individuals with strong sense of purpose and meaning are more likely to sustain long-term religious commitments (Park *et al.*, 2021).

Rulla and colleagues conceptualized perseverance as the outcome of successful integration between motivational structures and personality organization. They argued that when vocational identity is deeply internalized and emotionally congruent, individuals are more likely to persist despite external and internal challenges (Rulla *et al.*, 1976).

F. Attrition

Attrition refers to the premature departure of individuals from religious life during formation or after profession of vows. It is a complex phenomenon that cannot be attributed to a single cause but rather emerges from the interaction of psychological, relational, spiritual, and environmental factors.

Contemporary research identifies several predictors of attrition, including emotional instability, weak intrinsic motivation, interpersonal conflict, burnout, and poor person–environment fit (Lee *et al.*, 2020; Rossetti & Rinehart, 2020). Attachment insecurity and unresolved psychological vulnerabilities also significantly contribute to withdrawal from

religious life due to difficulties in sustaining communal relationships and emotional regulation (Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2016).

Rulla *et al.* (1976) provided one of the earliest psychological analyses of attrition in religious life, arguing that vocational withdrawal often reflects pre-existing psychological incongruence that becomes more visible under the structured demands. They emphasized that attrition is frequently the outcome of unresolved tensions between idealized vocational expectations and actual psychological capacities.

Modern studies continue to support this interpretation, showing that attrition is often preceded by gradual disengagement, relational strain, and emotional exhaustion rather than abrupt decision-making (Howard *et al.*, 2021). This highlights the importance of early psychological assessment and continuous follow-up interventions in reducing attrition risk.

4. Methodology

This study employs an integrative review design to systematically synthesize empirical, qualitative, quantitative, and theoretical literature on psychological assessment and vocational perseverance in Catholic religious formation. The integrative review approach is appropriate because it enables the inclusion of diverse methodologies and theoretical perspectives, thereby offering a comprehensive understanding of complex phenomena such as vocational commitment, psychological readiness, and attrition in religious life. The method follows Whittemore and Knafl's framework (Whittemore & Knafl, 2005), which is widely recognized for guiding rigorous synthesis of heterogeneous evidence in health and social science research. It is particularly suitable for this study as it aligns with Self-Determination Theory and Person–Environment Fit Theory by allowing integration of psychological, pastoral, and vocational literature across contexts.

The integrative approach is especially relevant given that Catholic religious formation is multidimensional, involving psychological, spiritual, relational, and institutional dimensions. It also enables the inclusion of global literature while giving focused attention to African contexts, where empirical research remains limited but increasingly significant.

A comprehensive literature search was conducted in April and May 2026, covering publications from 2019 to 2026, while also including seminal works in vocational psychology and religious formation. The search was conducted across Scopus, PsycINFO, PubMed, ATLA Religion Database, Web of Science, and Google Scholar, selected for their interdisciplinary coverage of psychology, theology, psychiatry, vocational studies, and religious research.

Search strategies combined keywords and Boolean operators to ensure comprehensive coverage. Terms included “psychological assessment,” “vocational perseverance,” “religious life,” “Catholic formation,” “seminary formation,” “attrition in religious life,” “psychological screening,” “emotional maturity,” “religious vocation,” and “psychological vulnerability.” Boolean combinations such as “psychological

assessment AND religious vocation,” “vocational perseverance OR attrition AND Catholic formation,” and “emotional maturity AND seminary OR religious life” were applied to refine results.

Study selection followed PRISMA guidelines, ensuring systematic identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and inclusion of studies. This enhanced transparency and methodological rigor across all stages of review selection.

Data analysis followed a thematic synthesis approach, involving systematic coding and iterative comparison of findings across studies to generate conceptual categories. This process identified convergent and divergent patterns across the literature. The synthesis was guided by Self-Determination Theory and Person–Environment Fit Theory, ensuring that themes were analytically linked to motivation, psychological adjustment, and environmental congruence in religious formation. Key themes included psychological readiness and assessment practices, emotional maturity and vocational stability, psychological vulnerability and attrition risk, and the role of formation interventions in enhancing perseverance.

African studies were treated as a distinct contextual layer within the broader synthesis, enabling comparison between global evidence and regional realities and ensuring both international relevance and contextual sensitivity.

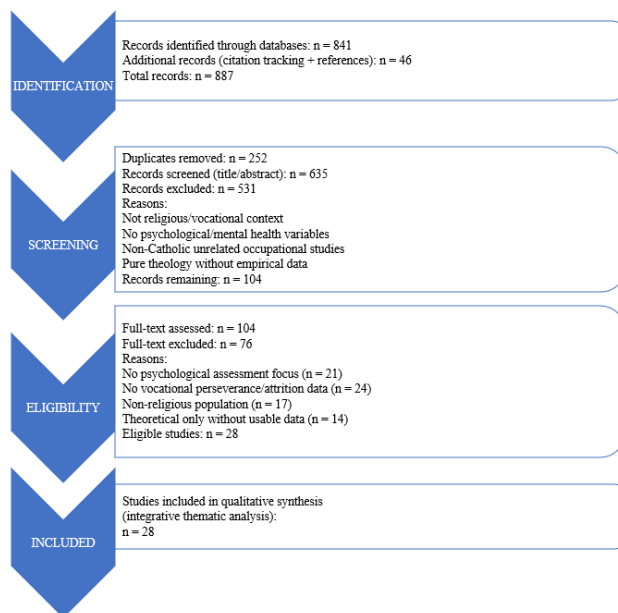


Fig. 1. PRISMA flow diagram

5. Results and Discussion

The analysis is anchored in Self-Determination Theory (SDT), Person–Environment Fit (P–E Fit) Theory, which together provide a multidimensional framework for understanding psychological assessment, emotional maturity, psychological vulnerability, follow-up interventions, vocational perseverance, and attrition in religious life. The findings indicate that vocational perseverance in Catholic religious life is not determined by a single psychological or institutional factor but emerges from the dynamic interaction of internal motivation, relational development, psychological

structure, and environmental demands. Five major themes were identified and are presented below, with integrated interpretation and discussion.

A. Psychological Assessment as a Tool for Vocational Discernment and Formation

The review found that psychological assessment has become an essential component of vocational discernment and formation processes in Catholic religious life (Congregation for Catholic Education, 2008; Congregation for the Clergy, 2016). Across studies, assessment tools such as structured interviews, psychometric tests, and projective methods are widely used to evaluate emotional stability, personality functioning, and relational capacity among candidates (Isacco *et al.*, 2020; McGlone & Viglione, 2020; Plante & Peng, 2023).

From a Person–Environment Fit (P–E Fit) perspective, these assessments function as mechanisms for evaluating compatibility between candidates and the demands of religious life. Kristof-Brown *et al.* (2005) emphasize that congruence between individual traits and environmental expectations predicts satisfaction and retention, a pattern strongly reflected in the reviewed literature.

Francis and Crea (2019) further demonstrate that personality structure and intrinsic vocational motivation significantly influence adaptation in seminary contexts, reinforcing the idea that psychological assessment is not merely diagnostic but also predictive of vocational adjustment. Similarly, Thompson *et al.* (2023) note that although psychological assessment is widely used, its predictive validity varies significantly across cultural contexts, particularly where instruments are not adapted to local realities.

However, a critical limitation identified is that psychological assessment is often treated as a one-time gatekeeping mechanism rather than an ongoing developmental process. Cable and Edwards (2004) argue that person–environment fit is dynamic and evolves over time, suggesting that formation houses must move beyond selection toward continuous assessment and adaptive formation processes.

In African contexts, studies indicate increasing adoption of psychological assessment, but limited integration into long-term formation structures (Kiptoo & Barasa, 2023; Muthoni, 2022). This reduces its transformative potential and contributes to gaps in vocational sustainability.

B. Emotional Maturity and Psychological Readiness as Predictors of Vocational Stability

Emotional maturity emerged as one of the strongest predictors of vocational perseverance across the reviewed literature. Studies consistently show that individuals with higher emotional stability, resilience, and self-regulation demonstrate better adaptation to the demands of religious life (Lee *et al.*, 2020; Park *et al.*, 2021).

From a Self-Determination Theory (SDT) perspective (Ryan & Deci, 2017), emotional maturity reflects the satisfaction of the psychological need for competence. Individuals who perceive themselves as emotionally capable of managing stress, relationships, and responsibilities are more likely to sustain

long-term vocational commitment.

Wilt *et al.* (2020) confirm that psychological adjustment and emotional well-being are strongly associated with reduced attrition in religious and spiritual contexts. Similarly, Rossetti and Rinehart (2020) report that psychological wellness is directly linked to vocational perseverance among Catholic clergy.

Crea *et al.* (2021) further emphasize that resilience and emotional integration are not peripheral traits but central determinants of vocational sustainability. This supports the SDT argument that internal psychological integration is essential for sustained motivation and commitment.

From a theoretical standpoint, emotional maturity operates at the intersection of SDT (internal regulation) and P–E Fit (adaptive functioning within environment), making it a critical mediator of vocational outcomes.

C. Psychological Vulnerabilities and Attachment-Related Risk Factors in Attrition

A major finding of the review is that psychological vulnerabilities significantly contribute to attrition in religious life. These include unresolved trauma, emotional immaturity, maladaptive coping strategies, and insecure attachment patterns.

Attachment Theory provides a strong explanatory lens for these vulnerabilities. Bowlby (1988) posits that early relational experiences shape emotional regulation, interpersonal trust, and the capacity for intimacy. In religious life, these capacities are essential due to the demands of communal living and sustained relational engagement.

Empirical studies confirm that insecure attachment is associated with higher emotional distress, relational difficulties, and reduced resilience in religious contexts. Such individuals may struggle with authority structures, emotional intimacy, and communal belonging (Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2016; Wilt *et al.*, 2020).

Hamm and Eagle (2021) further show that clergy attrition is frequently linked to identity confusion, relational strain, and emotional exhaustion. These patterns align closely with attachment insecurity and poor emotional integration.

Importantly, P–E Fit Theory also explains attrition as a consequence of mismatch between psychological structure and environmental demands (Kristof-Brown *et al.*, 2005). When individuals lack the relational and emotional capacities required for communal religious life, maladaptation and withdrawal become more likely.

In African contexts, limited access to psychological and therapeutic services exacerbates these vulnerabilities. Formation systems often lack structured mechanisms for addressing deep relational and attachment-related issues (Okure, 2021).

D. Follow-Up Interventions as Determinants of Vocational Perseverance

A consistent finding across the literature is that psychological assessment alone is insufficient without structured follow-up interventions. Interventions such as counselling, mentoring,

spiritual direction, and psycho-spiritual accompaniment play a central role in sustaining vocational commitment.

From an SDT perspective, these interventions support the satisfaction of autonomy, competence, and relatedness needs. They help candidates internalize their vocation, develop coping skills, and strengthen relational integration (Howard *et al.*, 2021; Ryan & Deci, 2017).

Lee *et al.* (2020) and Park *et al.* (2021) demonstrate that resilience-building and meaning-centred interventions significantly enhance psychological adjustment and reduce attrition. Rossetti and Rinehart (2020) similarly emphasize that structured psychological wellness programs contribute to long-term vocational stability.

In Kenyan contexts, Kiptoo and Barasa (2023) confirm that structured psychological and supervisory support improves adaptation in religious life. However, Muthoni (2022) highlights a persistent gap: while psychological screening is widely implemented, post-assessment psychological accompaniment remains underdeveloped.

This creates a critical discontinuity between assessment and formation, undermining the developmental purpose of psychological evaluation. SDT suggests that without sustained environmental support, initial motivation may decline over time.

E. Person–Environment Fit, Motivation, and Vocational Perseverance

The findings highlight vocational perseverance as an outcome of interaction between individual characteristics and environmental demands. Person–Environment Fit Theory provides a strong explanatory framework for this relationship.

Kristof-Brown *et al.* (2005) demonstrate that congruence between individual values, personality, and environmental expectations predicts satisfaction, commitment, and retention. Cable and Edwards (2004) further emphasize that value alignment enhances occupational stability and reduces turnover intentions. Similar findings indicate that person–organization fit significantly reduces turnover intention through meaning in work and supportive ethical climates (Wnuk & Chudzicka-Czupala, 2026).

In religious life, environmental demands include celibacy, obedience, communal living, and structured spirituality. When candidates' psychological profiles align with these demands, adaptation is enhanced (Francis & Crea, 2019; Plante & Peng, 2023).

SDT complements this perspective by explaining internal motivation. Autonomy, competence, and relatedness are essential for sustaining vocational commitment (Howard *et al.*, 2021; Ryan & Deci, 2017). Thus, perseverance depends not only on external fit but also on internal psychological integration.

CARA (2020) highlights global differences in vocational trends, noting decline in Western contexts but growth in African regions, suggesting that cultural and environmental contexts significantly shape vocational pathways.

F. Integrative Discussion of Findings

Across the 28 studies, vocational perseverance emerges as a multidimensional construct influenced by several interrelated factors. These include psychological assessment, which supports processes of selection and discernment; emotional maturity, reflected in an individual's capacity for internal regulation; psychological vulnerabilities, particularly those associated with attachment-related risks; follow-up interventions that provide ongoing developmental support; and person–environment fit, which emphasizes the importance of contextual alignment between the individual and their vocational setting.

The findings suggest that psychological assessment alone is insufficient to ensure vocational perseverance. Instead, it must be embedded within a continuous formation system that integrates assessment, psychological development, and relational accompaniment.

In African contexts, the main challenge is not the absence of psychological assessment but the absence of integrated formation systems that sustain psychological and vocational development over time.

6. Implications and Recommendations

This section presents the implications of the findings of the integrative review on psychological assessment and vocational perseverance in Catholic religious formation. The implications are organized into formation, policy, psychological practice, and future research domains in order to provide a structured and applied interpretation of the results.

A. Formation Implications

The findings of this review have significant implications for Catholic religious formation programs. First, psychological assessment should be understood not merely as a selection tool, but as an ongoing formative process. Evidence from the reviewed studies (Isacco *et al.*, 2020; Plante & Peng, 2023; Thompson *et al.*, 2023) shows that personality structure and emotional stability influence long-term adaptation, but do not remain fixed over time. This supports the need for continuous psychological accompaniment throughout formation.

Second, formation houses are therefore encouraged to integrate psychological assessment into a developmental framework that includes periodic reassessment, reflective feedback, and structured psychological growth plans. This aligns with Self-Determination Theory, which emphasizes that autonomy, competence, and relatedness develop progressively through supportive environments (Ryan & Deci, 2017; Howard *et al.*, 2021).

Third, formation programs should prioritize emotional maturity development as a core dimension of human formation. Findings from Lee *et al.* (2020), Park *et al.* (2021), and Rossetti and Rinehart (2020) demonstrate that emotional regulation and resilience are key predictors of vocational perseverance. Formation curricula should therefore include structured training in emotional intelligence, conflict resolution, and stress management.

Finally, attachment-related vulnerabilities identified in the

literature (Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2016; Wilt *et al.*, 2020) suggest that formation must incorporate relational healing and integration processes, especially for candidates with histories of trauma or insecure attachment patterns.

B. Policy Implications

At the institutional and ecclesial level, the findings suggest the need for stronger policy frameworks governing psychological assessment in religious formation. First, there is a need for standardized psychological assessment guidelines that are contextually adapted to African realities. While Vatican documents such as the *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis* provide general direction (Congregation for the Clergy, 2016), implementation remains inconsistent across regions. The review indicates that lack of standardization contributes to variability in assessment quality and vocational outcomes (Thompson *et al.*, 2023).

Second, policies should explicitly require post-assessment psychological follow-up systems. Evidence from Kiptoo and Barasa (2023) and Muthoni (2022) shows that absence of structured follow-up support weakens the effectiveness of initial screening processes. Policy frameworks should therefore mandate counselling, mentoring, and psycho-spiritual accompaniment as essential components of formation.

Third, there is need for policies that promote integration between psychology and spiritual formation. The findings show that separation between psychological evaluation and spiritual formation reduces holistic development. An integrated policy approach would enhance Person–Environment Fit by aligning psychological readiness with vocational demands (Kristof-Brown *et al.*, 2005).

C. Psychological Practice Implications

The findings have important implications for psychologists working within religious formation contexts. First, psychological practitioners should adopt a developmental rather than diagnostic orientation. Psychological assessment should not end with admission decisions but should guide individualized growth plans throughout formation.

Second, practitioners should incorporate attachment-informed interventions in assessment and counselling processes. Given the strong influence of attachment patterns on relational functioning and attrition, psychologists should assess relational histories and provide targeted interventions for emotional integration and relational healing.

Third, psychological practice should integrate motivational assessment frameworks grounded in Self-Determination Theory. Evaluating autonomy, intrinsic motivation, and internalization of vocation can improve understanding of long-term perseverance potential (Ryan & Deci, 2017).

Finally, psychologists should work collaboratively with formators, spiritual directors, and community leaders to ensure that psychological insights are translated into practical formation strategies, rather than remaining isolated clinical reports.

D. Recommendations for Future Research

The review identifies several gaps that provide direction for

future empirical studies. First, there is a need for longitudinal studies that track candidates from admission through formation to final vows or exit. Most existing studies are cross-sectional, limiting understanding of psychological change over time.

Second, future research should focus on African context, where empirical evidence remains limited despite increasing use of psychological assessment. Studies by Okure (2021) and Muthoni (2022) indicate that contextual factors significantly influence formation outcomes, yet remain under-researched.

Third, there is need for predictive validity studies examining the extent to which psychological assessments actually forecast vocational perseverance. Thompson *et al.* (2023) highlight the lack of standardized validation across cultural settings.

Fourth, future studies should explore the effectiveness of follow-up interventions, particularly counselling, mentoring, and psycho-spiritual accompaniment, in improving vocational retention.

Finally, there is need for integrative theoretical studies that further test the combined explanatory power of Self-Determination Theory, Person–Environment Fit Theory, and Attachment Theory in vocational contexts.

7. Conclusion

This integrative review examined psychological assessment and vocational perseverance in Catholic religious formation using 28 empirical, theoretical, and mixed-method studies. The findings demonstrate that vocational perseverance is a multidimensional phenomenon shaped by psychological assessment practices, emotional maturity, psychological vulnerabilities, motivational processes, relational dynamics, and environmental fit.

The review shows that while psychological assessment is widely used in formation processes, its effectiveness is limited when applied as a one-time screening tool rather than a continuous developmental process. Emotional maturity and resilience emerged as strong predictors of vocational perseverance, while attachment-related vulnerabilities were consistently associated with attrition. Follow-up interventions such as counselling, mentoring, and psycho-spiritual accompaniment were identified as critical mediators of vocational sustainability.

The significance of this review lies in its integration of psychological and vocational literature into a unified framework that explains both vocational perseverance and attrition. By combining Self-Determination Theory, Person–Environment Fit Theory, and Attachment Theory, the study provides a comprehensive understanding of vocational development in religious life.

However, significant gaps remain, particularly in African contexts, where empirical evidence is limited and formation systems often lack structured psychological follow-up frameworks. There is also a shortage of longitudinal and predictive studies examining the long-term impact of psychological assessment on vocational outcomes.

These gaps justify the need for future empirical research focusing on psychological assessment, emotional development, and vocational perseverance within Catholic religious

institutes, particularly in Africa. Such studies would contribute to improving formation practices and strengthening evidence-based approaches to human formation in religious life.

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