Principles for Managing Burnout among Catholic Church Professionals

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Abstract

While a large body of research literature has explored the assessment, treatment, and prevention of worker burnout, much less research has focused on the unique issues associated with burnout in religious organizations, especially within the Roman Catholic Church. Catholic Church employees, whether clerics or laypersons, are embedded within a 2,000-year-old global hierarchical structure and organization that is unique in that it includes clerics with vows of chastity, obedience, and often poverty as well as ongoing crises related to clerical sexual abuse scandals, significant financial stressors, and a faith tradition that often overvalues sacrifice and suffering. The purpose of this brief article is to highlight burnout issues among Roman Catholic Church employees and offer principles and strategies for recognizing, treating, and avoiding burnout among these professionals. Five key principles for burnout management as well as several case examples are also presented.

Keywords Burnout · Stress management · Catholic · Work-life balance

Much has been written and discussed regarding worker burnout in recent decades (e.g., Maslach, 2003; Maslach & Leiter, 2006, 2017; Schaufeli et al., 2017). Regardless of the industry sector (e.g., health care, education, technology, transportation, business), numerous people report feeling burnt out at work (e.g., Petersen, 2021; West et al., 2018; Załuski & Makara-Studzińska, 2022). The so called Great American Resignation (e.g., Fry, 2022) during the recent COVID-19 pandemic was due, at least in part, to workers concluding that their jobs were not worth doing any longer for a variety of reasons, but many reported that they were just burnt out (Jiskrova, 2022; Sull et al., 2022). Research has investigated job burnout and strategies to diagnose, prevent, and treat it (e.g., Maslach, 2003; Maslach & Leiter, 2006). Human resource departments across the land, and within many diverse industries, have also offered workshops, trainings, and consultations to help prevent or minimize employee burnout (e.g., Bakker & de Vries, 2021; Cheng & Yi, 2018). Given

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the amount of attention burnout receives, one would expect great progress on burnout remedies. Yet, there are numerous reasons why burnout is a challenging problem to prevent, manage, or solve.

Burnout is now an official diagnosis or disease recognized by the World Health Organization and listed in the International Classification of Disease (ICD-11; Atroszko et al., 2020). It is defined as a condition or syndrome of chronic workplace stress that leads to symptoms of energy depletion or exhaustion, increased mental distance, disengagement, cynicism, negativism towards the workplace, and a sense of ineffectiveness or lack of efficacy (Atroszko et al., 2020; Hewitt et al., 2020). Burnout leads to both learned helplessness and decathexis from work (Plante, 2022). There are several reliable and valid assessment instruments to help diagnose burnout, with some being free to use while others are proprietary (Kristensen et al., 2005; Maslach, 2003; Maslach & Leiter, 2006; Schaufeli et al., 2017, 2020).

Burnout has received a great deal of media and research attention, mostly in the corporate and health care industries (e.g., Fraser, 2002; Maslach & Leiter, 2017; Willard-Grace et al., 2019). However, little attention has focused on burnout within various church communities and within the Roman Catholic faith tradition in particular (Jackson, 2009; Oakes, 2019; Rossetti & Rhoades, 2013; Virginia, 1998). There are many unique circumstances within faith communities that make burnout a critically important yet under-researched and underappreciated area of focus. The unique features of the Roman Catholic Church (e.g., clerics with vows of obedience and chastity and, for religious order clerics, poverty) make risk of burnout among clerics and laypersons especially challenging (Oakes, 2019).

The purpose of this article is to discuss some of the unique features and risks of burnout among employees, both clerics and laypeople, within Roman Catholic faith communities and offer several principles and strategies to prevent and manage burnout for these religious professionals.

Why are Catholic workers at elevated risk for burnout?

Catholics may be at higher risk for work burnout due, in part, to the unique qualities and organizational structure of the organization. First, Catholic clerics (e.g., priests, bishops, cardinals) maintain a vow of chastity such that they are not allowed to have marital or sexual partners (Coleman, 2006; Manuel, 2012; McGlone & Sperry, 2012; United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2006). Thus, they do not have their own families, with or without children (other than their families of origin). Therefore, they do not have the boundaries between home and work life that most people have to respect and manage. Without a spouse and children to answer to, little prevents them from blurring personal and professional boundaries, including sometimes working almost around the clock (Coleman, 2006). Lay employees, who typically do have spouses and families, may get little sympathy or accommodation from clerics, who are often their bosses or supervisors, for the work-life balance necessary to maintain a family and to avoid burnout (Plante, 2022). Second, Catholic clerics maintain a vow of obedience to their religious superiors, including the local bishop, as well as to the pope. These vows present a military-style hierarchy in that the superior has the right to order their subordinates to do as they wish. Clerics who are used to this structure that highlights obedience to authority may utilize this approach with lay subordinates and co-workers (Plante, 2022). Although laypeople do not have a vow of obedience to a religious superior, they work in an organizational structure that operates using this model. It is thus easy for boundaries

to be crossed by imposing or expecting obedience from the laity. Third, each bishop in the Catholic Church manages their diocese with essentially no checks and balances. There is no overriding board or committee that acts as overseers of the local bishop. The bishop's boss is the pope, who cannot micromanage all of the global bishops from across the globe. Thus, the bishop may impose his will, for good or for bad, upon his employees with little, if any, consequences or even with any corrective feedback. This creates an environment where burnout can fester among subordinates when there is so much power in the hands of one individual.

In addition to the unique organizational structure of the Catholic Church, the recent clerical sexual abuse crisis in the Church adds additional and unique stress that may contribute to burnout among employees, both laypersons and clerics alike. For the past 20 years, since the release of the *Boston Globe*'s Spotlight Team report on clerical abuse in the Archdiocese of Boston (Boston Globe Investigative Staff, 2002), the Church has been in a deep and long-lasting crisis as additional cases of sexual abuse perpetrated by Catholic priests have made headline news (Plante & McChesney, 2011). The negative press attention has been relentless (Henderson, 2018). Although the incidents of clerical abuse declined in the early 1980s, with very few reports of abuse having occurred during the twenty-first century (John Jay College of Criminal Justice, 2004, 2011), the press and the public have become highly skeptical of the Church's progress in this area (Plante, 2020). Additional bad press about unrelated topics have made "Catholic" a bad brand in the minds of many (Gehring, 2015; Lowney, 2017). This includes press attention associated with the "wafer wars" (i.e., bishops refusing to allow politicians to receive Holy Communion if they disagree with them on sexual ethics such as the right to abortions or same-sex intimate relationships), divisive political views, internal squabbles between highly conservative clerics and Pope Francis's progressive reforms, and various financial scandals (Byrnes & Segers, 2019; Middleton, 2021).

Finally, recent research has documented that many people, especially youth, are leaving the Church in droves (MacGregor & Haycook, 2021). Those who consider themselves religiously affiliated "nones" or "dones" have exploded in recent years across most of the major religious traditions, including the Catholic Church (Packard & Ferguson, 2019; Wiertz & Lim, 2021). Fewer church attendees mean less financial resources, closed or merged parishes, and much belt tightening that affects everyone who works for the Church. The Church often addresses these issues with a "five loaves and two fish" (Mark 6:41) approach, trying to continue their operations on fewer resources and hoping for a miracle from God to help them to do so.

Five principles to consider in managing Catholic worker burnout

Once diagnosed, what can be done to better manage, or even prevent, burnout among Church employees? Much research has been published about strategies for dealing with worker burnout in general (e.g., Khosravi et al., 2021; Martínez-López et al., 2021) that does not need to be repeated here. In this paper, strategies most relevant to Church-related burnout, and to Catholic employee-related burnout in particular, are highlighted. Several principles can be incorporated into preventing and managing worker burnout that are especially relevant to Catholic Church communities and environments for both laypersons and clerics alike.

Setting appropriate boundaries

While clerics might have vows of obedience, chastity, and, for religious order priests and nuns, poverty, laypeople do not. It is important for laypeople, in particular, to set firm boundaries around work and to be attentive to work-life balance issues. Celibate clerics, such as priests and bishops, often need to be reminded about the demands of secular family life since they do not experience the same challenges in this regard that nonclerics typically do. While they may mean well and offer supportive comments about family life, without actual lived experience they may easily forget or minimize the challenges that many lay professionals experience juggling work-life issues with their families. Clerics, since they do not have spouses or children to attend to, may also have difficulty setting appropriate and reasonable boundaries with parishioners, fellow clerics, and their religious superiors as well. They may easily be cajoled into responsibilities and activities during their off days, vacations, and at odd hours. The boundaries between personal and professional life are often blurred in Church employment environments, and thus vigilance regarding limit setting and firm boundaries are needed to avoid and manage burnout.

Pushing back against the "five loaves and two fish" viewpoint

All four of the New Testament gospels highlight and feature the miracle of the loaves and fishes in which Jesus is able to feed thousands of people with just a few barley loaves and a few fish (see Matthew 14, Mark 6, Luke 9, and John 6). Too often, the Church may use this image or way of thinking to push for more work out of their employees and clerics, encouraging them to do much more with fewer resources. The notion that "God will provide" can be used to encourage employees to work harder and harder regardless of the resources available to do their jobs. Chronically doing more with less is a sure way to risk and foster worker burnout as it is not sustainable over time.

Dealing with Church hypocrisy with realistic expectations

Many people who choose to work for the Church have been influenced by idealistic views about their faith, the Church as an institution, and Church leaders of both the past and the present. Putting their faith into service for the Church may come with many compromises, financial and otherwise. Yet working for the Church likely includes a clearer and more realistic picture and view of this very human institution where ideals and reported values may contradict the harsh reality of flawed humans operating a large and complex organization (Martel, 2019; Waligurski, 2019). Perhaps the clergy sexual abuse situation that has been headline news for many years is an excellent example of this (Boston Globe Investigative Staff, 2002; Plante & McChesney, 2011; Plante, 2020). Making compromises to work for the Church when so many vowed celibate clerics have been credibly accused of child sexual abuse, with many cases mismanaged by their bishops, is especially hard to reconcile with the tenets, demands, and ideals of the faith (Boston Globe Investigative Staff, 2002; Martel, 2019; Turpin, 2022). Attending to good evidence-based research data on these issues, rather than to sensationalized news headlines, may help to better understand the Church's behavior and problems as well as

the realization that all institutions, even religious ones, are managed and controlled by humans who are always far from perfect (John Jay College of Criminal Justice, 2004, 2011; Plante, 2020). As it states in the New Testament book of Romans (3:23), "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God" (NKJV). This is true for clerics, too. Thus, maintaining reasonable expectations about the Church, Church leaders, and rank-and-file clerics is important in order to avoid harsh disappointments leading to potential worker discouragement and burnout over time.

Avoiding hostile dependencies and knowing when to let go

While burnout can occur in any profession, it may be a higher risk in certain professions such as nonprofit Church-related work (Messer, 2021). Since a person's religious and spiritual life is woven into their work as a Church employee, they may have an especially hard time looking for a new job outside of the Church setting. Hostile dependencies can develop where employees may feel trapped, resentful, and burnt out but do not feel like they can leave for a variety of personal and professional reasons (Peteet, 2018). Hostile dependencies can act like a toxin, not only to the employee who is struggling but also to the coworkers and family members who surround them (Plante, 2022). Letting go of their job may be necessary but hard to do unless they can step away from their situation and secure adequate time for consultation, reflection, and corrective feedback from helpful others. Peers, family members, and friends may be influential in providing the much-needed corrective feedback and support to help the employee experiencing a hostile dependency to consider other options for work and their life path.

Clerics may experience hostile dependencies as well. They may also believe that they have no choice but to continue with their Church roles and responsibilities since they work under vows of obedience; leaving the Church is much harder for clerics to do than for laypersons. For example, leaving the priesthood means going through the laicization process with Vatican involvement and approval. Furthermore, many consider laicization scandalous. Clerics also may not have job or life skills that could be transferred or applied to non-Church-related careers and living situations.

Maximizing spiritual and religious tools

Much research has focused on coping with worker burnout by using general and secular stress management tools (e.g., exercise, sleep hygiene, meditation, yoga, healthy eating, social support; Maslach, 2003; Maslach & Leiter, 2006, 2017; Schaufeli et al., 2017). However, the special qualities of Church-related burnout lend themselves to spiritual and religious tools as well (e.g., spiritual direction, discernment, prayer, and meditation; Pargament & Exline, 2021; Plante, 2009). These spiritual tools, in addition to general stress and career management strategies, can be used by people working in faith-based organizations such as the Catholic Church. There are many evidence-based best practices that use spiritual and religious strategies for stress management, lifestyle management, and discernment for career directions that can be utilized by Church workers (Pargament & Exline, 2021; Plante, 2009, 2021a, b).

Three burnout case examples

Brief case examples may be helpful to demonstrate how burnout might occur and be better managed among psychotherapy and consultation clients who work within the Church.

Case example 1: Fr. Brown

Fr. Brown is an international priest who has recently been incardinated into an American diocese. He is extraverted and likeable. His parish community really enjoys him, and he enjoys working with his parish. Given Fr. Brown's background and culture, he always wears his clerical clothes, even on his days off and when he is engaged in routine activities such as grocery shopping. Fr. Brown finds that he has a hard time saying no to parishioners and ends up giving up many of his days off by taking phone calls and answering emails when off-duty and during odd hours. Since there is always important Church-related work that needs to be completed with increasingly limited resources, he tends to work around the clock. He blurs his personal and professional life, with few boundaries between them. Over time, he becomes more stressed and burned out. After an incident in which he raised his voice in an angry manner with a Church lay employee, his bishop asked him to seek consultation and psychotherapy. Intervention strategies included setting more appropriate and reasonable boundaries, encouraging Fr. Brown to wear street clothes when he is engaged in non-Church activities, and joining several non-Church-related ongoing activities that are relaxing and enjoyable for him. He joined a soccer league and enrolled in a yoga class, both without telling anyone that he was a Catholic priest. Strategies for dealing with demanding parishioners were also discussed, with setting appropriate and firm boundaries especially highlighted.

Case example 2: Samantha

Samantha is a laywoman who manages the music ministry for a local Newman Center and Catholic community at a secular university. She has several small children, and her husband tragically died a few years ago in a car accident. Raising several children alone on a church salary is very challenging for her. The pastor of the community is sympathetic but, as a celibate priest, knows little about the realistic difficulties and conflicts of family life, money management, and raising young children. Samantha feels supported and cared for by the priest, who is also her boss, but feels that his good intentions are not adequate given her stressful circumstances. Samantha is a perfectionist who wants the music and her choir to be perfect in every way, and she pushes herself and them. Her hard work is appreciated and applauded, but it takes a toll on her. In psychotherapy, boundary setting is discussed along with strategies to better interact with her supervisor to make the position more manageable. Several talented graduate students step in to help relieve Samantha of some of her music obligations, which helps reduce the pressure on her. Additionally, hiring an associate music director is now in the works as well.

Case example 3: Andy

Andy is a social worker who is the victim assistance coordinator for a large archdiocese. After the clergy abuse crisis in the Church and new child protection policies were enacted, all Catholic dioceses had to develop policies and procedures for managing every accusation of clerical abuse. The victim assistance coordinator's role is to support victims throughout the process. Andy has been overwhelmed by the volume of cases and the intensity of the work. He is married with three young daughters. The stories of sexual victimization of children really hit home for him given his family circumstances. Additionally, he is asked to travel for victim assistance coordinator trainings, which he finds to be challenging in terms of managing his busy family life. As cases keep mounting and his bishop expects him to work miracles, he feels chronically stressed and burned out. During psychotherapy, he admits that the workload and demands are too much for him, and he asks the bishop to hire an additional staff member to ease the burden or he will plan to seek a new position elsewhere.

These three cases provide examples of typical Church employee burnout issues and circumstances. Each burnout case is unique, and the strategies for each person either at risk for burnout or experiencing burnout need to be thoughtfully tailored to the individual and their special circumstances and needs. There are many secular as well as religiously based tools that can be used to assist employees to minimize or better manage their burnout risks and challenges. Using quality evidence-based strategies and being vigilant regarding burnout risk factors may assist in minimizing burnout in these environments.

Conclusion

Work burnout is a problem for many (e.g., Maslach, 2003; Maslach & Leiter, 2006, 2017; Schaufeli et al., 2017). While a great deal of research has been conducted on this topic, most of it has focused on the health care and corporate communities with fewer studies focused on Church communities, especially Roman Catholic ones. Thus, more research on Church-related burnout is clearly needed. Several strategies might be helpful to consider when trying to prevent or manage Catholic employee burnout. These include setting appropriate boundaries between work and personal responsibilities and activities, pushing back on the pressure to do more work with less resources, understanding and dealing with hypocrisy by maintaining realistic expectations, addressing potential hostile dependencies and letting go when necessary, and using spiritual and religious tools in addition to secular stress management strategies. Being mindful of burnout risk factors for Church employees is critically important for any Church community. Since non-profit Church work often is stressful with high demands and few resources, burnout is common. Therefore, close attention to these issues is especially important. Without adequate attention to burnout risks, fewer and fewer workers may be willing to do Church work.

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