Sex and the Clergy: An Insider Perspective on Celibacy and Loneliness in the Priesthood

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Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I-
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

The Road Not Taken, Robert Frost

Abstract

In order to become a priest or religious, one has to take various decisions that could affect their life trajectory. These decisions invariably have an impact on one's life, self-concept, and mental health. Celibacy in the Catholic priesthood, whether voluntary or involuntary, has been a point of contention for decades. Research on the intersection of celibacy and loneliness is lacking, especially in the Maltese context. Hence, this study aimed to explore whether celibacy contributes to loneliness in priests, and what other factors might be contributing to loneliness in this subset of the Maltese population, through the lens of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory. Through a mixed methods approach, this question was explored in two concurrent phases. The quantitative phase involved a survey (n = 149) measuring attitudes towards celibacy, masculine norms, and feelings of loneliness. The qualitative phase involved interviews with eight priests from different orders exploring their experiences of celibacy. Reflexive thematic analysis was used to extract themes from this data. Qualitative and quantitative results were triangulated and the result of this process indicated that celibacy is contributing to loneliness in priests, however there are other factors that could give rise to their poor wellbeing. These may include several factors such as the lack of close networks, the stereotypes that priests face, and the length of time spent in the priesthood. Moreover, priests describe loneliness in complicated ways that are independent of their celibacy practices. Through interviews the difference between well-integrated and poorly integrated celibacy also emerged, and the subsequent effects that each can have on a priest's life. The desire to marry emerged from the narratives of some priests, but not all. The findings present several implications for practice, emphasising the need for structral reforms, more open conversations, and a stronger emphasis on mental health at every stage of formation in order to decrease loneliness in priests and religious.

Keywords: loneliness, celibacy, stereotypes, manhood beliefs, acedia, mental health

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Chapter 1: Introduction

"Two roads diverged in a yellow wood, and sorry I could not travel both, and be one traveller" (Frost, 1915).

Celibacy in the Catholic priesthood, whether voluntary or involuntary, has been a point of contention for decades. In Malta, however, arguments against and in favour of mandatory celibacy resurfaced in 2024 for a number of reasons. In an interview in January, Maltese Archbishop Charles Scicluna stipulated that despite the continued importance of celibacy in the Catholic Church, priests should still be given the option to marry - "It was optional for the first millennium of the Church's existence and it should become optional again" (Archbishop Scicluna, 2024). This sparked a lot of debate, but in March of that same year the Archbishop's Seminary had no new recruits for the first time in four decades, a headline which further fueled mass opinion (Xuereb, 2024). In this chapter, some background on the topic of celibacy in Catholicism will be provided to contextualise the study. Some key terms will be defined, and the motivation and rationale of the study will be explained. This will be followed by an outline of the main research question together with the aims of the study. Finally, a brief outline of the chapters will be provided.

Background and Relevance

Celibacy in Catholic Priesthood

Celibacy in the priesthood has been around for centuries, however, mandatory celibacy in the Latin Rite of the Catholic Church has been in force since the Second Vatican Council (Anderson, 2003). Mandated celibacy is not considered to be a holy law, but a canon law, the latter being a body of laws that govern a Church which includes rules from sacred texts and practical rules established by religious groups over time (Sandberg, 2020). Apart from the practicalities which the canon law outlines, there are also a number of theological arguments for celibacy within the Catholic priesthood, for example the vow of celibacy being

construed as the total gift of self to the Church (Stickler, 2019). The vow of celibacy is not to be conflated with the vow of chastity, which is theologically mandatory in religious life and relates to the giving of the most intimate aspects of oneself to God (Jewdokimow & Sadlon, 2022). Although celibacy is practiced in multiple religions, each religion has a distinctly different understanding of the concept, with different priests within differing contexts having unique experiences and beliefs (Anderson, 2003). Hence, although the current study focuses on the attitudes and experiences of Roman Catholic priests, it must be acknowledged that this is not the only reality.

Celibacy as a mandate has been a point of contention among the laity, however little attention is given to the lived reality of the mandate. As a result of this sensationalisation, it seems that it is priests and religious themselves who are listened to the least. In a book about the lived reality of celibacy, Raguin (1974) states that "those who manage to shout the loudest, and who have the largest audiences, are usually those for whom celibacy has lost all meaning" (p. 2). It is thus worthwhile to determine what priests have to say about the matter, rather than turning to laity and the media.

The Maltese and Gozitan Context

The Maltese Islands are composed of a Catholic majority, with Catholicism being deeply enshrined in cultural traditions and generational thought (Buhagiar et al., 2022). About 83% of the population identifies as Catholic (European Commission, 2019). Though not necessarily practiced in the conventional manner, especially among youth, the Catholic religion still has a strong position in Maltese communities (Abela, 2000; Buhagiar et al., 2022). Although a Catholic upbringing was the standard in the past, there has been a slow shift towards a decrease in Catholic influence in the Islands (Buhagiar et al., 2022).

Religion is often a cultural identity marker, where the lines between culture and religion tend to blur (Beyers, 2017). This is especially so in countries where religion forms a

large part of the national identity. In Malta and Gozo, for example, religion is solidly ingrained in the culture. There are feasts dedicated to patron saints in every village, many religious public holidays, and much of our celebrations are centred around religious practices. Even though the Maltese Islands have become more secular with time, religious traditions are still held in high esteem by many. The role of the priest has also faced a paradigm shift of sorts. The priest was once a most revered profession, and it was almost an honour to come from a long line of priests. Although the vocation has not lost importance in all spheres, the priest as a figure in society has taken more of a background role.

Christianity and the Maltese have had a longstanding synonymity. This can be exemplified in the centrality of the parish church in every village and the privileged position of the Church preserved in the Maltese Constitution (Deguara, 2020). In particular, in the Constitution it is stated that the religion of Malta is Roman Catholic and that the Church is bestowed the right to disseminate Catholic teaching (Deguara, 2020). Maltese and Gozitan schools also have religious syllabi which are compulsory, although this has recently been replaced by ethics lessons for those who do not practice the Catholic faith. Children are also given catechism lessons multiple times a week up to the age of 12, and the longstanding tradition of the MUSEUM or the Society of Christian Doctrine has been a staple in Maltese and Gozitan upbringing for over a century. However, there has been a shift to a more secularised society in the past years. This, however, does not negate the ever-present importance of the Church in our culture, with the majority of the Maltese islands remaining persistently Catholic (Baldacchino, 2011). An interesting point made is that “Maltese Catholics have become more secular in their lifestyle choices, disregarding Church teachings, but still seeking its blessing” (Deguara, 2020, p.383).

There are two dioceses of the Catholic Church in the Maltese islands – one in Malta and one in Gozo. However, the Gozo diocese is substantially smaller. In 2011 it was

estimated that the ratio of priests to Catholics in Gozo was 1:180 (Galea, 2011), and in the last 14 years it has only been decreasing. The most recent statistics from the Maltese diocese show that there were 853 priests and 1,143 religious in Malta alone (Archdiocese of Malta, 2010). The current number stands at 234 diocesans and 210 religious who are active in Malta, and 115 diocesans and around 20 religious in Gozo (J. Borg, personal communication, January 22, 2025). As the number of Catholic clergy not only locally but also worldwide is eroding, it is worth considering the many factors that might be affecting this rapid decline.

Key Terms

Given the nuance and complexity of certain constructs, it is important to define the key terms which will be discussed, including celibacy, chastity, and loneliness. Celibacy is the free choice to abstain from marriage and sexual activity (Marga, 2024). In the Roman Catholic tradition, celibacy allows for priests to offer their full love and devotion to God without the constraints of marriage or familial obligations (Morales, 2023). This vow is taken by diocesan priests, who are priests that serve people of a particular diocese and who tend to live alone (Fitzgerald, 2024). Chastity is the vow to integrate one's spirit with the sexuality of the body, and in the process to exercise self-restraint and deny all forms of sexual acts including masturbation and lust (Morales, 2023). This is the vow taken by religious priests, who live in a community of priests united by a distinctive way of life or spiritual focus (Fitzgerald, 2024). Both celibacy and chastity are considered vocations (Morales, 2023). Although religious priests take the vow of chastity, it is nonetheless a universal virtue that all Christians are called to practice. Celibacy, however, is viewed as more of a choice (Thatcher, 2011). A distinction should also be made between celibacy and asexuality, with asexuality being defined as diverging from celibacy – unlike celibacy, which is a choice, asexuality is a sexual orientation (Knauss, 2017). As such, celibate priests and religious are called to abstain from sex, being a type of intimacy involving various forms of sexual activity between two or

more people (Richards & Barker, 2016). Sex and the clergy, therefore, are two concepts which thus far have not been allowed to mix. Priests are not necessarily barred from experiencing other forms of intimacy, however, such as emotional, social, or intellectual intimacy, within limits (McDevitt, 2012).

Loneliness can come in many forms and has many definitions, one being the unpleasant feeling that results from a perceived discrepancy between one's actual relationships and the ones they desire (Heu, 2025). Some also define distinct categories of loneliness, such as intimate, relational, or collective loneliness (Austin, 1983). Intimate loneliness is defined as a desire to be vulnerable with a person, relational loneliness is defined as a desire to be part of a reliable social network, and collective loneliness is defined as a desire to form part of a group that shares common interests (Heng, 2023). Loneliness can be chronic or transient, with most people experiencing it at some point in their lives (van Staden & Coetzee, 2010). People can be lonely if they lack strong social networks, but they can also be lonely because their relationships fail to meet their expectations (Heu, 2025). Using an umbrella concept analysis, Cunningham et al. (2025) define loneliness as:

> *the negative feeling(s) one experiences as a result of a (conscious or subconscious) personal perception that one's interpersonal needs are not satisfied by (the quantity and/or quality of) one's interpersonal (emotional, social, collective, professional, and/or religious) relationships.* (p. 29)

Loneliness can come with a plethora of negative feelings, including distress, sadness, emptiness, despair, anxiety, agony, boredom, or worry (Cunningham et al., 2025). For the purpose of this study, loneliness will be discussed with all these definitions taken into account, since some variations compensate for gaps in others.

Motivation and Rationale

My interest in the subject came from what I perceived to be a disjoint in the lives of priests and religious. I could not understand that despite having renounced the chance to engage in romantic relationships most priests I knew seemed happy, fulfilled, and at peace. I found it difficult to reconcile the idea of a man without a partner not being lonely, sad, or in despair, perhaps based on a mistaken notion that an unmarried or single person could not possibly live a happy life. Moreover, I could not understand how adult men could live a celibate life, given how important sexuality tends to be not only for the human condition but also for men in general, or so it is in modern society. Having already undergone research on masculinity during my Bachelor studies, I wanted to narrow my focus on an understudied population in masculinity research: voluntarily celibate priests. I found it curious that on the one hand priests faced masculinity norms whilst on the other hand their vocation called for them to display traits which were feminine in nature. If masculine stereotypes sat on one shoulder of the priest and Christ's masculinity on the other, the two would be whispering opposite orders in his ears (or rather, the former yelling and the latter whispering, as is the stereotype).

Upon further reading, I was struck by the loneliness epidemic facing the Maltese Islands, a place where a word for 'lonely' never existed in the language because it was previously a foreign concept. I wondered especially about this feeling in priests, whether it was amplified because of their tendency to live alone, the nature of their profession, and their vow to remain unmarried. Given the dwindling number of priests, I thought it would be interesting to explore whether the decrease in numbers is being caused by the loneliness of the vocation. I also wished to find out whether different types of priests faced different levels of loneliness. Given that priests are a subset of the male population, one which often swears by the suppression of emotions, I wanted to understand whether the mental health of priests was a matter that needed attention. I was also curious to see whether celibacy affected the

mental health of priests, and sought to find out what was behind the mask. Essentially, the research question emerged from a strong desire to understand a population I knew nothing about and whose experience I could never live through myself.

It is of course worth noting that the priesthood and the problem of celibacy cannot be examined or resolved on the basis of considerations which are purely psychological. When examining a phenomenon from a psychological perspective, importance is given to different aspects than when being examined from a philosophical or theological perspective. Possible problems within the priesthood cannot be treated as functional (Stickler, 2019), and thus this study is not about making the Church more functionally effective. The aim of this study is to provide a purely psychological perspective, focusing on the mental health of priests, however it is also recognised that one perspective is not enough, and what will be uncovered by this research will certainly not be the full explanation. This needs to be kept in mind when reading the arguments and assumptions being presented.

Research Question, Aims, and Objectives

The overarching research question of this study is: *does celibacy contribute to loneliness in priests?* Through a mixed methods research design, the aim of this study is to explore loneliness and celibacy in the priesthood, and to seek whether there are any factors that might be impacting how lonely Maltese and Gozitan priests feel. This will be achieved through the use of both a survey and data from interviews with priests and religious in order to reach multiple objectives, namely (1) to quantitatively investigate the prevalence of loneliness in the priesthood, (2) to quantitatively investigate the relationships between commitment to celibacy, manhood beliefs, and loneliness, (3) to quantitatively investigate the demographic variables that affect priests' commitment to celibacy, manhood beliefs, and feelings of loneliness, (4) to qualitatively and quantitatively explore how priests define loneliness, (5) to qualitatively explore the experiences of priests in relation to celibacy and loneliness, and (6) to triangulate quantitative and qualitative findings in order to gain both an in-depth and broad

understanding of celibacy and loneliness in Maltese and Gozitan priests. These areas are being explored in order to gain an in-depth understanding of the association between celibacy and loneliness in the priesthood. All this will be guided by a theoretical framework which centres on Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory.

Outline of Chapters

This chapter serves as an introduction to the dissertation, outlining the context and key terms related to the study, the rationale, and objectives. The next chapter will delve into the existing literature and engage with previous studies in the field. The theoretical framework and main constructs informing the study will also be outlined. In Chapter three, the methodology will be outlined, with a particular focus on the mixed methods design, the philosophical underpinnings, and ethical considerations taken. In Chapter 4, the details of the quantitative procedure and the results are presented, and in Chapter 5 the qualitative phase and the findings from the interviews are presented. Finally, in Chapter 6 the results of both phases are integrated and discussed in light of the literature. In this chapter are also recommendations for practice and research, and the limitations of the study, together with the main conclusions of the study.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

In order to become a priest or religious, one has to take various decisions that could affect their life trajectory. However, it might be worth asking whether these decisions affect their mental health and self-concept. Some realities emerging from taking the vow of celibacy might be going unnoticed. Sex, love, romance, and family are considered by many to be the *raison d'être* (Gold et al., 2024; Gómez-López et al., 2019; Tartakovsky, 2023; , which raises the question of why priests and religious would choose to lead a life without these normative pillars. Additionally, sexuality and manhood seem to be intertwined in the conventional form of gender socialisation (Duckworth & Trautner, 2019). This begs a different question – does celibacy affect the way priests conceptualise their own manhood? Manliness has been a pillar stressed by the Catholic Church for many years (van Es, 2021). However, men and masculinities among priests seem to be understudied, with most studies centering around women, often carried out from a feminist perspective (Romeo Mateo, 2021). Studies marrying the two concepts are not often psychological but historical in nature, and focus on priests before the 21st century, thus omitting the actual lived experience of priests (e.g., Mínguez-Blasco, 2021; Thibodeaux, 2010). This chapter provides the theoretical framework that aims to inform one main question: does celibacy contribute to loneliness in priests? Some key studies on celibacy are provided, followed by literature on loneliness and male mental health. The intersection between masculinity and religion is also discussed.

Understanding the Relationship between Priests and Loneliness

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory

When trying to understand behaviour, one must not consider the person in isolation but as part of an interconnected web. The different systems which form part of a person's environment, their different relationships, and the effects of wider societal structures all impact them in different ways (Crawford, 2020). Ecological systems theory postulates just

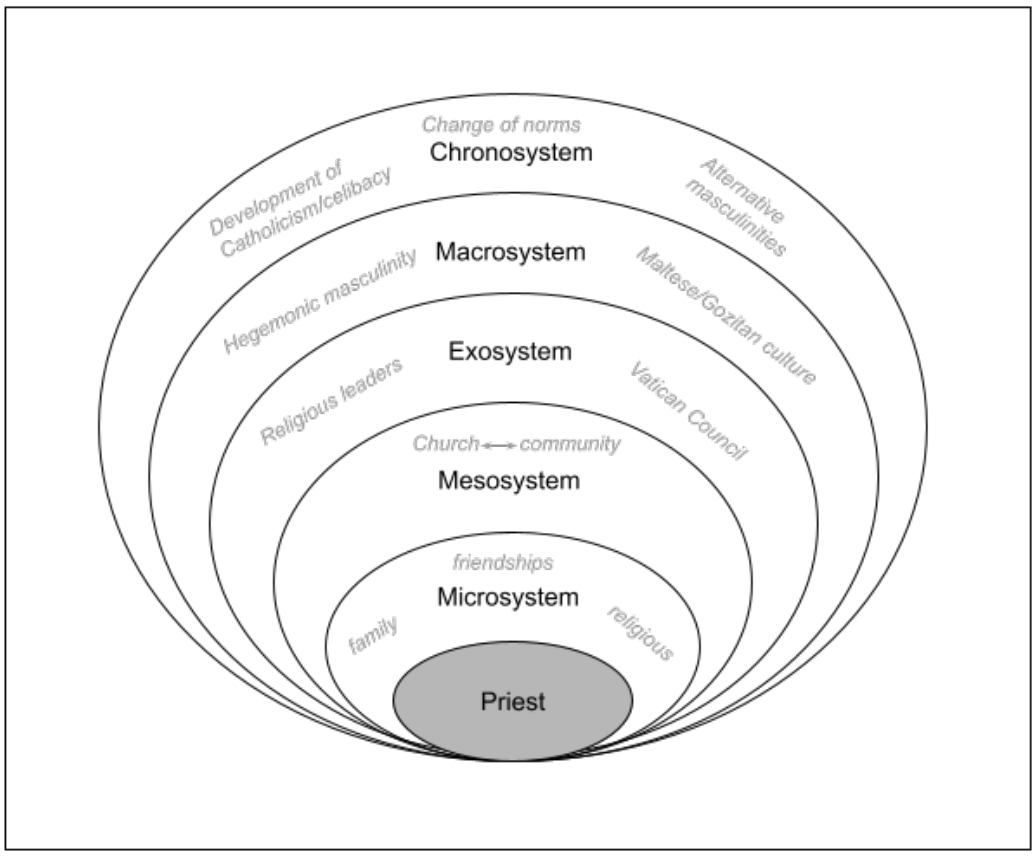
that – just as Russian dolls fit into one another, Bronfenbrenner (1979; 1994; 1997) proposed that there are five systems nestled within one another which affect one's functioning. Although it is usually applied to childhood development, it has also been applied to other contexts including domestic violence (Mestvirishvili et al., 2025), technology use in older adults (Backonja et al., 2014), drug dependency (Granger & Mirabelli, 2025), work-related triggers in teachers (Nkomo et al., 2025), therapeutic services (Paterson-Young et al., 2025), adults with disabilities (Šumskienė et al., 2023), and romantic love (Mayer, 2025). In the current study, this theory is being applied to understand the relationship between priests' celibacy and loneliness. A major focal point of using an ecological framework is that it allows for a holistic view of loneliness, since it acknowledges that it is a complex issue that does not have a single cause (Mestvirishvili et al., 2025). Rather than focusing on the pathology of priests, using this framework allows for the consideration of various interacting factors that could be contributing to feelings of loneliness (Mestvirishvili et al., 2025).

The Five Systems. Bronfenbrenner (1979) proposed five interconnected systems which can shape a person's psychological growth. The microsystem involves one's direct interactions and relationships (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). The mesosystem involves interactions between two or more environments that the individual actively forms part of. The exosystem represents the wider social system; this directly impacts one's life without them ever having access to the system (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The macrosystem acts as a cultural blueprint, representing characteristics of the culture one is situated in. The chronosystem represents how certain constructs can transform over time (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). These five systems shape one's context, and can further compound and exacerbate an issue (Choi, 2025), in this case loneliness. Although the systems can lead to dysfunction, they can also lead to development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998).

Several factors can be placed within each individual layer. Amongst the various aspects of human development, biological, psychological, spiritual, social, cultural, and economic factors can be placed in one or multiple layers (Crawford, 2020). Figure 1 builds on Bronfenbrenner's model with the addition of some different factors that might affect the loneliness of priests.

Figure 1

The Application of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory to Loneliness in Priests



It is being theorised that the loneliness of priests is affected by various systems. The priest is at the centre, nested within the rest of the systems, with his personal history, personal characteristics, and past experiences. Embedded here are the possibilities of spiritual dryness,

emotional exhaustion, and poor mental health. There is then the microsystem, which includes the priest's family, close friendships, and in the case of religious priests the rest of the congregation that they live with. Some authors also consider aspects of faith in this system, with religious communities being placed in the microsystem (e.g., Crawford, 2020). The mesosystem involves the different interactions between all the environments the priest is directly involved in, such as the interaction between the Church and the community, the interaction between his peers and the laity, the interaction between his pastoral team and his parishioners. The exosystem involves the environments which the priest does not directly form part of, such as the Vatican Council and higher orders of the Catholic Church in Malta and Gozo. Even though he is not directly part of these environments, they might still affect him greatly. For example, it is the Vatican Council that creates the laws of the Church, such as that mandating celibacy. At the exosystem level priests might experience cognitive dissonance, which is a state of holding two or more conflicting beliefs, attitudes, or values at the same time, and the resulting tension (Hamel, 2014). For example, if a priest does not agree with the laws of the Vatican Council, but at the same time wants to remain a priest, he will experience cognitive dissonance.

The macrosystem involves norms, cultural phenomena, and stereotypes. This includes the norms embedded within hegemonic masculinity, as well as Maltese and Gozitan culture and attitudes surrounding religion, amongst others. Since hegemonic masculinity forms part of the macrosystem, it could have a greater effect than other factors since the macrosystem influences multiple levels of the ecological system, and is thus out of the priests' control (Crawford, 2020). Spirituality has been argued to be a protective factor from trauma at the macrosystem level (Crawford, 2020). Finally, the chronosystem refers to the time in which the person is living, and thus the changes of certain concepts over time. For example, although most priests today would have been raised with a stereotypical view of masculinity,

nowadays the advent of alternative masculinities might change their realities. Similarly, Catholicism and celibacy have developed and changed over the course of history. Had these priests lived before the Second Vatican Council, they would not have had to take the vow of celibacy. Even in the Maltese context change is constantly happening over time, with one example being the lack of men entering the priesthood and another the Archbishop's recent suggestion to allow the consideration of a married priesthood.

Celibacy

Many formulations of celibacy exist – from mandated to voluntary, complete to partial, and vocational to philosophical (Choudhury, 2020). From a Roman Catholic perspective, celibacy can be defined as a free choice to abstain from marriage and remain chaste in order to dedicate oneself to carrying out God's service (Marga, 2024). Implicit in this definition is the idea of continence, which is when one refrains from using their sexual faculties and does not succumb to their sexual desires (Daly, 2009). In fact, although celibacy derives from the Latin word for single or unmarried, there is a difference between being a celibate priest and being a celibate bachelor. Through religious celibacy, one is expected to sublimate their sexuality into spirituality (Choudhury, 2020). A celibate bachelor, on the other hand, is free to 'undo' their celibacy. The issue is even more complex when the word celibacy is often conflated with abstinence or chastity, which are similar but not equal (Knauss, 2017). Celibacy is practiced by all priests, but only religious priests take the vow of chastity. Furthermore, the vocation to become a priest and the vocation to be celibate can be viewed as two separate callings, with the latter having a more coercive element (Rulla, 1971). Although the vow of priesthood remains throughout one's life, even if they leave the Church, the vow of celibacy has more of a lawful connotation and does not need to be followed upon leaving (Mayblin, 2018).

Christian Asceticism

Asceticism involves a number of practices of self-sacrifice which are intended to deepen one's spiritual development, and encompasses practices such as renouncement of desires and fasting (Halligan, 2020). Christian asceticism involves self-denial for a spiritual purpose (Adair-Toteff, 2020). In terms of celibacy, it comprises the free acceptance of celibacy and the renunciation of marital life. Christian asceticism does not imply denial of love, but rather limits some forms of expressing it. Asceticism is meant to fulfill various functions, such as the control of one's sexual appetites, a detachment from relationships and materialism, and identification with others' suffering (Halligan, 2020).

Asceticism Without Meaning. Celibacy is sometimes considered to be a forced lifestyle or an imposition on Catholic priests (Baumann et al., 2019). When not freely chosen, or when priests feel that they have been coerced into celibacy, they may become weak in their practice, alienated, lonely, and bitter (Abbott, 2000). Abbott (2000) interviewed a number of former priests and religious over six years, and quoted many who left the priesthood due to celibacy. Some felt that coping with celibacy was too energy-consuming, whilst others felt that the denial of sexuality was vaguely sinful. One priest, on returning to his empty house after a day of work, stated that he felt "like a diver who had gone down deep and did not have a decompression chamber when he came up" (Abbott, 2000, p. 385). Although Abbott's work is now 25 years old, and was carried out in America, the fact that the statements were collected over a number of years attests to their relevance even now. The words are still carried through today, in various different iterations. However, Abbott interviewed only ex-priests, and thus the sample could have had an element of bias. Over decades, studies have shown that the primary reason for priests leaving the priesthood is the rejection of celibacy stemming from the desire to marry (Verdieck et al., 1988; Schoenherr & Young, 1990; Schoenherr & Vilariño, 2013; Pietkiewicz, 2016; Hamm & Eagle, 2021).

Celibacy is only stable if one is peacefully assured that they have been called to it (McGavin, 2011). When embraced, priests can view celibacy as a sign of full dedication to their faith and an opportunity to experience divine love (Gregoire, 2003). It also allows for a sense of generative love for the people in their ministry (Manuel & Manuel, 2012). From a practical perspective, celibacy has also been viewed as a choice for independence, so as to enable priests to focus their energy on their parish and work rather than on a spouse and family (Besançon, 2009). In general, it has been found to be helpful in ministering more effectively (Baumann et al., 2017). This finding was part of a study on 2549 Catholic priests, and the results were mixed, with the majority stating that celibacy is helpful, and others viewing it as a burden (Baumann et al., 2017). Thus, both perspectives need to be understood further.

Celibacy as a Cultural Practice

Celibacy is not just a religious practice, but a cultural one. For example, in some popular culture spheres it is promoted and endorsed by "celi-brities" as a lifestyle choice for both men and women in order to acquire freedom, success, and energy (Knauss, 2017, p. 85). Different cultures practice it differently. For example, *Brahmacharya* is conceptually similar to celibacy, but it is practiced in Hindu cultures and has very different rules (Kumari et al., 2024). Hence, one must not negate that religion and culture coexist, so when studying religion it is necessary to also study the culture in which it is being practiced (Beyers, 2017). This is why celibacy in the Maltese context needs to be examined, because our culture has its own idiosyncrasies which will affect the way celibacy is practiced and understood.

Religious Norms. Religious groups have their own norms, rules, and laws (Sandberg, 2020). Canon law is a term which describes a body of law which is applicable to a Church, and encompasses not only the rules found in sacred texts but also practical rules which have been developed by religious groups (Sandberg, 2020). The Roman Catholic Church in

particular is subject to many laws found within the *Code of Canon Law* (1917/ 1983), one of which binds clerics to celibacy. It states:

> *Clerics are obliged to observe perfect and perpetual continence for the sake of the kingdom of heaven and therefore are bound to celibacy which is a special gift of God by which sacred ministers can adhere more easily to Christ with an undivided heart and are able to dedicate themselves more freely to the service of God and humanity.* (*Code of Canon Law*, 1917/1983)

The Second Vatican Council. The current debate on celibacy in priesthood was initiated with the Second Vatican Council. The Second Vatican council emanated from a need to discern the meaning of the rapid changes occurring worldwide (Grech, 2024). Taking place between the years of 1962 and 1965, it aimed to modernise the Church (Wilde, 2007). Since then, two major bodies of work have had a major impact on the priesthood. Firstly, the Presbyterorum Ordinis – a conciliar document on the priesthood – which included several statements such as:

1. That celibacy was recommended and advocated for by Christ;
2. In St. Paul's letters, celibacy is often promoted;
3. Celibacy is compatible with the priesthood in many ways, including that it allows priests to be free from any distractions and limitations caused by family life, that it allows for more time and independence for them to work in the community, and it encourages focus;
4. Celibacy is seen as a gift bestowed to priests (Anderson, 2003).

Secondly, Pope John Paul II's Holy Letters (1979-1996) also endorsed celibacy in a variety of ways. Again, his letters often stated that renouncing family life is essential to the priesthood, and that celibacy is a gift given by God. Other writers in the field, such as Crosby

(1996), argue that using the New Testament to argue in favour of celibacy is a misuse of scripture, and that arguments for celibacy are loaded with contradictions.

Integrated Celibacy

When well-integrated, celibacy can allow priests to be more committed and devoted to their ministry (Issaco et al., 2015). A compelling suggestion by Bordisso (2011) is that the way priests experience celibacy is on a continuum, with acceptance on one end and rejection on the other. On this continuum, most priests tend to fall in the middle (Bordisso, 2011). A consecrated celibate could become sexually integrated if they are well-prepared during formation. In fact, some theologians have been encouraging integration of human sexuality during formation rather than its denial and repression (Njinu, 2016). Moreover, formators are encouraged to display empathy and suspend judgement when budding priests in their care are faced with sexual difficulties during their formation. In a case study on formation in an American diocesan seminary, a priest-researcher sought to understand how celibacy is taught and internalised in Catholic seminaries (Stanosz, 2004). There was an interesting contrast between seminarians who had integrated celibacy well and those who had not. The former found that celibacy allowed them to be committed to everyone in the parish, made them more approachable, and gave them a sense of control over themselves (Stanosz, 2004). On the contrary, those who had not integrated celibacy well expressed anxiety about the promise of celibacy, about committing to chastity, saw celibacy as a requirement rather than something they took on willingly, feared loneliness and not being able to speak to someone on an intimate level (Stanosz, 2004). Although this study is twenty years old, it has value in that it was conducted by a celibate priest who understands formation, and it provides a well-rounded account of what celibacy can feel like for seminarians.

Mental Health in the Priesthood

Research on the mental health of priests has been steadily increasing over the past few years (Harmon et al., 2023). This is well-needed, especially in the Maltese context, but also in other countries where the number of individuals joining the priesthood has been progressively declining. The priesthood has also seen an increase in the withdrawal from active ministry due to rising levels of burnout and depression (de Lima Dias, 2019). Hence, researchers might need to consider priests' mental health as a risk factor for withdrawal from the priesthood, and possibly the fear of developing poor mental health as a deterrent from joining the priesthood.

Risk Factors and Buffers

Flourishing versus Burnout. Due to the nature of their work, priests might be at a higher risk of experiencing stress (Ruiz-Prada et al., 2021). However, their work might also be the source of various unique buffers (Büssing et al., 2017). A systematic review of literature on occupational stress and Catholic priests found that priests can experience ordinary buffers which are applicable to anyone, such as frequent exercise, finding time to rest, and social support (Ruiz-Prada et al., 2021). What is perhaps unique to priests is their relationship with the Eucharist, and in fact it was found that the Eucharist can be a buffer to stress in priests (Upenieks, 2024). In this study, a distinction was made between good mental health and flourishing, the latter being defined as a state where one experiences good functioning in different facets of everyday life, including the psychological, the social, and the physical (Rule et al., 2024). As a group, priests seem to be flourishing more than the general population (Vaidyanathan, 2024). The results could be viewed as fairly robust, as the sample comprised 3794 diocesan and religious priests. Thus, the distinctive factors of priests' vocation could either be seen as buffers or as risk factors in conjunction with their mental health (Upenieks, 2024; Vaidyanathan, 2024).

In relation to burnout and stress in Catholic priests, there are various risk factors for poor mental health in the priesthood, including living alone, insufficient support systems, introverted personalities, and the excessive demands of their practice (Ruiz-Prada et al., 2021). However, protective factors such as social support, maintaining an active spiritual life, and promoting optimism have also been identified (Ruiz-Prada et al., 2021). Moreover, in a review of the literature on pastoral attrition, loneliness and isolation mainly attributed to celibacy were the most common reasons for Catholic priests leaving the priesthood (Hamm & Eagle, 2021). Taking all the research into consideration, it is necessary to delve into the possible risk factors and protective factors affecting the Maltese and Gozitan clergy.

Emotional Exhaustion. The mental health of priests can be influenced by a plethora of variables. In a study on burnout in 264 priests, high scores of extraversion predicted higher levels of satisfaction in the ministry and lower levels of emotional exhaustion (Crea et al., 2024). Another study on Catholic priests and religious in Italy found that those who felt they had a sense of purpose and meaning in life also had lower levels of emotional exhaustion and higher levels of satisfaction in their ministry (Crea & Francis, 2022). Although this sample was composed of both males and females with ages ranging from 27 to 86, the researchers controlled for age and gender. Hence, results are more generalisable to clergy of all ages and genders, especially since older priests and religious tend to report lower levels of burnout and exhaustion than their younger counterparts (Francis, 2018).

Why Priests Are Happy

Life Satisfaction of Priests. When looking at research on the life satisfaction of priests and religious, one milestone study is Rossetti's (2011) *Why Priests Are Happy.* Based in the United States, the results of this study illustrated that priests had slightly higher levels of psychological health than the general population, with particularly high scores for happiness. The study sampled 2482 Catholic priests across the United States. A replication of

this study in an Italian sample of Catholic priests and religious also found high levels of happiness among 95 male priests and 61 female religious (Francis & Crea, 2018). Another study involving interviews with 33 Irish priests found that fulfilling friendships with other priests were a main source of social support (Weafer, 2014). Although the latter is a ten-year-old study, the findings may still be applied to the current context, given that research on loneliness and mental health in general tends to centre around the importance of strong relationships with others (e.g., Hutten et al., 2021; Zhang & Dong, 2022), especially when applied to the clergy (Eagle et al., 2018).

Celibacy and Mental Health. In an American sample of Roman Catholic priests, celibacy was linked to both positive and negative outcomes (Issaco et al., 2015). The former included an increased focus on the vocation and stronger relationships, whilst the latter included the stifling of biological desires, depression, and loneliness. However, priests' relationship with God was a central contributor to positive psychological health, with particular emphasis on that it decreases negative emotions, empowers, creates balance, and enables authenticity. These results were mirrored in a study by Baumann et al. (2017), who found that a personal relationship with God increased both priests' life satisfaction and their commitment to celibacy. The same priests studied, however, still viewed celibacy as a burden and would not have chosen it if given the choice again (Baumann et al., 2017). Presently, there is not much literature on the mental health outcomes of celibacy in priests. The most frequently studied population when it comes to celibacy and mental health are incels (e.g., Delaney et al., 2024; Donnelly et al., 2001; Sparks et al., 2022; Sparks et al., 2024). Since celibacy in the Roman Catholic rite is said to be a free choice (Marga, 2024), the mental health of priests and of incels cannot necessarily be compared.

Loneliness

Loneliness in Men

The loneliness epidemic has been intensifying over the past few years. The Maltese Islands have not been immune, with one study finding that 43.3% of the population experiences loneliness to some degree (Clark et al., 2019). Loneliness tends to be more rampant in men, but research is inconclusive (Botha & Bower, 2024). This is often due to non-disclosure of mental distress (Wagner & Reifegerste, 2024). Hence, it is important to take into account the probability that women might be reporting loneliness more than men not because they are more lonely, but because men are less likely to disclose it. Conversely, a study conducted with 16 to 99-year-olds across 237 countries found that men report loneliness more than women do (Barreto et al., 2021). The sample of this study was quite robust, given that 46,054 responses were analysed. However, contrary to most literature, loneliness seemed to decrease with age (Barreto et al., 2021). Other studies have found that although women report higher levels of loneliness, in one's 40s it was men who reported feeling more lonely (Klein et al., 2021; Botha & Bower, 2024). Circling back to the research question, to understand loneliness in priests one must also take into consideration the implications of gender and age.

Masculine norms can influence loneliness (Nordin et al., 2024). For example, a study found that several narratives influence how lonely men feel, including ideals such as men as invulnerable, the idea of the 'family man' which can further isolate men, the narrative that intimate connections between men are difficult to form and maintain, and men being seen as stoic and reluctant to disclose emotions (Ratcliffe et al., 2023). A scoping review by Nordin et al. (2024) highlighted how traditional masculinity norms which emphasise emotional stoicism, independence, and pain endurance can shape men's experiences of loneliness and also social connectedness in men. Many other studies across various cultures cite masculinity norms as significant barriers for men to seek help (Herreen et al., 2021; Jones et al., 2023;

Johnson et al., 2024; Soomin & Dongil, 2015; Yousaf et al., 2015). Masculine norms and societal expectations tend to prevent some men from disclosing mental health difficulties, and can thus increase loneliness (Jones et al., 2023). Since Catholic priests are men, it would be worthwhile to factor in masculine norms when discussing feelings of loneliness, as they form part of priests' macrosystem.

Loneliness in the Priesthood

Acedia has been defined as similar in presentation to depression but solely countered by prayer and spiritual practice (Sultana, 2018). Initially coined by St. Thomas Aquinas, it is described as spiritual sloth or spiritual dryness, characterised by boredom, tiredness, emotional fatigue, lack of care for one's spirituality, and a general sense of sadness (Baumann et al., 2019). In Ignatian Spirituality, practiced by Ignatian Jesuits, the term spiritual desolation is used. Some hypothesise that celibacy intensifies loneliness and therefore places Catholic priests at a higher risk of acedia (Baumann et al., 2019). Baumann et al. (2019) found that spiritual dryness positively correlates with loneliness, particularly a lack of a social network and the inability to be alone. The study was conducted in Germany, which could be a limitation in terms of generalisability. However, the main sample of the study comprised 2531 priests so the results could be considered as quite robust. Having a romantic partner has been found to protect against loneliness (Botha & Bower, 2024), however, there are studies that counteract this, with some findings showing that significant loneliness with romatic relationships is still a reality (Husain et al., 2025). It thus might not be enough to argue that priests' loneliness and acedia stem solely from the lack of a romantic relationship.

Another study by Naparan et al. (2020) focusing on seminarians examined how loneliness was faced by participants. Three distinct forms of loneliness were highlighted: seminary-related loneliness, living away from the family, and being alone (Naparan et al.,

2020). Loneliness in the seminary resulted mainly from the silence inside the seminary itself, instances of bullying, and feelings of being misunderstood. Many of the participants were not able to be alone. Loneliness was dealt with through prayer, social interaction, and keeping busy (Naparan et al., 2020). The author gave a very rich description of the context in which the seminarians were studied, thus making the results more trustworthy. Also, most of the researchers were seminarians themselves, which could be a positive or a negative. Albeit not a participatory research study, being seminarians gave the researchers a unique understanding of their participants, and might have allowed for more honest answers.

Loneliness versus Aloneness

An interesting distinction that should be made is that between loneliness and *aloneness*. Aloneness in the spiritual context differs from loneliness in that when one is alone they are believed to still be accompanied by God, so they are alone, but they are not lonely. However, priests are still at risk of facing "crowded loneliness", where they are constantly surrounded by people but still do not have many supportive relationships of their own (Eagle et al., 2018, p. 2058). Interestingly, loneliness is a common theme shared between priests of all ages and sexual orientations (Greene et al., 2017). However, priests and other clergy have the unique quality of seeking solitude in order to be closer to God, which is interpreted as a factor which does not lead to isolation (Durà-Vilà & Leavey, 2017). This literature thus shows that although there might be many factors which could lead to priests being lonely, there is also a balance of factors which buffer against loneliness itself.

The Maltese Context

Research on the wellbeing of priests in Malta and Gozo is sparse. A study on 85 Gozitan priests found that 10% of the priests in the sample disobeyed the celibacy mandate, and 20% viewed celibacy as a burden (Galea, 2011). 20% of the sample felt humanly, sexually, or spiritually frustrated. On the other hand, more than half of the participants

reported that they felt happy, and slightly less than half the sample had close friendships which gave them a sense of fulfillment. This study however, had a sample consisting of mainly priests over 50, and lacked a good number of recently ordained priests. Furthermore, a major flaw was that the questions asked were open to interpretation, such as the question '*are you happy in life?*', and were asked on a 3-point Likert scale ranging from *yes* to *neutral* to *no*. Hence, though celibacy was a point of concern in the priests sampled, this study might not be the most accurate representation of the current Gozitan clergy. In that same year, 2011, the Maltese Presbyteral Council commissioned a study on the wellbeing of priests. This study showed that priests urgently needed more support in their ministry (as cited in Cini, 2021).

Some recent studies have shown that living with a partner or being in a supportive relationship both increase wellbeing in the Maltese population (Abela et al., 2020; Debono, 2020). Wellbeing in Malta is also influenced by religious beliefs and practices, as well as gender roles (Satariano & Curtis, 2018). In Gozo it was found that there are relatively higher levels of wellbeing than in Malta (Briguglio, 2022). However, these studies are not specific to loneliness but focus on general wellbeing. On paper, loneliness is not frequently experienced by the Maltese population (Briguglio et al., 2024), with less than half (43.7%) reporting that they experience some form of loneliness (Clark et al., 2022). However, priests do not lead the life of the average Maltese individual, and might have gotten lost in that 43.7%, hence it is worthwhile to examine whether priests are more, less, or just as lonely.

Living alone has also been found to contribute to loneliness in the Maltese population (Clark et al., 2019), and thus diocesan priests might be more likely to experience loneliness based on living conditions. Conversely, a study on the life satisfaction of older priests and religious in Malta and Gozo found that older diocesan priests had higher life satisfaction scores than male religious (Cini, 2021). This is interesting, considering that diocesan priests tend to live alone, while religious live in communities. Moreover, priests living with family

members had the lowest scores overall (Cini, 2021). However, the study was solely quantitative, with only 108 male participants, and thus lacked depth. Interestingly, despite the data being collected at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, the life satisfaction scores remained high. The COVID-19 pandemic in Malta also had implications on priests. Loneliness seemed to wreak havoc, with some priests being left to serve alone in their ministry (Pulis et al., 2023). This was especially detrimental to older individuals (Briguglio et al., 2021), and thus loneliness in elderly priests might have been more widespread, especially if they resided alone, though this is not substantiated by current literature.

Studies on celibacy in the priesthood in particular are uncommon in the Maltese context, but celibacy is sometimes mentioned as one component of multi-faceted studies. In an autoethnographic study, when a lay member of the MUSEUM society was asked if they feel the need for sexual intimacy, their answer was *"No…no I do not feel the need… eh… I do feel it actually"* (Mifsud, 2013, p.47). This quote provides an interesting snapshot of what voluntary celibacy might feel like for some.

Masculinity

Masculinity is important to discuss in the context of celibacy and loneliness, especially in light of findings mentioned previously (e.g., Jones et al., 2023; Nordin et al., 2024; Ratcliffe et al., 2023). Firstly, being celibate is not conducive to the stereotypes associated with being a man, since celibacy overtly denies the male norm of giving importance to sex (Levant et al., 2010). Secondly, hegemonic masculinity and religion are intertwined in interesting ways (Holmes, 2024) which will be discussed. Thirdly, loneliness can be associated with masculinity in that it is men who often do not speak up about emotional matters, leading to loneliness or sometimes worse outcomes (Wagner & Reifegerste, 2024). Since masculine norms can influence loneliness (Ratcliffe et al., 2023), they are important factors to consider in priests' macrosystems. Moreover, since priests are

men, and loneliness can sometimes be intensified in men (Jones et al., 2023), gender could be considered as a contributor to priests' loneliness as well, in addition to other factors. Hence, since an ecological systems perspective to loneliness will be taken, manhood is being postulated to be an integral part of these systems. Here, loneliness is being considered as a concept which can be exacerbated or buffered by different factors in priests' systems, in line with ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), one of which can be masculine norms which fall in the priest's macrosystem.

At the time of writing, a search on Google Scholar produces 1,480,000 results for *masculinity*. With this in mind, one would assume that masculinity is a well-defined concept by now, given the sheer volume of literature that can be found on the concept. However, this is far from the case. When narrowed down to *priestly masculinity*, the search produces 32,400 results. Although masculinity research has been gaining traction over the past years, there are still various gaps in the research, especially when it comes to the notion of masculinity in the priesthood.

Masculinity versus Masculinities

Masculinity is largely performative in nature and is molded by the society in which it is performed (Arandjelović, 2023). It is essentially the antithesis of femininity (Arandjelović, 2023). For example, in the traditional pattern of masculinity the concept of care is excluded, simply because it is defined as a feminine trait which men are unable to perform well (Kluczynska, 2021). One point of note is the shift from the singularity of masculinity as one overarching construct to a plural form, acknowledging the existence of multiple masculinities. To expand on the previous example, the concept of caring masculinities has emerged, which are forms of masculinity exemplified in men in positions such as stay-at-home fathers, nurses, educators, and psychotherapists (Kluczynska, 2021). Even one of the most prominent journals in masculinity research changed its title from *Psychology of Men*

and Masculinity (between the years 2000-2018) to *Psychology of Men and Masculinities* (from 2019 onwards) (Wedgwood et al., 2023). Despite this shift, masculinities are not equal but placed within a hierarchical structure, and one form continues to dominate: *hegemonic masculinity*.

Key Hegemonic Norms. Hegemonic masculinity comprises four main norms: No Sissy Stuff, The Big Wheel, The Sturdy Oak, and Give 'Em Hell (David & Brannon, 1976). Expanding on this notion, Levant et al. (2010) divide hegemonic norms into seven dimensions, the most applicable to this study being avoidance of femininity, restrictive emotionality, importance to sex, and exhibiting dominance. These four hegemonic norms contradict the norms of the Roman Catholic Church, and this becomes complicated especially in the context of priesthood – priests might be torn between embracing their manhood whilst also remaining true to their vocation, given that they often display traits that defy traditional masculinity (Schüßler, 2024).

In a society that is constantly restructuring gender norms, it seems unusual that traditional masculinity norms such as male dominance, self-reliance, restrictive emotionality, and importance to sex would be glamorised and believed to this day (McNulty & Birney, 2024). In fact, this is the case in some groups, but not others. Ichiavello et al. (2022) found that men perceived hegemonic norms as being valued by other men, but not by women or by society as a whole. This might indicate that men still behave in certain stereotypical ways because they value the opinions of men in their ingroup more. This study had many interesting features, including its recency, and the fact that the sample was only composed of heterosexual men. Moreover, it involved a comparison between two separate cohorts, one British and one American, showing that across cultures results were still the same. However, both samples were quite small, with 161 American participants and 160 British participants, thus limiting the generalisability of the study.

In addition to this, there are even differences in the treatment of heterosexual men in comparison to homosexual men. Bauermeister et al. (2017) reported that homosexual men often experienced gender policing in their childhood, most commonly through explicitly being told to correct certain behaviours that made them appear feminine. Research with homosexual men has shown that they tend to experience a great deal of tension as a result of living in a way that strays from hegemonic masculinity (Ravenhill & de Visser, 2019). Masculine norms involve a sense of pressure toward sexual activity, pressure which could lead to men perceiving their virginity as embarrassing or anxiety-inducing (Boislard et al., 2016). Based on these findings, it is reasonable to postulate that as a result of acting in ways that are outside of the hegemonic norm, priests might also be under undue stress and tension.

Hegemonic Masculinity and Catholicism

Although multiple forms of masculinity exist, hegemonic masculinity remains one of the more dominant forms in the West (Halberstam, 2019). In fact, hegemonic masculinity centres around power, specifically on dominance over women, queer men, or men who form part of minority groups (Kaulback & Maydell, 2023). Religious beliefs and practices can exacerbate the attention paid to the differences between genders; for example, in many religions the rules for modest dress are much more stringent for women than they are for men (Neitz, 2020). Interestingly, Catholicism has sometimes been equated with hegemonic masculinity by authors in the field (Holmes, 2024). For most Christian religions, men were privileged over women by allowing only them to become priests (Neitz, 2020). Christianity is still considered to be a male-dominated and patriarchal religion (Schüßler, 2024). Despite this, priests still tend to exhibit behaviours which are usually attributed to feminine traits, such as through their liturgical dress and their role in the Church as caregivers (Schüßler, 2024). Such men tend to be shamed by those who subscribe to the stereotypes which hegemonic masculinity perpetuates (Schüßler, 2024). Once again, since priests practice

celibacy, and celibacy goes against the norms of hegemonic masculinity, these constructs must be kept in mind when discussing celibacy and loneliness in the priesthood. Hegemonic masculinity might be exacerbating loneliness in priests whilst also making it difficult for them to practice celibacy, especially when keeping in mind findings on masculine norms and loneliness (e.g., Nordin et al., 2024) and on celibacy and loneliness (e.g., Baumann et al., 2019).

Hegemonic Masculinity Across Different Religions. Piers Morgan, a renowned British journalist, once criticised James Bond actor Daniel Craig for carrying his daughter around in a baby sling, referring to him as an "emasculated Bond" (Heritage, 2018). In the same way, priests might receive criticism from individuals outside of the Church when they act as "emasculated Bonds". This is especially so considering that the Catholic Church tends to be hegemonic in its function and teachings (Khwepe, 2016). Celibacy implies the denial of hegemonic masculinity, thus posing a dilemma for priests. Hegemonic masculinity is not unique to Catholicism and Westernised countries; it is also found in other spheres. For example, a main tenet of Pentecostal Christianity is moral superiority, and in the African context where religious leaders are seen as "big men", hegemonic masculinity is conceptualised in this way (Burchardt, 2018, p. 123). These concepts of "emasculated Bonds" and "big men" might be exacerbating loneliness in the priesthood as well, since certain stereotypes that make it difficult for men to disclose struggles could be made harsher when such titles are attributed to them (Wagner & Reifegerste, 2024). If a priest is expected to be a "big man" whilst also being judged for acting in stereotypically feminine ways, the dissonance between the two might lead to increased feelings of loneliness, since they must live up to the stereotype.

Sexuality, Celibacy, and Religious Men

Keeping in mind hegemonic masculinity as part of the macrosystem of priests and religious men, it is worth noting that the hegemonic man is constantly expected to prove his heterosexuality through sexual experiences (Duckworth & Trautner, 2019). In an eight-year-long anthropological study on Roman Catholic priests who engaged in intimate relationships, priests who did not disclose being in a relationship felt that celibacy was "demonic", reductionist, damaging to their self-perception, a struggle, and an infringement of their personal needs (Anderson, 2003, p.154). On the other hand, priests who admitted to engaging in an intimate relationship stated that it was healing, allowed them to grow in confidence, had another person who kept them grounded, and felt that the relationship had a positive effect on their ministry. They also expressed feelings of being uplifted and at peace, and felt that being in love boosted their personal wellbeing. One priest in particular explained that having a partner was not simply about having a sexual relationship, but what he valued most was "having someone to snuggle into" (p. 160). This brings up a different question – do priests feel the lack of sex, intimacy, both, or neither? Once again, the issue of loneliness is posited as one worth looking into. This research showed courage in that it examined both heterosexual and homosexual priests, and looked into a topic that is often swept under the carpet.

Male Sexuality and the Priesthood

Since Maltese men who want to become priests tend to become seminarians around their 20s, they might be more susceptible to the pressure to conform to hegemonic masculinity norms. From a young age, men are socialised to be sexual beings, and some may argue that this applies more to boys than to girls (Bauermeister et al., 2017). For example, a qualitative study by Solebello and Elliot (2011) noted that fathers of boys often encouraged behaviours like exposure to sexualised images of women and girl-watching as a means of ensuring they grow to be heterosexual. However, in seminary training, men are sometimes

expected to undo this form of socialisation and to forgo their sexuality in order to become priests (Armbruster, 2022). What is interesting is that even in their language, priests were often taught to censor themselves and avoid directly mentioning sexuality (Armbruster, 2022). However, this censorship decreased over time, with an analysis of the language used in various editions of the *Program of Priestly Formation* from 1971 to 2005 showing an increased frequency of the word *sex* in many forms and in the number of paragraphs dealing with celibacy (Armbruster, 2022). It is important to note that this manual is used for formation in seminaries in the United States, however no such research was done in the European context.

Although psychosexual education in formation of priests and religious has increased, there are still some strides to be made. There has been a shift in the language, from barely alluding to sexuality to portraying the sexual dimension as human and something which must be incorporated (Armbruster, 2022). Relating this to the Maltese context, a pastoral letter written by ex-Gozitan Bishop Mario Grech (2014) repeatedly brought up issues of intimacy and sexuality, albeit not in relation to the priesthood. Hence, although in some religious realms sexuality is still taboo, in others it is being talked about.

Arguments for Married Priesthood. Most arguments for married priesthood in the Catholic Church use marriage as a proactive method of decreasing clerical sexual abuse (e.g., Ballano, 2024). Ballano often writes about the married priest and his praxis is that Roman Catholic priests are equal to sex offenders (e.g., Ballano, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2023, 2024). I disagree with this position for two reasons. Firstly, because it paints priests as psychosexually stunted, and secondly because it insinuates that all priests are paedophiles and abusers. In one of his publications, he quotes:

> *As Scheper-Hughes and Devine (2003, 20)* ***rightly argue****:*
>
> *… [S]exual abuse has everything to do with mandatory celibacy… Celibate priests were not 'ordinary men'. It is this aura, this 'mystical halo', that the pedophile priests have taken advantage of to gain easy access to naive religious families and their vulnerable children.* (as cited in Ballano, 2023, p. 4)

Not only does this clearly indicate negative bias, but it is also a perfect example of the misunderstandings that can result from thinking about one population as uniform based on the mistakes of a select few. The media's portrayal of the clergy does not help the argument. If one were to search the words *Catholic priest* on popular streaming platforms such as Netflix, portrayals of priests carrying out abuse outweigh the number of media portrayals of decent and well-meaning priests. At the time of writing, the only exception to this seems to be any fictional accounts of the life of the late Pope. Moreover, a quick search of the same term on Google brings up two results first: videos about the next Pope and whether he will eradicate sexual abuse in the church, and a link to various BBC articles on Catholic Church sexual abuse cases, with pages on pages of articles such as *"Let out the poison – new study aims to find the truth on Northern Ireland abuse"* and *"Christian Brother to 'die in jail' after new abuse sentence"* (see Page, 2025; Morrison & Fitzpatrick, 2024).

One should not study a population in order to break it down. Arguments in favour of married priesthood should instead focus on the desire to love, be sexually active, and have the option to start a family. Moreover, it should be seen as a possible protective factor for priests' mental health and a possible deterrent to loneliness, and not a deterrent to clerical sexual abuse. It is also worth noting that human sexuality has a generative purpose in Catholic terms, and is reserved for marriage (McGavin, 2011), and so arguments against celibacy must imply arguments for a married priesthood, as in adherance with the Catholic Church one cannot occur without the other.

Alternative Masculinities in the Church

Religion greatly influences constructions of masculinity (Nyhagen, 2021). In a study by Khwepe (2016), seminarians of the Roman Catholic Church constructed masculinity in various ways. Some seminarians described priestly masculinity in ways that mirrored patriarchal masculine practices, such as being responsible, strong in character, being in control, being physically strong, and controlling one's emotions. Others described it as patient, strong, serving, enduring, and sacrificing. So, for some seminarians being a priest could not be separated from being a man, and they did not feel that being a priest was a hit to their own manhood (Khwepe, 2016). Khwepe's (2016) study, however, was carried out with seminarians, who have not yet committed to the priesthood and therefore might have different experiences from fully ordained priests. Moreover, this study was conducted with a sample of South African participants, who differ greatly from Maltese men.

Studies with lay people have also given mixed results. Nyhagen (2021) found that Anglican men typically display a hybrid form of masculinity, where some qualities usually labelled feminine were thought as necessary for one to be a Christian man. Although these men accepted qualities such as vulnerability, love, and submission, even accepting crying as masculine, they still gave importance to hegemonic norms such as the provider role (Nyhagen, 2021). Although this study was well-executed, with a sample of 21 interviewed participants, they were also not clergymen and came from a middle-class background. Moreover, all were married or had been married in the past. Hence, it does not necessarily reflect the norms held by the unmarried, the celibate, or the clerical.

Biblical Masculinities. Heimerl (2020) notes that clerical masculinity is inconsistent, highlighting that priests have many traditionally feminine qualities including their liturgical dress and their abstinence from sexuality, which both contrast with the hegemonic norms of importance to sex and avoidance of femininity. The idea of priests as pastoral caregivers also supports this notion. Even characters from the Bible portray what has been coined *Josephite*

masculinity – stemming from classic descriptions of St. Joseph – broken down into traits such as humility, selflessness, responsibility, and inconspicuousness (Boisvert, 2019). David's masculinity has also been a cultural model of biblical manhood, with his heroism, physical strength, wisdom, beauty, and capacity for leadership (Ramos-Gay, 2020).

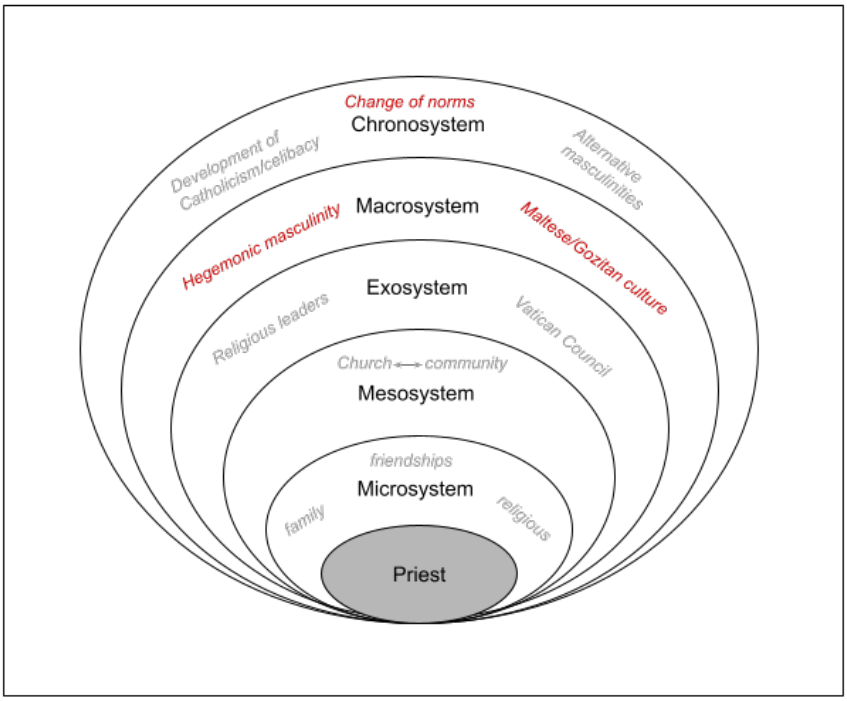
Conversely, biblical manliness has been defined as involving loving, leading, providing, and protecting (Rogers, 2019). There is an interesting overlap between priestly masculinity being inherently hegemonic but at the same time being subordinate in the traditional masculinity structure. Over the years, Christianity has presented us with a series of conflicting forms of masculinity which have little to no similarity with one another. Bartkowski (2000) noted that religious men produce a melange masculinity, which is at the same time strong and sensitive, but egalitarian and authority-minded. This is a lot to live up to, and could thus be affecting priests' mental health. If one is expected to at one go be a caregiver, a provider, responsible for others, a leader, and a source of wisdom and infinite love, whilst not having such traits reciprocated by those around them, it would not come as a surprise that the priesthood is perceived by some as a lonely profession.

Tying Everything Together

Although celibacy in the priesthood is seen as a personal choice, it is not made in isolation (Kumari et al., 2024). Social norms affect the decisions people take. When applied to celibacy, celibate men could either be challenging or fully rejecting social norms relating to sexual behaviour in favour of alternative scripts that align with their values or beliefs (Kumari et al., 2024). Referring back to the theoretical framework being applied, which is reproduced below for ease of reference (Fig. 2), social norms might also be contributing to priests' loneliness, with an example being traditional masculine norms. Although celibacy is being hypothesised as a major contributing factor, it is not being considered as the only one that is affecting the loneliness of priests.

Figure 2.

The Application of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory to Loneliness in Priests, with Factors Pertaining to Norms Highlighted



Social Norms. Social norms include standards for behaviour which have been established by a group (Gelfand et al., 2017). Group membership, in this case the 'priests' group, does not imply only adhering to group norms but also behaving in line with these norms, irrespective of whether they are imposed or implied (Turner et al., 1987). Hence, it can be assumed that to form part of the 'priest' ingroup, there are explicit and implied norms which one must follow. However, there are also implicit norms which one must follow to fit into the 'hegemonic male' ingroup (Rossum et al., 2024).

An issue arises when the norms of two groups oppose one another (Cialdini & Trost, 1998), as is the case with the implicit hegemonic norm that men should give importance to sexuality versus the explicit religious norm that priests must be celibate. Another example of the conflicting norms in these groups is the avoidance of femininity in the stereotyped male

group versus the overt display of some feminine traits in priests. Thus, cognitive dissonance might not only be taking place at the exosystem level, but at other levels as well, due to the overarching cultural blueprint and the beliefs held by priests themselves.

This chapter provided an overview of the main theories and constructs informing the study, as well as previous literature that has been carried out in relation to themes of masculinity, sexuality, and mental health. In particular, research across multiple cultural contexts was examined, and a gap in Maltese literature was identified. The reviewed literature expanded on the themes outlined in the research question by providing different perspectives on priests' mental health, loneliness, and celibacy. Although the literature did allude to a relationship between priests' celibacy and loneliness, there was no clear response as to whether celibacy contributes to loneliness in priests. Rather, the literature highlighted how priests' loneliness is not clear-cut and that there may be other factors that need to be considered. It also remains uncertain whether priests experience greater loneliness than the general population, and – if they are in fact lonely – whether this can be attributed to their vow of celibacy, or to other possible factors. Since previous studies found that men could be experiencing more loneliness, this will also be considered in the following chapters. The gap being addressed is therefore the lack of Maltese findings on the mental health of priests in general, but specifically the lack of studies that bring together celibacy, loneliness, and male norms. Previous findings also indicate the need to determine whether priests are lonely, the prevalence of such loneliness, to gauge priests' experiences in relation to celibacy, and in general to gain both an in-depth and broad understanding of celibacy and loneliness in Maltese and Gozitan priests. In the following chapter, the methodology will be explained, with particular reference to the research questions and how they were answered within the chosen research paradigm.

Chapter 3: Methodology

The previous chapter included a review of the literature that relates to celibacy, masculinity, and loneliness in the priesthood. This chapter outlines the methodology used to explore the research questions of the study. The mixed methods research process, sampling methods, and ethical considerations taken throughout the research process are explained in this chapter.

Research Design

The aim of this study was to explore three constructs in the context of the Catholic Church: voluntary celibacy, loneliness, and masculinity. To do these complex constructs justice, they must be examined through different lenses. Hence, a mixed methods research design was chosen to explore attitudes towards and experiences of loneliness, celibacy, and masculinity from the perspective of members of the Catholic clergy. Through connections made between previous studies, it was postulated that celibacy could in some way be affecting priests' loneliness, and that masculinity might also be exacerbating this. These concepts have yet to be explored in depth, both in Maltese and in global religious contexts.

Research Search Strategy

In order to arrive at these three main constructs, a systematic and rigorous search for relevant literature was carried out. The objective was to identify all primary studies addressing the influence on celibacy on mental health, whilst also identifying possible stressors faced by men, across key academic databases.

Database Selection. The literature search was conducted across both generic and field-specific databases to ensure a maximun coverage of both published and unpublished literature. These databases and their main functions are illustrated in Table 1. It is also worth noting that apart from these databases, a number of textbooks and books written by clergy were used, in order to gain a more comprehensive picture.

Table 1

Main Databases Utilised During the Search Strategy

Database	Main functions
HyDi*	A one-stop shop to access articles, dissertations, books, and e-books made available by the University of Malta Library. HyDi also collects a number of databases in one place.
OAR@UM	Used to access dissertations and publications by Maltese academics.
ProQuest Central	Used to access articles across different disciplines, including humanities and social sciences.
ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global	Used to identify unpublished work, including Master's dissertations and PhD theses.
SAGE Knowledge Complete Books and Reference Collection	Used mainly to identify key definitions and core constructs.
PsycINFO (EBSCO)	A comprehensive resource for psychological literature, covering a number of disciplines such as psychology, psychiatry, education, and sociology.
Google Scholar	Used for supplementary searching

Note. HyDi provided access to a number of articles and sources from difference databases, such as PubMed, Taylor & Francis Online, JSTOR, Psychology Database (ProQuest), SAGE Journals, and EBSCO. The databases listed in the table were used for a more detailed search, with specific search strings. However, sources from other databases were also consulted.

Keyword Development and Boolean Logic. A structured approach was used to develop keywords based on the core conceptual elements of the research question: *does celibacy contribute to loneliness in priests?* Key terms were categorised into groups, and Boolean operators such as OR, AND, and truncation (*) were used to create relevant search strings, for example 'celibacy OR chastity OR asceticism AND loneliness' or 'masculinity OR manhood AND mental health OR life satisfaction'.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria. The search results were filtered using three main criteria: (1) timeframe, (2) language, and (3) source type. The timeframe for publication was dependent on the type of source used; articles published before 2019 were excluded unless no other literature was available. There were some key studies published before this time which were included, and in general since the topic is understudied some older studies still had to be mentioned. Only articles published in English were used, including articles originally written in another language and translated for publication. With reference to source type, peer-reviewed journal articles were preferred, but books, dissertations, and conference proceedings were also considered. Editorials, review articles, and audio-visual media were excluded.

Research Question and Aims

This study aimed to explore priests' and religious' experiences of celibacy and feelings of loneliness. The specific questions and hypotheses will be stated in their respective chapters. The goal of the study was to understand the relationship between celibacy and loneliness, as well as the effect of other factors such as age, order, clerical status, country of residence, and year of ordainment on attitudes towards celibacy, manhood beliefs, and loneliness. Through the literature search and also as a result of curiosity, masculinity was identified as a factor that might affect both attitudes towards celibacy and feelings of loneliness. Since priests must be men, and men face a number of stereotypes and norms which have been found to impact their mental health, it seemed like an important factor to take into consideration when discussing celibacy and loneliness. Additionally, experiences of celibacy and loneliness, and the lives of priests in general, needed to be examined in more depth. Thus, the overarching research question was: does celibacy contribute to loneliness in priests?

Philosophical Underpinnings

All research approaches are guided by a paradigm, which is a set of beliefs that guides our thinking by defining the nature of reality and framing one's worldview (Habib, 2020). Mixed methods designs align to the post-positivist paradigm (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). At its root, post-positivism delineates the need to recognise participants as active in the production of their reality, and thus post-positivist research would require a degree of empathy where understanding is more important than measurement (Fox, 2008). In social science research, the objects of study are active and meaning-making human beings. However, the researcher is also an active interpreter of the world which they are researching, though they aspire to objectivity (Schutz, 1972). Thus, in post-positivist research reflexivity is necessary. The researcher is there to learn and not to test, and research is carried out *among* people and not *on* them (Ryan, 2006). Moreover, this paradigm posits the existence of multiple realities which can be understood but never entirely so (Schutz, 1972).

Ontology and Epistemology

Research paradigms have underlying ontological and epistemological assumptions (Scotland, 2012). The former are concerned with what exists and how it can be categorised, whilst the latter are concerned with how what exists can become known (Maguire & Racine, 2016). The ontological framework underlying post-positivism is critical realism, which is the idea that there is a true reality and it can be measured imperfectly. Observations can be flawed and thus reality cannot be known fully (Habib, 2020). In the context of this study, the observations of the student researcher could be completely different from those of the supervisor, for example, depending on their own beliefs and individual experiences. If the supervisor was analysing the data instead of the student, their interpretations of the same data could have differed substantially. Additionally, the epistemology underlying this paradigm is modified objectivism (Ponterotto, 2005). Although objectivity is still important in this type of research, modified objectivism acknowledges that there is no value-free research and that the

researcher might influence what is being researched (Means & Mowatt, 2024). This paradigm makes sense in the context of the current study, since the researcher acknowledges that each priest might experience celibacy differently, and that the values of the researcher might impact the study despite attempts to set them aside.

Mixed Methods Methodologies

Mixed methods methodologies allow for different methods to compensate for the weaknesses of one another, since social science research methods can be flawed when used in isolation (Turner et al., 2017). As Weick (1969) puts it, all methods are imperfect in different ways but "when multiple methods are applied, the imperfections in each method tend to cancel one another" (p. 21). Triangulating research methods allows for a more comprehensive picture of the topic being studied, since the strengths of each method are harnessed to complement each other (Vogt et al., 2012). As in the Yin-Yang philosophy, mixed methods research allows two opposing methodologies to be used harmoniously (Meng & Liu, 2023). Moreover, applying multiple methods to one research question can allow for a more precise and complete perspective of human experience (Pinto, 2022). The advantages of mixed method designs greatly outweigh the limitations, with the most glaring disadvantages being the increased workload and need for time in order to execute the multiple phases of the study (Oranga et al., 2025).

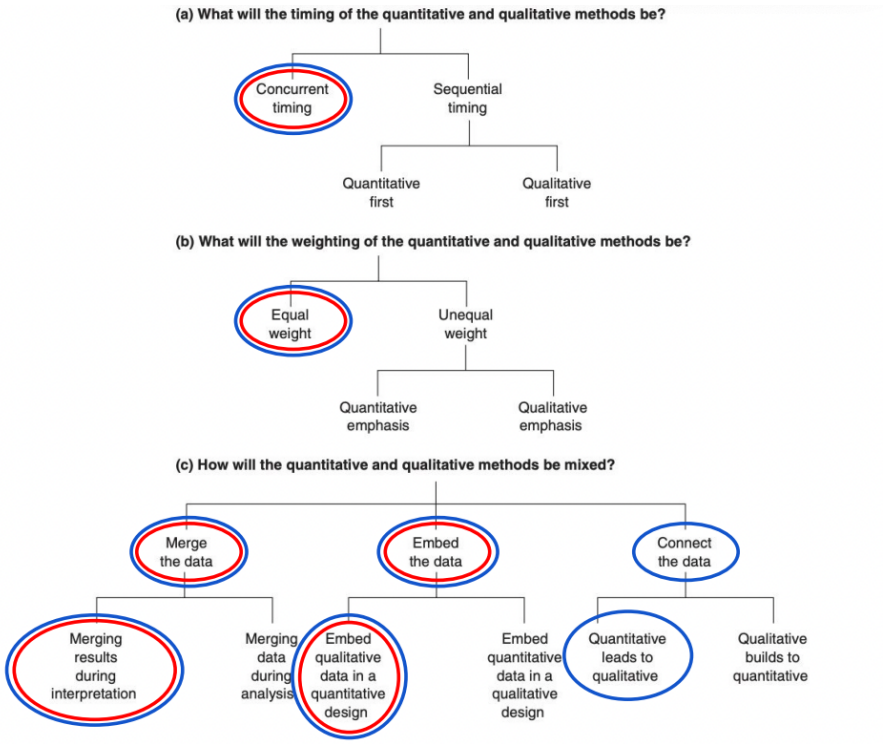
Before carrying out a mixed methods study, it is always important to ask whether using mixed methods is going to add more value to the research than a single method would (McKim, 2017). Using both quantitative and qualitative methods to examine the research question at hand is meant to add value to the field by examining both attitudes and lived experiences of the same target group in tandem. In fact, one advantage of mixed methods research is the ability to answer research questions in both breadth and depth (Oranga et al., 2025). When studying human behaviour, single methods are not always enough to address

complex problems, so collecting different forms of data allows the researcher to capture multiple aspects of one phenomenon (Mertens, 2023). Not only does this type of research provide different insights, it also combines statistics with narratives in order to gain a clearer picture (Kajamaa et al., 2020). This helps the research findings to be more appealing to a diverse audience, since in the field of psychology there are some who are more persuaded by stories and others who are more convinced when findings are reported through numbers (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2016; Kajamaa et al., 2020).

Choosing a Design. Creswell and Plano Clark (2016) developed a decision tree for mixed methods designs. This decision tree emphasises three key factors to consider when choosing a mixed methods design: timing, weight, and the mixing approach. Essentially, these are three key decisions which the researcher needs to take in order to choose the best research design to address the research question at hand. The first decision to make is the timing or order in which the data will be used, followed by the weight or emphasis which will be given to the two approaches, and finally how the two approaches will be mixed, or how the two resulting datasets will be connected together (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2016). The decision trees for the planned research design (red) and the actual design (blue) are illustrated in Figure 3.

Figure 3

Decision Tree for Mixed Methods Design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2016)



The chosen research design was concurrent, with both phases of the data collection occurring simultaneously. Although great efforts were taken to ensure that the timing of the data collection was concurrent, the quantitative data was collected much quicker, resulting in the chance to take a cursory overview of the data which consequently informed the updated interview guide. However, both the qualitative and the quantitative phases were given equal weight, and the methods were mixed during tool design in two ways, through (a) embedding an open-ended question within the questionnaire, and (b) developing some interview questions based on a cursory overview of quantitative data.

Data Integration. When conducting a mixed methods study, data integration is of utmost importance. With reference to the current study, integration occurred both at the design level and at the methods level. However, the intention of a true mixed methods design is to integrate quantitative and qualitative strands at each stage of the process (Skamagki et

al., 2024). Thus, integration at the data level could be by using quantitative data to substantiate qualitative findings or using qualitative data to explain quantitative findings – this integration is done at the interpretation and presentation stage (Fetters et al., 2013). In this case, data was integrated by weaving qualitative and quantitative findings together to form a substantiated narrative (Fetters et al., 2013). There was also integration through data transformation, as qualitative data obtained through the open-ended question in the questionnaire was converted into quantitative data (Krippendorff, 2013).

The Role of the Researcher

When conducting research, it is always of value to be aware of one's biases. Researcher bias is the researcher's tendency to think in ways which might obscure the way their research question is addressed (Buetow & Zawaly, 2021). This is of particular importance when researching a group such as priests, where the researcher could be considered a privileged outsider (Braun & Clarke, 2023). Moreover, in critical mixed methods research constant critical reflexivity and self-examination are necessary, and researchers are asked to consider what their motives for conducting the research are (Hernández-Johnson & Bendixen, 2024). I am a woman, a layperson, and an agnostic-verging-on-atheist. Paradoxically, I was raised Roman Catholic and practiced for most of my life.

Reflexivity

Reflexivity involves a researcher's sense of self-awareness in relation to how their values, assumptions, and theoretical stances can shape a research process (Schwandt, 2011), hence why I made sure to clearly state my positioning and biases. Through reflexivity, the researcher critically examines their own impact on a research study, including through interactions with research participants and data, but essentially at every stage of a research study (Berger, 2013). Conducting research also changes the researcher in several ways

(Palaganas et al., 2017), as will be elaborated at a later stage. Reflexivity is essential in research with qualitative elements, since it enhances trustworthiness of the study and provides a means to keep researcher's biases in check (Ortlipp, 2008).

I approached this study with a myriad of preconceived ideas and attitudes, shaped by my upbringing and my life experience, and moulded by my various interactions with both priests and laity. Moreover, throughout the course of this study I spent a hefty portion of my days with religious priests, attending various retreats, and even spending a whole month living with the Ignatian Jesuits residing next to the University. I had one prominent bias going into the study – I did not agree that priests should be celibate, I saw no reason for it, and found arguments in favour of it to be unfounded and hollow. This bias was like a piece of unfired clay, and throughout the research it was moulded into different shapes. However, I did make a conscious effort to keep it at bay throughout the research process.

Being a layperson and a non-believer gave me a sense of distance which was both an advantage and a disadvantage. Moreover, being a woman allowed me to distance myself from the men in front of me. Throughout the process I constantly reflected on the feelings which participants' stories raised in me. An aim of the study was to gain insight into the real experiences of priests, and to do so I needed to set my biases aside. Moreover, since it was paramount to gain an insider perspective of the topic at hand, I made a conscious effort to truly understand their experiences and not to taint them with an outsider's views. It is also worth noting that the research process itself changed me as a researcher and altered my assumptions, as the participants provided a perspective which was entirely new to me. I went into the study believing that celibacy is a culprit of loneliness, and that the priesthood is an inherently lonely profession, a bias which had to be kept at bay throughout the study. However, as results will show, there were instances where participants proved this bias wrong.

Ethical Considerations

Given the sensitive nature of the study, ethical considerations were given due importance. Prior to data collection, ethical approval was sought through both the Faculty Research Ethics Committee (FREC) and the University Research Ethics Committee (UREC). Approval for quantitative data collection was granted in February 2024 (Appendix A), and qualitative data collection was approved in August 2024 following submission to both FREC and UREC (Appendix B). A data management plan was also submitted to the ethics committee to ensure transparency (Appendix C)

Informed consent was sought prior to the start of both the questionnaire and the interviews. For the online questionnaire, an information letter outlined all participants' rights, and they were free to withdraw any time by closing the window (Appendix D). The form also did not allow them to proceed to questions if they did not consent. For the interviews, an information letter was provided beforehand (see Appendix E), and participants had the chance to clear any questions before the start of the interview. Participants also had the option to be sent the transcription of their interviews in order to be able to omit any sensitive data which might cause them to be identified. Anonymity was paramount given that the pool of priests and religious in the islands is small and thus participants could easily be identified. IP addresses were not collected through Google Forms, and each interviewee was assigned a pseudonym. Any identifiable details such as priests' village of origin, the parish in which they practice, or any very specific details were also omitted from the final transcript. The participants were also given various professional services to contact should the data collection process have caused them any distress (Appendix F).

This chapter gave a brief overview of the methodology used and the reasoning behind choosing a mixed methods approach. It also provided a comparison between the planned research design and the actual research process, as well as highlighting the researcher's biases and any ethical considerations taken. The next two chapters will expand on the quantitative

and qualitative phases of the study separately, with a more in-depth description of the methodology employed and an overview of the findings from each phase.

Chapter 4: The Quantitative Phase

In this chapter the quantitative phase of the study will be discussed, addressing the research question from a quantitative perspective. The research instrument used, the step-by-step process employed, and the sample recruited will be described. Any measures taken to ensure the rigour of the study will also be addressed. Furthermore, the way the data was analysed will be outlined, as well as an overview of the results obtained during this phase.

Research Question and Hypotheses

The overarching research question informing this study was broad: does celibacy contribute to loneliness in priests? To answer the main research question, it was necessary to explore the attitudes held by clergy members towards celibacy and manhood since these two issues can be interrelated. Then, it was also necessary to determine how often priests feel lonely, what loneliness feels like to them and whether they believed that celibacy could possibly be a factor contributing to their loneliness. Factors other than celibacy – such as age and other demographic factors – that might also contribute to loneliness were explored. Most of these factors were still related to the priesthood (years since ordination, order, and role) and thus still in a way related celibacy to loneliness. Hence, for this purpose, two research questions were postulated based on the literature and on the Maltese context:

- RQ_1: Do attitudes towards celibacy affect priests' manhood beliefs and feelings of loneliness?
- RQ_2: What variables affect priests' commitment to celibacy, manhood beliefs, and feelings of loneliness?

Moreover, hypotheses were formulated based on these questions:

- H_1: In clergy members, there is an association between commitment to celibacy and traditional manhood beliefs.

- H_2: In clergy members, there is an association between commitment to celibacy and degree of loneliness felt.
- H_3: There is a significant difference between demographic factors (age, role, order/movement, duration as priest, island of residence) and clergy members' attitudes towards celibacy.
- H_4: There is a significant difference between demographic factors (age, role, order/movement, duration as priest, island of residence) and clergy members' manhood beliefs.
- H_5: There is a significant difference between demographic factors (age, role, order/movement, duration as priest, island of residence) and clergy members' levels of loneliness.

Research Instrument

The data for this phase was collected through an anonymous online questionnaire covering four areas: (1) demographic data; (2) attitudes towards celibacy; (3) manhood beliefs; and (4) loneliness (see Appendix G).

Demographic Data. At the start of the questionnaire, participants were asked to give their age and the number of years for which they have been a clergy member. They were also asked to specify what role they hold in the clergy, for example whether they are a diocesan priest, religious priest, deacon, monk, or seminarian. Furthermore, they were asked to specify what spirituality, order, or movement they follow, for example whether they are Ignatian, Charismatic, or Missionary. This was asked for the sake of later grouping them based on whether they live alone, with other priests, or form part of a movement which would increase their ties to the community. Following piloting, a question was also added to determine whether the priests answering were Maltese or Gozitan. Towards the end of the study,

respondents were also asked a binary question to determine whether all the priests they know practice celibacy.

Commitment to Celibacy Scale (Joseph et al., 2010). Following the demographic questions, the Commitment to Celibacy scale was used to determine the attitudes of priests towards celibacy. The aim of this scale was to determine whether priests find celibacy to be useful for their ministry and how they coped with any issues that might arise from it (Baumann et al., 2017). Seven items on this scale were rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree'. A high score indicates a positive attitude towards celibacy, and low scores would indicate negative attitudes.

Manhood Beliefs. The second scale was self-developed specifically for the current study based on David and Brannon's (1976) four pillars of masculinity. Table 2 lists these four pillars as well as the corresponding questions which were devised to match the pillars. Four items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree'.

Table 2

Manhood Beliefs Scale: Pillars and Items

Pillar	Item
Pillar 1: No Sissy Stuff	Men should be emotionally strong in all situations
Pillar 2: The Big Wheel	Success is important for all men
Pillar 3: The Sturdy Oak	Men are self-reliant
Pillar 4: Give 'Em Hell	I believe a man should be tough

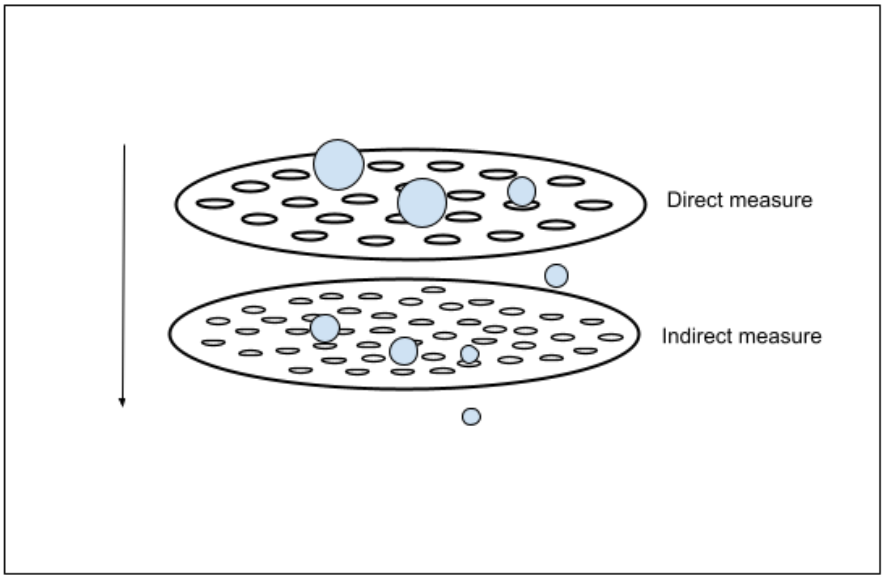
The items were formulated in this way based on the literature with the aim of eliciting a strong response from the participants.

UCLA 3-Item Loneliness Scale (Hughes et al., 2004). This scale was used to measure the overall levels of loneliness of the participants. Although it comprises only three items, it has been cited as a comprehensive measure of the construct (Gosling et al., 2024). In fact, when compared to the 20-item version of the same scale, the psychometric properties of the 3-item measure are similar in magnitude (Gosling et al., 2024). Items are rated on a 3-point Likert scale ranging from 'hardly ever or never' to 'often'. The 3-item scale is an indirect measure of loneliness, and thus a direct measure of loneliness was also added to the questionnaire. Participants were directly asked *'how often do you feel lonely?',* with this item being rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 'often' to 'never'. The difference between the two measures is that the indirect measures avoid direct references to loneliness, whereas direct measures target the construct explicitly (Mund et al., 2022).

Indirect measures are useful for avoiding the activation of negative stereotypes by disguising the researcher's interest in the participants' loneliness, thus eschewing socially desirable responses (Mund et al., 2022). Using both direct and indirect measures to assess such a subjective construct is valuable, as they allow for the measurement of both situational and chronic loneliness, whilst also acting as a net for individuals who might underestimate their loneliness or avoid identifying themselves as lonely due to the associated stigma (Shiovitz-Ezra & Ayalon, 2012). Figure 4 illustrates this sifting, which metaphorically functions similarly to a gold pan or fruit sieve.

Figure 4

Measuring Loneliness in Participants Using Both Direct and Indirect Measures



The direct measure of loneliness acts as the first level of the sieve, where those who subjectively and directly identify as lonely are caught, and those who evade the question or answer in a socially desirable way fall through. The indirect measure of loneliness is the second level of the sieve, where those who have experienced loneliness but have not identified it as such, or who evaded the direct question, are caught. Those who do not feel lonely and do not experience situations that lead to loneliness fall through both levels of the sieve.

Reliability, Validity, and Utility

Reliability and validity are necessary to assess the accuracy of a measure (Karnia, 2024). In addition to reliability and validity, the utility of a measure should also be considered. Utility indicates how practical the measure is to use in the desired field (Bannigan & Watson, 2009). If a scale is not usable, testing for reliability and validity is useless. It should be noted that all the questions were rated on Likert scales with three or five

response choices. The use of an odd number of response choices was preferred since a rating scale with an odd number of choices is the most effective when it comes to reliability and validity coefficients (Kusmaryono et al., 2022).

Reliability

Reliability is the extent to which a measurement yields the same results consistently, or how stable it is (Ahmed & Ishtiaq, 2021). Essentially, although there will always be a degree of random error in the administration of a measure, reliability assesses how much a score is free of random errors (McDowell & Newell, 1996). One measure of reliability is internal consistency, which measures the degree to which a set of different items accurately measures the same construct (Utwin, 1995). The Cronbach's alpha, which measures the extent to which items are consistent with one another, should be over 0.7, but under 0.95, to be acceptable (Emerson, 2019). The higher the internal consistency of a measure is, the more likely it is to obtain the same scores using the same measure and thus the higher the test-retest reliability will be (McDowell & Newell, 1996).

The Commitment to Celibacy scale has a high internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha being .85 (Joseph et al., 2010). The UCLA-3 Loneliness scale has a good internal consistency with a Cronbach's alpha of .72, as well as a strong correlation (r = .82) with the long version of the same scale (Hughes et al., 2004). The single-item, direct measure of loneliness has been found to have good reliability, with a recent study finding it to be .77 (Mund et al., 2022).

Validity

It was also important to determine how valid, or accurate, the measure was. Validity is the degree to which a scale measures the construct that it is intended to measure (Ahmed & Ishtiaq, 2021). Using multiple means to test validity is essential, since validity is not absolute but rather a matter of degree (Bannigan & Watson, 2009). There are various types of validity,

but in general a measure is valid if it is deemed high-quality, targeted, and ideally based on existing standardised questionnaires (Heale & Twycross, 2015).

The validity of the Commitment to Celibacy scale has not been reported by the authors or in any other study, however it was the only openly available measure of the construct. In the case of the UCLA-3 Loneliness scale, when correlated with other related scales measuring wellbeing, the correlations supported the construct validity. For example, the WHO-5 showed a strong negative correlation [$r(2,413) = -0.54$, $p<0.001$] (Kliem et al., 2025). One way of determining content validity is through comparison with relevant literature (Bannigan & Watson, 2009). Since the manhood beliefs scale was developed following extensive consultation with the literature and comparison to other methods, it can be said to have good content validity.

Utility

The utility of a measure refers to how practical it is to use. McDowell and Newell (1996) suggest that to assess the utility of a measure one must consider (a) how long it takes to administer; (b) how easy it is to administer; and (c) the clarity of the language used. The current questionnaire was piloted on ten lay men to ensure that the language used was clear, and following this stage of the study a few modifications to the language were made. The online questionnaire was kept short, not taking longer than ten minutes to answer since Google Forms only requires that the participant tick one box per item. Moreover, Google Forms utilises an accessible font which allows for faster reading and is easier to read for those who are dyslexic or have poorer eyesight (Rello & Baeza-Yates, 2016). For those who might not have access to technology or who had trouble with the online version of the questionnaire, the option of a pen-and-paper version of the questionnaire was provided, thus aiding ease of administration.

Procedure and Participants

Following the piloting of the questionnaire, an updated version was distributed using Google Forms. In some cases, a Microsoft Word version of the questionnaire was also used, to be answered by priests who had difficulty using the software. In the latter case, participants had the option to either answer the Microsoft Word version digitally, or on pen-and-paper, and then submit it anonymously. Due to the sensitive nature of the study, the main aims of the study were clearly outlined in the information letter, to ensure that participants were making an informed decision before agreeing to participate. None of the questions were intended to mislead. Following the demographics section, questions were shuffled rather than presented in an order based on the construct being assessed. It was also ensured that there was no technical jargon included in the items. The questionnaire was not provided in Maltese, mainly because of language nuances that might have influenced the results. Especially when speaking about loneliness, in the Maltese language the translation of 'solitude' is used ('*solitudni'*), which is a similar construct, but not identical. The various understandings of the Maltese word might have resulted in inconsistent results, and thus the decision was to administer the questionnaire in English only. English is one of the two official languages spoken in Malta.

Having appropriate sampling methods and clear parameters also increases the validity of a study (Ahmed & Ishtiaq, 2021). The criteria for participation in the quantitative phase were that participants were over 18 years of age, Maltese or Gozitan, male clergy members. The type of clergy member was not specified, if the role required the individual to be celibate. Recruitment was done using non-probability methods, particularly volunteer and convenience sampling. Social media platforms were mainly used. As a first attempt, an article was published in the Times of Malta (Appendix H) about celibacy and loneliness, with a link to the questionnaire at the end. This garnered a significant number of participants, but not enough to comprise a representative sample. The questionnaire was then shared to social

media, including in religious groups and Maltese and Gozitan priests. The last attempt at data collection was through a direct email sent to publicly available lists of priests provided by the Archdioceses of Malta and Gozo. A description of the study with a link to the questionnaire was sent to all the available priests' emails (see example in Appendix I).

Using an online survey limits the selection of the sample for various reasons. Firstly, it is grounded in probabilistic methods and thus self-selection can be an issue (Huang & Schlomo, 2024). Those who choose to answer the survey could either have extreme viewpoints, be open to answer, or might not be honest about their identity (i.e. there was the risk of people answering as priests when in reality they were not). However, the researcher attempted to counteract self-selection by using an open-access directory of priests and religious, hence most of those who received the questionnaire have email addresses given by the Archdioceses of Malta or Gozo. Another issue is under-coverage; priests with low computer literacy or no access to the internet would have been barred from the study by default (Huang & Schlomo, 2024). Under-coverage was also counteracted by providing the researcher's details in all dissemination efforts, so participants had the option to call the researcher for help if they were not very computer literate, or to request a copy that can be answered in pen-and-paper format.

Data Analysis

The data was analysed using the IBM Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS-31). First, all responses to the questionnaire were coded numerically, and the data was cleaned further on Microsoft Excel before being uploaded to SPSS. Descriptive statistics were used to compile demographic data, allowing for a clear picture of the sample in terms of participants' age, number of years since ordination, role in the clergy, religious order, and island of residence. Responses to each measure were recoded and new continuous variables

were generated. These variables were commitment to celibacy, degree of loneliness, and manhood beliefs.

Cronbach's alpha was computed for each measure to determine the internal consistency of the measures, thus ensuring that the items measured the same construct (Kiliç, 2016). Inferential statistics tests were conducted to test the hypotheses. Following the administration of normality tests for the three newly computed variables (total scores for the commitment to celibacy scale, the manhood beliefs scale, and the loneliness scales respectively), the Shapiro-Wilk p-value was smaller than the 0.05 level of significance (p <.001; p = .031; p <.001), indicating that the distribution of the data was not normal. For this reason, non-parametric tests were conducted. Spearman's correlational tests were used to determine correlations between the different variables. Kruskal-Wallis tests were used to measure differences between groups on each variable.

Results

Reliability Measures

Cronbach's alpha was computed for each measure to determine the level of internal consistency of the test items (Kiliç, 2016). The results of these computations are presented in Table 3. The results showed that the internal consistency of all test items was acceptable, since values of .7 and above are taken as acceptable values, and values above .8 are considered good (Emerson, 2019).

Table 3

Cronbach's Alpha for Each Measure

Measure	α	*N* of items
Commitment to celibacy scale	.88	7
Manhood beliefs scale	.79	4
UCLA-3 loneliness scale	.80	3

Moreover, to cross-check both measures of loneliness, Spearman's correlational test was carried out on the data. A statistically significant positive correlation was found between the direct and indirect measures of loneliness (r = .711, p<.001), indicating that both measures were measuring the same construct.

Demographic Data

The original sample consisted of a total of 152 participants. Three of these were eliminated for incomplete or unusable answers, resulting in a final sample of 149 priests and religious (N = 149). Table 4 shows the demographic data collected.

Table 4

Demographic Profile of Survey Respondents

Sample Characteristics	Frequency (n = 149)	Percent (%)
Age		
18-29	11	7.4
30-45	54	36.2
46-64	46	30.9
65+	38	25.5
Role		
Priest	99	66.4
Religious	39	26.2
Seminarian	5	3.4
Other	6	4.0
Order		
Residing alone	51	34.2
In a community	55	36.9
In a movement	20	13.4
None/other	23	15.4
Years since ordination		
<10 years	37	24.8
11-30 years	60	40.3
>30 years	52	34.9
Residence		
Malta	122	81.9
Gozo	19	12.8
Other	8	5.4

Note. N = 149. The mean age of participants was 51.3 (SD = 16.68) and the mean number of years in the priesthood was 24.64 (SD = 17.11).

Hypothesis 1: Commitment to Celibacy and Manhood Beliefs

Spearman's correlational test was conducted to determine whether there is an association between commitment to celibacy and traditional manhood beliefs in clergy members. There was a weak positive correlation between commitment to celibacy and manhood beliefs, $r = .044$, $p = .593$. The correlation was not statistically significant. H_1 was thus rejected, and the null hypothesis was accepted.

Hypothesis 2: Commitment to Celibacy and Loneliness

Spearman's correlational test was conducted to determine whether there is an association between commitment to celibacy and degree of loneliness in clergy members. There was a moderate negative correlation between commitment to celibacy and degree of loneliness, $r = -.498$, $p < .001$. The correlation was statistically significant. H_2 was thus accepted, and the null hypothesis was rejected.

Hypothesis 3: Demographic Factors and Commitment to Celibacy

To determine whether there were any statistically significant differences in terms of clergy members' age, role, order/movement, duration as priest, and island of residence in commitment to celibacy scores, Kruskal-Wallis tests were conducted. The tests indicated that there was no significant difference in commitment to celibacy across different age groups, $H(3) = 6.32$, $p = .097$. The mean rank scores were 99.36 for ages 18-29, 77.42 for ages 30-45, 64.87 for ages 46-64, and 76.78 for ages 65+. They also indicated no significant difference in commitment to celibacy across different roles, $H(3) = 4.54$, $p = .208$. The mean rank scores were 75.51 for priests, 67.71 for religious, 108.3 for seminarians, and 86.25 for the 'other' category.

There was a significant difference in commitment to celibacy across different orders, $H(3) = 10.02$, $p = .018$. Mean rank scores were 80.59 for those who were part of orders that reside alone, 69.91 for community-based orders, 95.25 for those forming part of a movement, and 57.17 for the 'other' category made up of participants who answered as 'none' or 'not

applicable'. Pairwise comparison revealed that there was a statistically significant difference between those who belonged to community-based orders and those who followed a movement (p = .024). No other group differences were statistically significant.

There was a significant difference in commitment to celibacy across different durations in the priesthood, $H(2) = 9.88$, p = .007. The mean rank scores were 97.65 for those who had been priests for less than 10 years, 64.39 for those who had been priests between 11-30 years, and 74.68 for those who had been priests for over 30 years. Pairwise comparison revealed that there was a statistically significant difference between those who had been in the priesthood for less than ten years and those who had been in the priesthood for 11-30 years (p = 0.002). No other group differences were statistically significant.

There was no significant difference in commitment to celibacy across different islands of residence, Malta and Gozo, $H(2) = 2.44$, p = .295. The mean rank scores were 72.64 for those residing in Malta, 82.26 for those residing in Gozo, and 93.81 for those in the 'other' category.

Hypothesis 4: Demographic Factors and Manhood Beliefs

To determine whether there were any statistically significant differences in terms of clergy members' age, role, order/movement, duration as priest, and island of residence in manhood beliefs scores, Kruskal-Wallis tests were conducted. The tests indicated that there was a significant difference in manhood beliefs across different age groups, $H(3) = 11.92$, p = .008. The mean ranks were 106.05 for ages 18-29, 64.77 for ages 30-45, 70.38 for ages 46-64, and 86.14 for ages 65+. Pairwise comparison revealed that there was a statistically significant difference between those aged between 30-45 and those aged 65+ (p = .019), those aged between 30-45 and those aged between 18-29 (p = .004), and those aged between 18-29 and between 45-64 (p = .013). No other group differences were statistically significant.

There was no significant difference in manhood beliefs across different roles, $H(3) = 4.73$, $p = .193$. The mean rank scores were 71.72 for priests, 75.99 for religious, 105.30 for seminarians, and 97.42 for the 'other' category. There was no significant difference in manhood beliefs across different orders, $H(3) = 1.052$, $p = .789$. Mean rank scores were 75.43 for those who were part of orders that reside alone, 76.09 for community-based orders, 79.85 for those forming part of a movement, and 67.22 for the 'other' category.

There was no significant difference in manhood beliefs across different durations in the priesthood, $H(2) = 5.37$, $p = .068$. The mean rank scores were 81.38 for those who had been priests for less than 10 years, 65.08 for those who had been priests between 11-30 years, and 81.90 for those who had been priests for over 30 years. There was no significant difference in manhood beliefs across different islands of residence, $H(2) = 3.45$, $p = .178$. The mean rank scores were 75.21 for those residing in Malta, 83.97 for those residing in Gozo, and 50.44 for those in the 'other' category.

Hypothesis 5: Demographic Factors and Loneliness

To determine whether there were any statistically significant differences in terms of clergy members' age, role, order/movement, duration as priest, and island of residence in levels of loneliness, Kruskal-Wallis tests were conducted. None of the tests were statistically significant. The mean rank scores, H and p-values are reported in Tables 5 and 6.

Table 5

Kruskal-Wallis Test Statistics for Indirect Measures of Loneliness

Demographic factor	*n*	Mean ranks	*H*	*p*
Age				
18-29	11	60.23		
30-45	54	77.06	1.82	.611
46-64	46	77.83		
65+	38	72.92		
Role				
Priest	99	77.29		
Religious	39	73.69	2.59	.460
Seminarian	5	48.00		
Other	6	68.25		
Order				
Residing alone	51	69.72		
In a community	55	78.81	2.27	.519
In a movement	20	69.78		
None/other	23	82.15		
Years since ordination				
<10 years	37	73.01		
11-30 years	60	78.61	.758	.684
>30 years	52	72.25		
Island of residence				
Malta	122	73.81		
Gozo	19	73.21	2.45	.294
Other	8	97.44		

**Note.* Island of residence also refers to the island on which the priest practices.

Table 6.

Kruskal-Wallis Test Statistics for Direct Measures of Loneliness

Demographic factor	*n*	Mean ranks	*H*	*p*
Age				
18-29	11	73.36		
30-45	54	77.63	2.59	.460
46-64	46	76.92		
65+	38	69.41		
Role				
Priest	99	76.65		
Religious	39	74.23	1.28	.735
Seminarian	5	67.50		
Other	6	59.08		

Order				
Residing alone	51	74.67		
In a community	55	76.00	.43	.934
In a movement	20	70.08		
None/other	23	77.63		
Years since ordination				
<10 years	37	75.05		
11-30 years	60	79.75	1.79	.408
>30 years	52	69.48		
Island of residence				
Malta	122	74.20		
Gozo	19	73.68	1.20	.548
Other	8	90.25		

*****_Note._ Island of residence also refers to the island on which the priest practices.

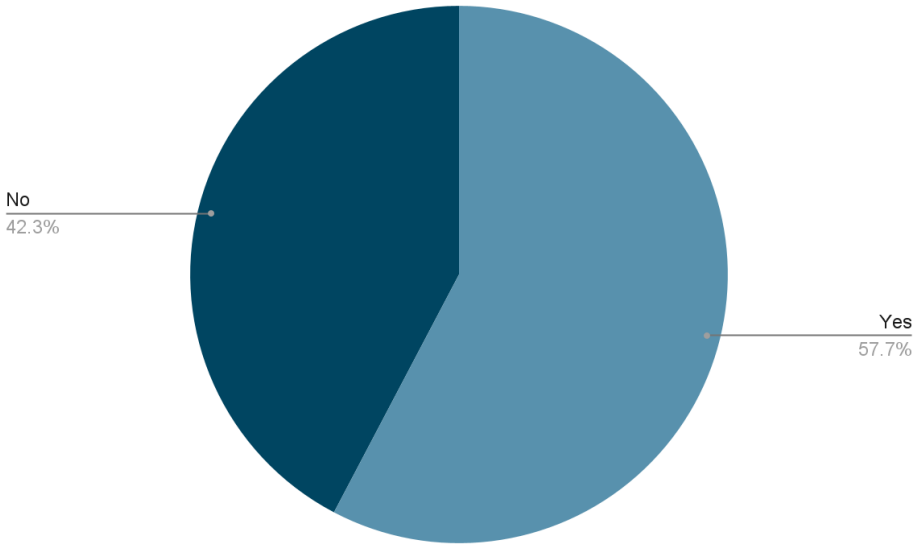
H_5 was thus rejected, and the null hypothesis was accepted. These results indicate that none of the demographic factors measured have a statistically significant difference on levels of loneliness. Although not statistically significant, the results might indicate that seminarians are less lonely than ordained priests, that those in community-based orders are the loneliest, and that those who have been ordained the longest feel the least lonely, whilst those who have been priests between 11-30 years might feel the loneliest.

Binary Question: Do All The Priests You Know Practice Celibacy?

Towards the end of the survey, the participants were asked whether all the priests they know practice celibacy. Figure 5 shows their responses. Almost half the sample (42.3%) reported knowing priests who do not practice celibacy. This could indicate two points, that not all Roman Catholic priests are keeping true to their vow of celibacy, or that the priests in the sample know a number of priests from orders where celibacy is not mandated. Due to the vagueness of the question asked, there is no way of knowing which point is true. However, since most Maltese and Gozitan priests are Roman Catholic, responses might indicate that there is a disparity between what is mandated and what is actually practiced.

Figure 5

Do All The Priests You Know Practice Celibacy?



Open-Ended Question: In One Word, What Does Loneliness Feel Like To You?

At the end of the survey, the participants were asked to answer an open-ended question to determine what loneliness feels like to them. The answers ranged from one-word answers to multiple sentences. These were coded thematically by first grouping similar answers together based on frequency, then reviewing the groupings, and finally choosing a final all-encompassing code for each group. Table 7 shows the codes chosen and their corresponding frequencies.

Table 7

Open-Ended Response Frequencies

Code	*N*	%
Isolating	17	11.4
Disconnect	12	8.1
Emptiness	11	7.4

Solitude	11	7.4
Frustration	11	7.4
Positive adjectives	10	6.7
Part of the human condition	8	5.4
Being forgotten	7	4.7
Painful	7	4.7
Sadness/depression	7	4.7
Non-belonging	6	4.0
Lovelessness	5	3.4
Burden	3	2.0
Hell	3	2.0
Misunderstood	2	1.3
Sickness	2	1.3
Other	27	18.1
Total	149	

Note. "Other" refers to answers which had multiple meanings, incomplete answers, or answers which were not relevant to the question.

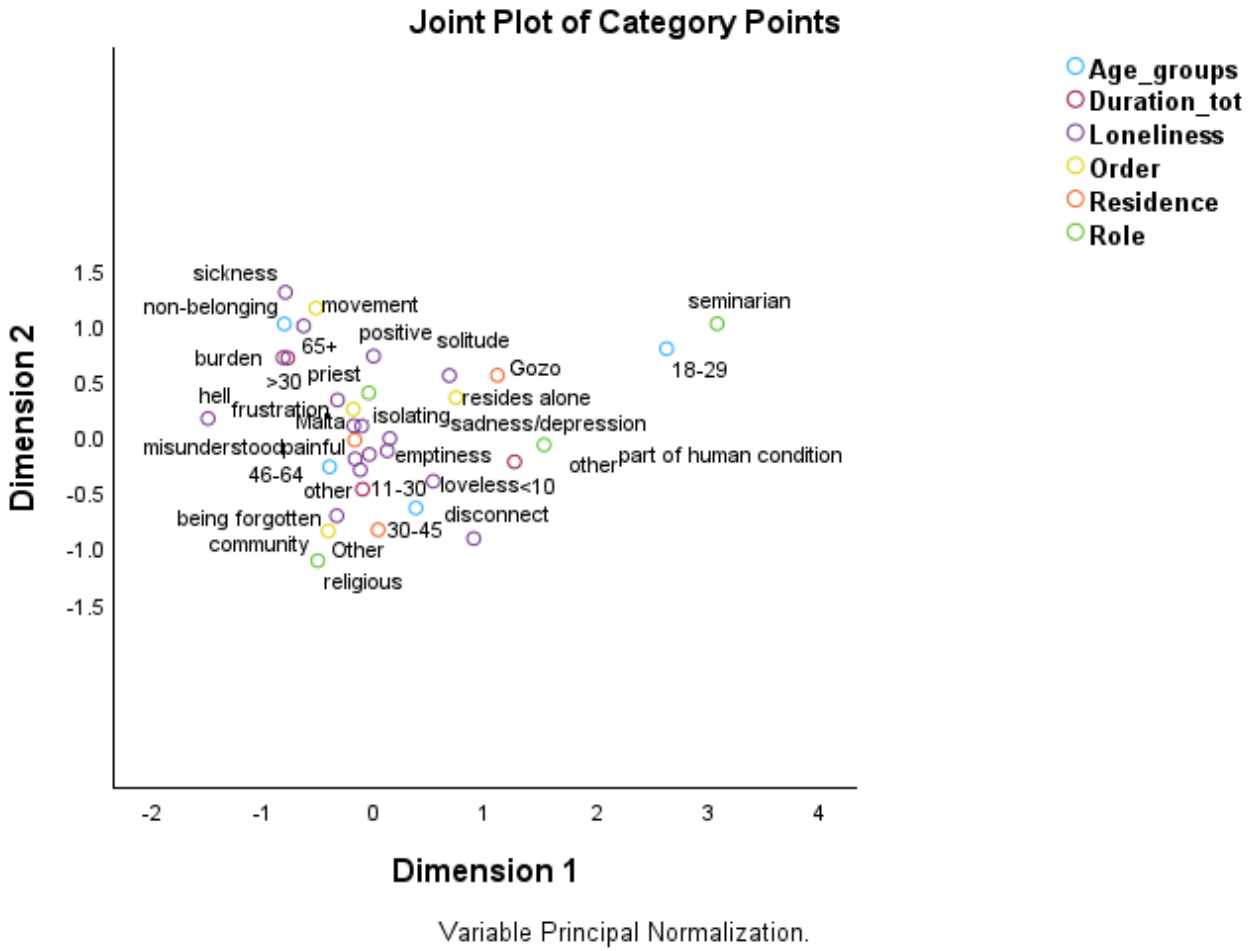
A multiple correspondence analysis was conducted to further investigate the demographic factors – namely age, role, order/movement, age since ordination and island of residence – and adjectives or sentiments related to the word 'loneliness'. Two dimensions were extracted. The first dimension explained 42.51% of the variance and the second dimension explained 34.16%. Figure 6 shows the joint category plot of the variables.

According to this representation, Gozitan diocesan priests who reside alone associated loneliness with solitude, sadness, and depression. 30-45-year-old religious priests who reside in a community associated it with being forgotten. Those who had been a priest between 11-30 years described loneliness in terms of emptiness and pain. On the other hand, those who had been priests over 30 years associated it with hell and described it as a burden. Those who

had been priests for 10 years or less described loneliness as a sense of disconnect and lovelessness. Priests over 65 had both negative and positive connotations, with some describing loneliness as non-belonging and a sickness, and others giving positive adjectives. In general, those residing in Malta associated loneliness with a frustrating and isolating feeling.

Figure 6

Joint Category Plot for Demographic Factors and Adjectives



In this chapter, the quantitative phase of the study was described. The research question and hypotheses, methods employed during this phase, as well as the procedure and sample were outlined. The results obtained through quantitative tests were also stated. In the following chapter, the qualitative phase of the study will be described, and the themes extracted from the data will be presented. The results presented in the following chapter will also shed light on factors apart from celibacy which could be contributing to loneliness.

Chapter 5: The Qualitative Phase

The following chapter will go through the qualitative phase of the study. The procedure will be outlined, from design to application, and the participants and their recruitment will be described. Furthermore, the steps taken to ensure trustworthiness of the results will be outlined. The data collection process will be described, and the use of thematic analysis to extract codes and themes from the data will be explained. Lastly, the themes and subthemes extracted during this phase will be listed, with quotes from participants to expand each theme.

Research Question

The aim of the quantitative phase was to determine what factors may influence loneliness in priests, and whether celibacy had a unique role in this influence. However, certain nuances could not be explained through quantitative data alone. Thus, a qualitative component was necessary to explore priests' experiences of celibacy, of loneliness, and as priests in general. The overarching research question was '*does celibacy influence loneliness in priests?*' However, to gain a more comprehensive picture, it was important to also understand what other factors might be influencing loneliness in priests' lives. It was therefore important to listen to priests' stories, to ask them about their experiences, and to determine how they cope with celibacy in the priesthood. This also ultimately allowed for the chance to see loneliness through their eyes.

The Interview

Semi-structured interviews were carried out with a number of priests and religious. Semi-structured interviews start with a loose guide, where question stems are pre-established, and probing questions may branch off based on participant's responses to the initial question (Morse, 2012). This allows interviews to be focused while simultaneously allowing for room to explore any ideas that might arise throughout the course of the interview (Adeoye-

Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). This flexibility and a lack of set boundaries allow for a plethora of topics to be covered within one interview, whilst also allowing for a structure to follow should one start to veer away from the research question (Fylan, 2005). Interviews were chosen over other forms of data collection for various reasons. Firstly, the sensitivity of the research topic did not allow for focus groups. Since personally sensitive disclosures were likely and encouraged, focus groups might have led to shallow data in comparison to one-on-one interviews (Gibbs, 2012). For this same reason, the use of a focus group might have discouraged some from participating in the study (Gibbs, 2012).

The Interview Guide. An interview guide was developed based on the literature (see Appendix J), and piloted on one priest. Following the pilot interview, it was decided that these questions were easy to evade, were not conducive to building a trusting rapport, and were simply not the right questions to ask to gauge priests' experiences. Thus, following a review of the quantitative data collected up until that point and further consultation, a more comprehensive interview guide was developed. Before interviewing re-commenced, the guide was further reviewed by a researcher with extensive experience in the religious sphere, so as to determine the best way to build rapport with participants and make them feel comfortable to share their stories.

Procedure and Participants

Throughout the quantitative phase, participants who filled in the questionnaire had the option to ask any questions by emailing the researcher. Those who were interested in contributing to the study further were given the option to be part of the second phase of the study and be interviewed. Participants were thus collected through non-probability sampling methods. Although the use of snowball sampling was anticipated, it was not needed since through volunteer sampling eight participants wanted to participate.

To be interviewed, participants had to be a practicing Roman Catholic priest of any order. From these eight participants, seven were Maltese and one was Gozitan. Furthermore, the sample consisted of three religious priests and five diocesan priests, with ages ranging between 33 and 82. There was a fairly even spread of ages, with varying generations of priests being represented. In Table 8 the pseudonyms of each participant as well as the distinction between diocesan and religious priests are listed. The religious priests interviewed were from three separate orders, however this information is omitted from the table to prevent identification. Ages and places of residence are also omitted for this reason, since priests are very easy to identify in Malta and even easier to identify in Gozo.

Table 8

Interview Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Type of priest
Fr Nick	Diocesan
Fr Tony	Diocesan
Fr Nathan	Diocesan
Fr Bertu	Religious
Fr Julian	Diocesan
Fr Chris	Diocesan
Fr Marco	Religious
Fr Isaac	Religious

All interviews were carried out face-to-face, to ensure privacy and confidentiality, and at a time and place which was convenient and comfortable for the participants. Prior to the interview, the participants were provided with the information letter and consent form and were given time at the beginning of the interview to ask for clarification on their content

(Appendices D and E). Participants were given the option to read their transcribed interview, in order to highlight any misinterpretations. This option also allowed participants to omit any information that they believed would make them identifiable. This was explained before the start of the interview, to allow them to feel more at ease. Moreover, the participants were informed about what the data collected would be used for, and that the full transcription of their interview would only be available to the researcher and to the participant themselves. Before the interview started, the participants were informed that they may choose to stop at any time, and that they may refuse to answer any questions they might be uncomfortable with. Further to this, the researcher explained that the aim of the interview was to understand their individual experience, and not to judge it, nor to sensationalise it in the media. Since establishing trust was a necessary aspect for the interview process, the interviewer constantly reminded the participants that they were free to speak unabashedly, and that they had the freedom to omit certain details from the transcription.

Interviews lasted between an hour to an hour and a half and were recorded and then transcribed. Pseudonyms were used throughout transcription, analysis, and writing up of the results and discussion. Since it is suggested that anonymisation should occur promptly following data collection (Clark, 2006), identifying information was removed immediately from the transcriptions to prevent the participants from being traced. As much as possible, the pseudonyms assigned have no relation to the priests. This was done to avoid any speculation, and to avoid the identification of the interviewees.

Interviews are not one sided, but rather an interaction between interviewer and interviewee who co-create meaning – the interview can be considered as a social interaction (Warren, 2012). In fact, constant reflexivity and acknowledging the researcher's effect on the interview is important, as it allows the researcher to reflect on how they might have affected what the participant shared, and therefore how they might have influenced the results (Fylan,

2005). With this in mind, throughout the months in which the interviews were carried out, the researcher kept a reflective diary to constantly note down their behaviours, thoughts, and feelings after each interview. This allowed for the identification of any subtleties that could have affected the data collected.

Trustworthiness

If the results of a study are not trustworthy, then the research by default loses relevance (Adler, 2022). As an alternative to assessing qualitative research through reliability and validity measures, Lincoln and Guba (1985) proposed using trustworthiness to evaluate such research. Specifically, credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability are the criteria by which such research is assessed. Moreover, transparency and reflexivity were processes carried out throughout the research and write up, in conjunction with these four facets of trustworthiness.

Credibility

A study is credible when the participants' lived experience is depicted accurately and truthfully (Cypress, 2017). To achieve this, various different strategies were employed. Firstly, the type of community being researched was studied closely before determining the best way to answer the research question at hand. I spent a prolonged amount of time with religious priests through retreats, and I lived with a religious community of priests during the month of May 2024. This allowed me to understand the best way to speak to priests, how to conduct myself, and gave me a sense of familiarity which was very helpful during the interview process. In order to further ensure a truthful depiction of priests, I consulted various priests at various stages of the process, including when the Times of Malta article was being written, and when there were certain grey areas in the literature which needed further explaining. I also consulted with laypeople who had extensive experience with priests whilst formulating the interview schedule.

Throughout the different phases of the study, but especially during the interview phase, I kept a reflective journal in order to record my thoughts and the reasoning behind taking certain decisions. This allowed me to remain self-aware, and brought to my attention any biases so that I could bracket them effectively (Ortlipp, 2008). Following every interview, I wrote observations in the journal as well, to ensure that I had a record of such observations to be used during analysis.

Having eight participants allowed for more data sources, and also allowed for the attainment of data saturation, whereby no new information was obtained by the last interview (Fusch & Ness, 2015). It was clear by the seventh interview that no new concepts were emerging, and the eighth interview confirmed this suspicion. Although I did not plan to stop at eight, since saturation was reached I made no further efforts to recruit more participants. Another way of ensuring credibility is through participant checking (Candela, 2019). Following transcription of the data, each participant was sent their transcribed interview and asked to check for any inaccuracies or misinterpreted words. This was helpful not only for the sake of credibility, but also to ensure that any data that participants feared might identify them could be omitted at that stage. This was instrumental in the research process, as participants were able to address whether the descriptions provided were realistic, and whether interpretations were fair (Candela, 2019).

Transferability

Transferability refers to the degree to which the findings of a study can be transferred to other settings (Drisko, 2024). Essentially, the aim of psychological research should be to produce work that others can use in their own research or practice, learn from, and build on (Stalmeijer et al., 2024). One way of establishing this is by using a research process which is in line with the aim of the research (Koch, 2006). For the qualitative phase of the study, interviews were deemed the most suitable to answer the research question. Since

conceptualisations of loneliness tend to be quite personal, and the research question required an in-depth understanding of personal experiences, focus groups did not fit the aim. Using focus groups ran the risk of decreasing participants' openness and of them being swayed by the opinions of other members.

Another means of ensuring transferability is by using a thick description. This involves a detailed account of the research process, the context in which the research was carried out, the sample, and a detailed account of the data obtained (Anney, 2014). By doing so, one enables the replication of the study in different settings (Anney, 2014). The process was detailed in Chapters 3 and 4, and in the current chapter, as a contribution to this thick description. Moreover, the Maltese context was described in detail, and the sample was also described in as much detail as was allowed without leading to the identification of the participants. The data collected will also be described in detail, with themes that are close to the data, and using many direct quotations from participants.

Dependability

Dependability refers to how stable findings remain over time (Bitsch, 2005). This parallels reliability in quantitative research (Cypress, 2017). It is often achieved through the creation of an audit trail and rigorous documentation (Ahmed, 2024). Decisions were documented in a reflective journal, and the methodology was also documented in detail in previous chapters. Moreover, any changes made to the initial methodology were also documented in Chapter 3, facilitating not just dependability of the findings but also transparency. Although inter-rater reliability is often used to establish dependability, for the purposes of this study it did not make sense, since there was no availability of another coder who was as immersed in the data as I had become over the course of this research. Moreover, since the data was so sensitive and the participants so easy to identify, I felt it would be unjust to expose the interview transcripts to another researcher. Using raw data has also been

cited as a means of increasing dependability (Adler, 2022), since it allows for a real account of the participants' viewpoint. Hence, it was important to remain close to the participants' original words by including a substantial number of quotes in the findings.

Confirmability

Confirmability refers to how impartial findings are (Ahmed, 2024). Of course, in qualitative research it is difficult to establish full objectivity, however to do so, the reflective journal allowed me to identify my biases as a researcher and reflect on how they might be impacting the research process. Confirmability also requires that the analysis of the data is grounded in context, rather than subject to individual interpretation. Specifically, it is concerned with confirming that findings are not "figments of the inquirer's imagination" but truly extracted from the data (Korstjens & Moser, 2018, p. 121). This was obtained through close consultation with transcribed interviews at every stage of writing, and using many excerpts from the interviews. I also made sure to state my biases earlier on, and to constantly reflect on findings to ensure that they were not influenced by my preconceived notions.

Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis was chosen as the preferred analytic method for this phase, mainly because of its accessibility, and theoretical and methodological flexibility (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis is a method used to identify, analyse, and interpret patterns of meaning in qualitative datasets (Braun & Clarke, 2017). These patterns generate a set of codes which are then grouped into themes. Codes are units of analysis used to mark interesting features of the data that are potentially relevant to the research question. These act as building blocks to create themes which encapsulate a shared core idea (Braun & Clarke, 2017). Particularly, reflexive thematic analysis was the preferred method, where the researcher's subjectivity is not viewed as a threat to data analysis but as a useful resource (Braun & Clarke, 2023). Here, coding is seen as an interpretative practice and the researcher

actively shapes the research process – this type of research "will always be infused with their [researchers'] subjectivity" (Braun & Clarke, 2023, p. 4). Through constant reflexivity, the researcher is asked to reflect on who they are, and to consider how their positionality and assumptions are affecting the analytic process (Pearson et al., 2025).

Braun and Clarke (2023) outline six steps of reflexive thematic analysis: familiarisation with the data; initial code generation; searching for themes; developing and reviewing initial themes; refining, defining, and naming themes; and writing up the story that links the themes. An important overarching step is to keep a reflexive journal for sense-making throughout analysis, which was something I kept to record thoughts about and decisions throughout the process. The first step was to familiarise oneself with the data, which started by transcribing the data. This allowed for total immersion, substantiated further through listening repeatedly to the recorded interviews and reading through the transcripts multiple times. Throughout the immersion process, any thoughts were noted using the annotations tab in NVivo, in place of a reflexive journal, in case they became relevant at a later stage. NVivo and other computed-assisted qualitative data analysis softwares (CAQDAS) have the potential to not only help sort, analyse, and visualise qualitative data, but also to improve the quality of the analysis (Dhakal, 2022). They are particularly valuable when it comes to managing volumes of data and avoid the messiness and limitations of pen-and-paper (Fallin, 2019).

The second step was to start coding any interesting data (Braun & Clarke, 2023). Through the use of NVivo, segments of the data were highlighted and labelled with initial codes. These codes were words or short phrases that encapsulated the core message of the data (Naeem et al., 2023). They are meant to be meaningful labels that highlight segments that are relevant to the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2017). NVivo was useful at this stage, as it allowed for the organisation and grouping of the codes in a systematic way. Any

relevant reflections were also added to the annotations tab in the software. The third step was to generate possible themes by grouping codes together (Braun & Clarke, 2023). By alternating between NVivo and pen-and-paper, similar codes were grouped together based on a possible relationship between them. Alternating between the software and manually working on the data allowed for an organic generation of themes, ensuring that the qualitative data was not organised in a quantitative way. It also allowed for a certain closeness with the data by actively engaging with it, whilst further enabling reflective thinking during analysis without any shortcuts (Bergin, 2011; Watling et al., 2012). The fourth and fifth steps involved further developing the themes, reviewing and refining them, and naming and defining the final themes (Braun & Clarke, 2023). The themes, subthemes, and codes are presented in Table 9.

Table 9

Table of Codes and Themes

Theme	Subthemes	Codes		
The prologue: Choosing which road to take	*The calling*	Childhood experiences Experiencing life before	Persisting desire Entering late/late vocations	Marriage not for me Perception of vocation
	Formal and informal teachings	Expectations vs reality Talking about gender	The value of a year abroad Mental health in formation Talking about sexuality	The role of the psychologist Spiritual direction
	Life in the seminary and beyond	Arrested development Desire to leave	Difficult experience Finding one's place	Rock and a hard place Same minds, same faces
The model priest	*Stereotypes*	The priest as asexual Laypeople on priests Views on masculinity in general	The priest in literature Being human as un-Christian Rgulija	Harmful stereotypes - the anti-model Priests in Maltese media Priests on priests
	The priest on a pedestal	Avoiding reality checks	The manly priest Priests as lesser beings	Old habits die hard
	Absurdity versus banality	Living an absurd life The risk of banality Celibacy as absurd, but not banal	Banal Church laws Absurdity within faith The theological context of celibacy	
Having the cloth cut out for you	*Priesthood in the family line*	Childhood experiences Family expectations	Judgemental family members	The honour of a priest in the family
	Priesthood like an arranged marriage	Being forced into it	Poor integration	Sexual frustration

Theme	Subthemes	Codes		
		Ill-adjustment	The risk of slipping up	
	The priest in closed-minded communities	The case of Gozo	Feeling trapped	Personality factors
Father versus fatherhood	*Fatherhood in its different forms*	Exercising one's paternity Fatherhood as proof of manhood	Fatherhood in religious communities	Perceptions of God The priest and his parish
	Feelings of loss	Father of many but father of none	The desire to be a dad 'I can never have that'	
When I close my bedroom door, I am alone: Loneliness in the priesthood	*Close relationships*	Healthy relationships 'Special' relationships Living one's faith	Moving from home to home Sharing life events of others	Lack of close relationships The repercussions of closeness
	The road not travelled	Life without a partner Lost love	Past lovers The meaning of love	The value of marriage
	Different ways of life	Diocesan life Religious life	Finding support Moments of loneliness	The transition from seminarian to priest
	The life of the parish priest	Insularity in Malta and Gozo Keeping one's distance	Parishioners as family Shared struggles breed community	The need to adapt The priest in closely-knit communities
	Loneliness and its different forms	Being misunderstood Being trained to be alone Emotional loneliness The inability to be alone	Solitude Obedience Filling the gap	Loneliness in thought Taking care of everyone, not being taken care of

Theme	Subthemes	Codes		
The value of celibacy: And that has made all the difference	*Positive perceptions of celibacy*	A yes to everyone Enhancing connection with others Moments of joy	Worth the struggle Theological arguments	Practical arguments Different contributions
	Continuous self-growth	Minding the mind and the spirit Ongoing formation	Two different vocations Well-integrated celibacy	
Married priesthood: Can I travel both?	*Married to the priesthood*	Deciding to commit everyday Making the choice		
			Married apostles The vocation as a marriage	Persisting sexual desires Signalling commitment
	Vocation versus relationship	A church practice that can be changed Experiencing love first Late life in the priesthood	Loss for some but not for others Missing piece Rejecting a utopian romance	Same-sex marriage Sense of frustration Is married priesthood worth it?
	Living celibacy at different ages	Celibacy for all ages Lack in integrated teaching	Knowledge gap Different desires at different ages	

Theme 1: The Prologue: Choosing Which Road To Take

As Robert Frost (1915) begins his poem: *"Two roads diverged in a yellow wood, and sorry I could not travel both and be one traveller"*. This theme portrays how participants chose their road to priesthood, from describing the calling to priesthood to describing seminary life and the way celibacy was talked about in their formative years. Although some participants felt that the choice of road was easy, others faced a more convoluted path. This is best explained through the contrasting experiences of Fr Tony and Fr Bertu. Fr Tony's choice was easy, as he felt that there was no better alternative. He had chosen this road well before he had to make a final decision, and he expressed being at peace with his choice: "I always felt called to be a priest… I remember that at age seven I wanted to be an altar boy, I had that wish to be on the altar". On the other hand, Fr Bertu had a harder time choosing which road to take, explaining that he had felt a "flame" and calling towards priesthood, whilst also being in the throes of young love, explaining that in his formative years he needed to "discern whether my goal is to ask to marry you or to remain where I am". These choices are better explained through the sub-themes which informed this theme.

The Calling. The calling hit participants at different stages of their lives. Some, like Fr Tony, felt this calling before the age of ten. He explained that "if the Lord wants you to go to China, he will instil in you the love for China". He also described his calling as "like a flame of fire growing, growing, growing". Others, like Fr Nathan, were raised into it:

> I was brought up in the parish. We were a very small town… if I fall from bed I could crawl down to the *Mużew* and then to the church. Literally… I could run a single sprint to the church. I was very much involved in the parish life (Fr Nathan).

He further explained the nuances of one's calling:

> [It's] one thing saying you want to become a priest when you're eight or ten. It's another thing if you're twelve or fourteen. But the idea never disappeared… I

> struggled with it along the process. I made the decision at around the end of Form 4 (Fr Nathan).

Fr Marco expressed similar sentiments, explaining that "when there's this type of calling, you're marked by it". He entered the priesthood fairly later, and then left formation for a few years. He explained that "I was out, I had my friends, I was happy at work, but I still kept feeling a sense of emptiness. I had everything, but at the same time I had nothing". Other priests, like Fr Chris and Fr Isaac, oscillated between roads. Fr Isaac chose the road in his mid-thirties:

> I had spent a long time feeling it and saying no… I spent over twelve years saying no. But then I saw [founder of his order's] life and I said I'll try, because I think that's the life for me. And I don't regret it (Fr Isaac).

Fr Chris, on the other hand, was geared up to choose the road of marriage after trying the seminary for a few years - "I bought a house with her, I fixed it up and everything". He further explained that "I still felt called, I always kept feeling it", and he eventually returned to the seminary later on. There were also priests who entered the seminary young, but did not feel a calling early on. Fr Julian expressed that "I never dressed up as a priest when I was young" and that it "wasn't a reality that ever crossed my mind". In fact, he expressed entering the seminary in a sort of half-hearted way:

> When I entered the seminary I don't think I was a person of phenomenal faith. I was feeling this urge, this desire, but obviously I came to realise what it actually meant…. There was a while where I was telling myself that I'll enter the seminary to just remove the itch, so to speak (Fr Julian).

Fr Nick chose the road with conviction at first, but was close to going back on his decision. At the time he felt that "there was no reason for me to leave, but there were no reasons for me to stay either". He then felt that "it was not worth it to fight this battle" and ended up

finishing his final years and moving into the priesthood. The road to priesthood, whether long or short, straight or convoluted, wide or narrow, might be influencing the way priests' live their celibacy and the way they experience loneliness.

Formal and Informal Teachings. Participants expressed that whilst in the seminary, they were presented with certain ideas on gender and sexuality. Many described a particular seminar, where they were presented with a list of masculine and feminine traits and asked which a priest should possess.

> ...we had a seminar on sexuality, which is given to every first year cohort…. Part of it was, kind of a remnant of the past, where they gave us sort of this sex talk… but the most interesting part was when he split the board in two and he wrote down adjectives on each side… part of the adjectives were very clearly masculine or adjectives we normally attribute to men, and the other part where, you know, caring, you know like ones that we would usually attribute to women (Fr Julian).

Fr Tony also explained that during this seminar "I remember at the time thinking [the priest] should have the masculine traits since he is a man" but that it was explained that they had to have both, "you have to be caring and nurturing but also protective" (Fr Julian). Although gender was touched upon during formation, apart from scratching the surface with a "sex talk", sexuality was discussed less. Fr Nathan explained that "formation has to be targeted specifically", due to "the culture" that priests are coming from, a world that encourages "eternal youth" without "commitment and responsibility". Fr Bertu further explained that instruction in seminaries was not good enough in his time "whether how to live our affectivity, whether how to live our sexuality". He explained that this changed in the 70s, however his experience was specific to the formation of a specific religious order. In diocesan formation there was a lack of "good guidance of what celibacy is and what it means,

[at] thirty, forty, and fifty" (Fr Chris). He continued explaining the need for more awareness around sexuality and celibacy when formation is still underway:

> They have to educate them and let them be aware [of] what they are doing before they do the choice. Because celibacy at 20 is more sexual, celibacy at 30 is something else. Celibacy at my age is something else again. and you will never understand it but at least you have heard about it (Fr Chris).

Fr Isaac also touched on this issue, stating that "whoever is entering [the priesthood] is giving his life, so show him things the way they are" and that they should not be given "an illusion of what this life is, that you paint everything as beautiful. You need to show him the ugly parts too".

Psychological health, however, has made great strides in seminary teachings. Fr Tony explained that in his time, prospective seminarians were screened by a psychologist, and that there was also therapy along the years. He explained that,

> When people are in your hands, to put it that way, and you aren't aware of who you are or you don't know yourself, or you don't know what you're being guided by, you're then going to misdirect others and you might cause some damage then (Fr Tony).

Priests are also encouraged to constantly reflect on their emotional and spiritual wellbeing though "meditation, knowing oneself, the examen of consciousness, mentoring" (Fr Tony). Fr Nathan also shared this experience, and Fr Isaac also explained that once they leave the seminary, priests of his order are followed by a psychologist if the need arises, which could be a protective factor against loneliness later on.

Life in the Seminary and Beyond. Participants also shared different experiences of seminary life, which then shaped the way they practiced their vocation. Fr Nick stated that "I was more out than in [the seminary]" and that during his time he felt that his fellow

seminarians were “not emotionally mature”. He further explained that “the way you are living your life, always protected, that was my biggest issue in the seminary, that you were living a life that was not normal because you were surrounded by like-minded people”. He felt that seminarians were in a state of arrested development, stuck in one place with the same people, when “our place was at barbeques with girls and [other] young people… don’t get me wrong, but we were deprived of that. You’re not going to turn out normal like that”. This can be a very lonely existence. Fr Chris felt that seminarians should have more opportunities to mix with others their age, especially in their intermediate year. He was disgruntled by the fact that seminarians would go work in a church during that year.

> Leave the church alone for that year. Mix with women, see what they are. If you have to fall in love, see – why not? It doesn’t mean that you are going to lose your vocation. I didn’t lose mine (Fr Chris).

Fr Julian explained that “when you leave the seminary it’s like removing a plant from a greenhouse and placing it on a roundabout”. Because of close-knit companions, support structures and routines, some priests might have found it difficult to leave such a “highly structured environment”, but “when you’re 18, you see everything positively” (Fr Marco). The participants highlighted that without some reforms in formation, the seminary would produce disillusioned priests who might find it difficult to adjust to the world outside of the gates of the seminary, which could further result in feelings of loneliness and issues with celibacy.

Theme 2: The Model Priest

In their daily lives, priests described facing many stereotypes which in some ways affected their ministry. Some were positive and others negative, but the most harmful were those pertaining to what a priest should be or how he should act. Moreover, there was an overlap between masculinity stereotypes and stereotypes about priests. Some participants

expressed that priests are often portrayed as asexual "they speak about priests as almost asexual, which I'm not quite fond of, because we are human just like everyone else" (Fr Nick). These ideas informing the concept of 'the model priest' had their repercussions, as participants felt that they were being placed on a pedestal against their will. This kept people from trying to get to know who they really were, inciting feelings of loneliness. Fr Tony gave an anecdote of a woman who worked with him, speaking as if to her "so you kind of know me, but you don't know *me*".

Stereotypes. The participants described the different ways in which stereotypes affected not just their ministry, but also their everyday lives. Fr Julian expressed that "in Malta the priest is socially understood. So even if you ask the biggest atheist and anti-clerical person in Malta, they still know who the priest is, what he stands for, his way of life". The stereotypes had differing sources: priests in Maltese media, priests in the literature, and priests before the 21st century. Fr Nick felt that "it's like there's a certain fascination, something mysterious, the forbidden fruit, whatever". The way lay people view priests is as "angels", "amongst the most intelligent and well-read people", someone to "look towards", "soft", "delicate", "timid/weak (*debboli*), "sheeply", and religious priests specifically as "living a holy life all the time, always praying". Participants also expressed the harm caused by certain stereotypes. Fr Nick expressed that "the priest was the secretary, the doctor, the lawyer. Now I'd say that the priest is the pedophile they see in the street". Fr Tony also described the model priest as one "[in a position of] power, who is the centre of attention". Fr Julian shared a similar view, drawing on priests in Maltese media:

> Look at the depictions of the priests in Maltese culture, in Maltese media, Dun Benit the idiotic priest, the naive priest (*baħbuħ*), the clueless priest. So this has also played into the general… understanding of the priest that says the rosary quietly in church,

> and poor him (*jaħasra*), and don't scandalise him because he's a dainty little fellow (Fr Julian).

The priest's collar elicited many reactions as well. Fr Nick expressed that "whenever I wear the collar I feel a 2000-year story resting on my shoulders". Fr Isaac shared an anecdote from the doctor's office:

> I went with the collar. And the professor told me "Father, if you weren't dressed like that, I would have thought you were anything but a priest! I assumed you were coming from the docks, because you're so well built!" (Fr Isaac).

Fr Julian mentioned that he does not always wear his collar, as it has sometimes resulted in him not being taken seriously:

> We affect how people perceive us… For example I make the decision on whether or not to wear my collar depending on the context that I'm in. If I wear it today, will it help or hinder my end goal?... I don't want to be immediately dismissed purely because I am a priest (Fr Julian).

The way the Church itself portrays priests also emerged from the interviews. "They give us too much gravitas (*ituna arja li m'għandux ikollna*) (Fr Nick). With particular reference to parish priests, Fr Nathan expressed that "sometimes… it's not out of patriarchy or clericalism, but you have to take decisions. Because you are the one accountable". Fr Bertu expanded on this:

> In the Church, when there is clericalism, and I think in Malta there's still quite a bit of clericalism, there tends to be, to project that image of the person who is dominant, who needs to be in control, who is the one to take the decisions and the others must follow. I don't agree with that image of the priesthood myself, but I think it's still very dominant in Malta (Fr Bertu).

This perception of priests as "always dressed in black, always in some shirt with the top button fastened" (Fr Nick), "fat, unhappy, sometimes dirty, *llapazzati*" and at the same time so scrupulous that people "take the other extreme that if they said fuck, it's 'sorry Father'" (Fr Julian), was not favourable for priests. Fr Marco in fact stated that "behind the doors of the convent are all different characters… some are calm, some are nervous, some try to go over your head, some hold back".

The Priest on a Pedestal. Because of certain portrayals of the model priest, some participants felt that they were being unjustly placed on a pedestal. "We have this problem if we present the priest as a hero, a type of superhuman. We are human, very human" (Fr Nick). Fr Marco expressed similar sentiments: "we are human, we contain multitudes, we feel everything, because we feel the same way that other humans feel". This distance that the laity placed between themselves and priests came across as isolating: "How many people are interested in truly knowing about our lives then? Or would they rather stop at the outer layer?" (Fr Tony). Fr Tony provided another anecdote, where upon leaving his office, he told a couple:

> "Pray for me!" And they seemed shocked. "Pray for you? Since when do you need prayers? Doesn't everything turn out well for you?" And that left, I don't even know what feeling it left in me…. It's convenient for them not to know us (Fr Tony).

Similarly, Fr Nathan shared what he experiences during house blessings:

> If the parish priest comes for the house blessing you would still, this has become very rare…. and I find that it's better actually that we get into people's lives as they are, as messy as they are, so people with their pyjamas at home … but then there are still those who do the spring cleaning for the house blessing (Fr Nathan).

On the other hand, there were also other downfalls to being placed on this pedestal. Fr Julian explained that:

> In spheres outside of the Church I feel I have a tougher time proving myself, I need to work harder to prove myself because I am looked down... one of the reasons because I'm a priest. So I have to sort of prove myself extra than someone else would, in that context… (Fr Julian).

Fr Nathan said, "when you take certain people as inspiration, and you don't take their humanity and their fragility into account, it's very naive" and Fr Tony compared priests to the royal family, who are seen as a source of hope but simultaneously "dehumanised" because of their status.

Absurdity Versus Banality. At the same time, participants expressed how celibacy not only places them on a pedestal in the eyes of the laity, but also makes their choices seem banal. "You can live with the absurd. My life is absurd, but I hope that it is not banal!" (Fr Nick). Similar sentiments were shared, such as Fr Tony's: "What I live makes sense because there is that connection to God", and Fr Nathan's:

> Celibacy makes sense within a theological context, within a faith context. If you think of it outside of that, it makes no sense… I cope because of this higher good, let's put it that way. Otherwise it would be nonsense…. The whole Christian life is ridiculous! (Fr Nathan).

This contrast between what is absurd and what is banal stood out in participants' narratives. Fr Julian explained that "without the theological context within which it [celibacy] is practiced it is meaningless, and is incomprehensive" and expressed that "if someone tells me that they want to live like me but without believing in God, I would tell them that they're insane". He further elaborated that:

> Celibacy, in our context at least, outside of the religious context within which it is practiced is very unnatural I think… you have to buy into the wider religious milieu within which celibacy is practiced. Celibacy in and of itself is unnatural. There's no two ways about it I think. (Fr Julian).

The participants thus placed huge emphasis on context when assessing the validity of celibacy. Without context, celibacy was seen as senseless and insane, banal rather than absurd.

The Intersection Between Priesthood and Masculinity. When discussing masculine stereotypes, participants explained how these also tended to have an impact on their lives as priests. Fr Tony described how "I never felt that I was that kind of man, but rather the idea of masculinity that we find in scripture". Fr Tony felt different in adolescence, since he did not display stereotypically masculine traits:

> I used to think there was something wrong with me… for example, I was never rough. Never. And I used to tell myself "how am I so soft in comparison to others? How am I not rough like them?" (Fr Tony).

He then described masculinity as modelled by Christ "the provider, protector", showing "love, sensitivity, reaching out", and "He showed emotion". He expressed that "with time I realised that I have what I'm supposed to have. I'm not in the wrong" and came to terms with his masculinity because "if I want to be like Christ, I have to be sensitive". Similarly, Fr Nathan described that "I do have sometimes a sensitivity of a woman, meaning I catch things that the typical alpha male wouldn't be able to read between the lines". Fr Bertu explained that "priesthood for me, if it is in the image of Christ's priesthood, it's service, being a servant. Not servile, but servant. So I am there, as Pope Francis says, to dirty my hands with the people I serve".

> I think there's a masculine way of caring and a feminine way of caring, a masculine way of being protective and a feminine way of being protective. They are not adjectives that ascribe to men only and to women only (Fr Julian).

Something that repeatedly turned up during interviews carried out in Maltese was the concept of "*rġulija*". The most accurate translation of this word is an honest or upright person, someone with integrity, but there are certain nuances to the word which do not come out through this translation. Displaying "*rġulija*" means giving the word of a man, it means being true to one's manhood. Participants had positive connotations to this word and said it with a sense of pride when describing their meanings of masculinity. In fact, Fr Nick explained that "to be a man means that you do what you have to do (*raġel iġifieri tagħmel dak li għandek tagħmel*)".

> *L-irġulija*, it captures a quality. My dad raised me in this way – so for example that you keep your word. That you are respectful, that you are dependable (*li ma tkunx tan-nejk*), that you honour your word… this concept of *rġulija* that you have to treat everyone with respect, from the guy who picks up your garbage to a university professor (Fr Julian).

Fr Chris held a similar definition: "*rġulija* is the word…. A person who is capable of keeping their word… that they are loyal" and later on "I gave my word, I'm gonna stick to it. That's manhood, that's *rġulija*". Fr Nathan described a similar concept:

> We have our pride, our sense of pride and we don't want to give into it, which is not really bad as long as it is lived and used properly in the sense that one wants to take responsibility, being committed, giving a word and being ready to sacrifice (Fr Nathan).

For the participants, *rġulija* was laced into their narratives and a quality which almost came together with being a priest, in some form or other. Unlike what would commonly be experienced by a lay man, this notion of *rġulija* did not come across as a perpetuator of loneliness, nor did it come up as the idea that celibacy might make priests less of a man.

Theme 3: Having the Cloth Cut Out for You

Some of the participants faced difficulties in their ministry because the priesthood was something that they felt forced into. They thus felt that they needed to keep renewing the same decision every day. When this was the case, and celibacy was not integrated well, there was the risk of resentments being built up, of feeling trapped and alone, and of slipping up. For this theme, many quotes will not be identified by a pseudonym, so that certain sensitive things shared are not traced back to any of the participants, and so when Gozo is mentioned there will not be the risk of this priest being identified.

Priesthood in the Family Line. Having priests in the family was a hindrance to some participants and a lesson for others. One priest expressed that "I come from a family of priests. It was quite normal for me to see how priests were living their vocation in their everyday lives". In Gozo especially, it came across that having a priest in the family was an honour that could not be refused. When he tried to refuse, "no one spoke to me anymore, my siblings stopped speaking to me, because my mum tried to boycott me… today I understand that she did it out of love". Other priests came from practicing families that were very supportive, resulting in them joining the priesthood as a joyous calling rather than as something to be done out of duty.

Priesthood Like an Arranged Marriage. Some of the participants made it seem, both implicitly and explicitly, that the road of priesthood was not entirely their choice at first – "they put me (*daħħluni*) in the seminary when I was 16" and "one of the strong elements of discipline [in our family] is that if we took a commitment, we had to stand for it". The former

participant expressed that “I remember that I did not want to join the seminary. I had the vocation but I was too young… but my mother insisted that I join and she put pressure on me”. When talking about the trajectories, these participants seemed certain in their choices, but perhaps unhappy with the circumstances in which they were made. One of them later left the priesthood briefly, but “to force me to return she [my mum] would sort of politely blackmail me”. That being said, both expressed that they were happy with their choices in the end.

There were also sentiments about the two vocations of priesthood and celibacy. Fr Nathan, who did not share this sentiment but described it nonetheless, explained that some priests would have the attitude of “I’ve been called to the priesthood and by consequence I have to live celibately”. He explained that this attitude resulted in becoming “a frustrated single man and a frustrated priest”. However, he also expressed: “I mean being celibate and choosing it voluntarily takes nothing away from all the sexual frustrations and sexual attractions and sexual whatever… everything works normally, no?” Similarly to a loveless marriage that one feels forced into, “if you do not know yourself enough and you don’t know what you’re standing for, you might easily become involved [with another person]” (Fr Tony). Furthermore, when celibacy is poorly integrated, priests risk “leading a double life”. Similar to an unhappy husband, Fr Chris explained that “being an unhappy priest causes a lot of damage, just as we had many priests who did a lot of damage. It’s better if they leave if they are not happy”. Additionally, “you can become sick by living unauthentically… or by eventually having to leave the priesthood, because it becomes unbearable” (Fr Tony).

It was highlighted that being a priest does not mean living as a bachelor or a single man:

> Just like a man, another man would marry and give himself completely to be a good father and husband… every priest, in celibacy one gives himself – so we're not

> single, and sometimes that's the problem also from our side when it comes to living celibacy because we sometimes fall into temptation of living the single life which is very different from the celibate life (Fr Nathan).

There were some feelings of being forced onto that path: “there’s a difference between choosing yourself and it being imposed on you. Because I felt that it was imposed on me in a way, although it’s not all bad, but I would have chosen differently”.

The Priest in Closed-Minded Communities. One participant expressed that “I cannot make sense of myself outside of the culture that I was raised in”. Maltese culture, and more so Gozitan culture, resulted in certain unpleasant parts of the priesthood being amplified. “Gozo suffocates me… everyone knows everyone… I don’t really like the Gozitan mentality because no one is sincere, everyone gossips about everyone”. Forming part of a closed-minded community made both Maltese and Gozitan priests alike feel like they were constantly being scrutinised: “you feel fearful… the priests’ actions seems to show more. And they don’t forgive the priest. We forgive so much and yet no one forgives us”. This seemed to exacerbate feelings of loneliness as well: “everyone knows that you live alone, everyone knows that you have to cook for yourself, everyone knows – but no one invites you over. No one”. Participants felt that even going out with a friend was risky, because of the eyes and imaginings of the laity: “and it tears you apart (*teqirdek*) because it brings you to the point where you are a man without relationships”. Even a simple hug was a risk, as “you can’t touch anyone. I haven’t touched a person with my own hands… I’m almost afraid to”. This ran a further risk of messy relationships being formed “because if it is not coming from the right place, you are going to look for it in the wrong place” and “ some people will give you attention that you are not getting from the channels you’re meant to be”.

Theme 4: Father Versus Fatherhood

The differences between being a father and a Father came out through the narratives of the participants. Some described the alternative ways in which they exercised their paternity, and the losses that come with renouncing marriage. There were also differences between fatherhood in religious communities and in the diocesan life. Being a father of many and of none at the same time was a source of hurt for some participants, and the struggle with the desire to be a father was also expressed by some. Perceptions of God were the source of many participants' views on fatherhood.

Fatherhood in its Different Forms. Participants had different definitions of the family father which informed what they felt was their role as a Father. "To me, the father is someone who will wake up at four in the morning to go make money to feed his family if he needs to" expressed Fr Nick.

> The father of the family, who works, who dedicates himself for the family, who does whatever sacrifice needs to be done… and I consider myself not a biological father, and I'm not, but I do exercise my paternity, my fatherhood, in various ways, sometimes even to people who are much older than me (Fr Nathan).

Additionally, Fr Nathan stated that "as a leader of the community", the priest gives his life completely to the community, acting as a father of sorts. Through their ministry, priests become Fathers: "I can say I have children in Egypt, … , in Italy, in France, wherever I've been, and I have families" (Fr Bertu). Fr Julian also felt that he is a father to many children in his work as a chaplain, explaining that with his 'children' he is firm, he keeps his word, he dispenses discipline where necessary, and there is a sense of shared respect between them. Fr Tony shared an anecdote about a child who wished for him to be his godfather:

> In those instances I feel like the best possible dad, because you know that for that kid you're a significant person in his life, you lead him, you show him the truth, and that is exactly what I wanted to do as a dad… so it's more than just physically

> having my own children, it's more about what I'm going to pass onto them as a father (Fr Tony).

He continued to say that "I don't generate children biologically, physically, but I do generate children in faith" and that through prayer he felt God showing him that he would be wasted as a father of just two or three children, and that "the priesthood isn't going to take that away from me, but it is going to help me do it on a larger scale" and "for me that is the best feeling ever". Fr Chris also described instances where he was a Father. He shared that he has nurtured vocations, and taught values to his students outside of the syllabus he was tasked to teach:

> I keep living on these sort of moments for weeks… these are the things that stick in life, they give you joy… what I didn't pass on to my biological children I passed to these people, and that is a greater love, because they are not yours (Fr Chris).

Similarly, Fr Bertu expressed that having just one family for him would not be enough to contain what he has to share:

> I feel I have received so much in life, and so much love through my family, through friends, that I need to share it and a family for me wouldn't be enough. I need the world. And that is what remained always. That for me, it was a way of living love in another way than marriage (Fr Bertu).

Particularly for priests within religious communities, they quoted instances that showed how they exercise their fatherhood: "the day-to-day running of the convent falls in my hands" (Fr Isaac) and "I try not to burden them, even though I myself am sometimes burdened… because you have to be their father" (Fr Marco). Fr Marco talked about heading a convent, and that he sometimes had to act as a father when the rest of his congregation refused to be together: "I don't know, if like kids you bring them together through food, or sometimes I'll invent something in the evening to spend a moment [together]". Fr Isaac expressed similar

sentiments: "... a lot of our community meetings aren't official, they happen around the dinner table". It is worth noting that many expressed that celibacy allowed participants to exercise their Fatherhood more effectively.

Feelings of Loss. Despite positive feelings generated by Fatherhood, there were also some feelings of loss expressed by participants. These feelings were especially experienced when witnessing the joys of others, and at time contributed to feelings of loneliness: "when I go to their home, sometimes, some days, and they're all there, and now there's even the great grandchildren, yes, I feel some heartache (*għafsa ta' qalb*) in a way" (Fr Bertu). The participants felt that not having children of their own was something which they had to sacrifice for their vocation: "I really wanted to be a dad… when I experienced colleagues mentioning their children, or others who were getting married, I started to tell myself that this is something that I'm not going to have" (Fr Tony). Similar sentiments were shared by Fr Bertu, who expressed that "one of the biggest sacrifices for me being a priest is not having children, because I love children". "You see your friends hugging their kids and you said, 'I could never do that" and "I can never look in my son's eyes and say how much he resembles me", were both expressed by Fr Chris. To some it was also a hit to their manhood, with Fr Tony explaining that "I think part of it was that I wanted to prove to myself that I am a normal man, like any other". Although these same priests had positive views of Fatherhood as well, it was worth noting that there were still some losses felt, and that these feelings were often intertwined in complicated ways:

> "I celebrated his marriage. Then I celebrated the baptism of his sons and then I was a godfather for the confirmation of one of the sons. Then I married the sons. Last year I baptised the girl. So it's, and in a way there is a relationship which, all right, I don't have children of my own but I see the joy of seeing these children grow" (Fr Bertu).

Theme 5: When I Close My Bedroom Door, I Am Alone: Loneliness in the Priesthood

Loneliness was not a stranger to the participants. Through the interviews, many participants described instances that made them feel lonely, and in some cases, there were different forms of loneliness experienced by religious and diocesan participants. Some participants also recounted their past encounters with love, how they navigated them, and how they would have chosen a married priesthood if it had been an option. Participants explained how they filled the gap that loneliness caused, how they had been trained to be alone, and how the parish was both a buffer to and a perpetuator of loneliness.

Close Relationships. Good friendships and close relationships with others were common among some of the participants. Those who maintained such relationships did not often feel lonely: "I have friends who aren't priests and some who don't really practice [their faith], but they want the best for me and we want what's best for each other, and they do a very good job of keeping me grounded" (Fr Julian). When discussing close relationships, Fr Tony explained how he was lucky to have made good friendships without much effort: "most of them came along the way, I did not choose them" and Fr Bertu expressed that "luckily God gave me the grace of being quite sociable and making friends quickly". The participants stressed that sometimes it is simply a personality factor: "those in the seminary who struggled to mix with others struggle to mix with others today as priests" (Fr Tony). Nevertheless, it was through maintaining such relationships that participants felt they could lead a regular social life, which buffered against loneliness. They also expressed gratitude in having friends with which they could be someone other than a priest: "I have a couple of friends who I know I can be, who I am comfortable – I'm not being the priest there, just myself" (Fr Nathan), and Fr Julian stated that "we occasionally meet, we drink, we smoke, we might smoke too much, we might drink too much" when describing the comfortable interactions which he had with his lay friends. Strong friendships with other priests were also given due importance, with Fr Marco stating that "there's something there, I can't explain it… I feel like I am a part of the

group, and they see me as one of them too" and that "we face common problems". For some such friendships were even a way to enrich celibacy, with Fr Bertu explaining that "it needs cultivating through deep friendships" and Fr Nathan stating that "those are important because I mean if you take away something you have to put something instead of it".

Different Ways of Life. There were some disparities between the lives of religious and diocesan priests. Religious priests, due to their community living arrangements, faced particular experiences.

> I need a community. I need people around me to support me. And I know that in my real moments of crisis – I've had a few of them – the presence of the community around me and its support was very, very important (Fr Bertu).

Communities were described as families, with busy lives that intersect at common moments of prayer or meal times: "Like every natural family, we fight, we laugh, but then everything smooths over by the end of the day" (Fr Isaac). Some communities are not as close, especially with increasing workloads and busy lives, its "every man for himself (*kulħadd għal rasu*)" (Fr Marco). Even in close communities, loneliness still had its hold: "sometimes we'll know what's happening in Australia with social media today, but I wouldn't even know what's going on in the room beside mine" (Fr Isaac). For diocesan priests the reality was different, since they tend to live alone. However, this again boiled down to character, as some were happy to live alone whilst others were not the type of people who enjoyed solitude: "You want to share something, you don't have anybody. You eat alone, you cook alone" and "it was not easy, it's still not easy" (Fr Chris). Other diocesan priests found living alone to be a blessing: "when I get home I'm dying to go to my room and spend some time alone, because I've been with people all day" (Fr Tony). Religious priests almost felt better off: "diocesans are worse than us cause once you've shut your door, you're left alone (*mil-bieb 'l*

ġewwa waħdek)" (Fr Isaac). However, "you have the Church and the community, those help you" (Fr Tony).

The Life of the Parish Priest. The parish priest lives a life with unique nuances. In many narratives, parishioners were described as being almost like family, and living in a close-knit community allowed for priests to maintain some relationships: "if you put yourself into it, it becomes a family" (Fr Nathan) and "people from the parish, not everyone but many, they invite you over for dinner, or to get a drink, because you become theirs" (Fr Isaac). Sometimes, parishioners were people of great support: "you'll find them with you at all hours, they go to extreme lengths (*jissalbu*), and they give you their life" (Fr Marco). This was not only experienced by diocesan priests, but also by religious priests who took care of parishes. At times, it is difficult to keep one's distance and to maintain the facade of the priest. Fr Nathan shared an example of having to perform funeral rites for a close parishioner:

> Sometimes we go and celebrate the funeral of someone or go with someone to bury him and you're trying to keep yourself calm, because they're not the normal funerals where you don't know nor the deceased neither his children or his grandchildren (Fr Nathan).

He described the parish priests' life as somewhat messy, because they are not strictly professionals but more similar to "the grocery shopkeepers, who have to listen to all the stories while people are doing their shopping".

Loneliness and its Different Forms. "Sometimes I go days without speaking to anyone" stated Fr Nick. Loneliness kept coming up during interviews, regardless of the topic being discussed. It is however worth noting that each participant had a different narrative, with different experiences of loneliness. Some participants viewed loneliness as a normal part of life, expressing that their loneliness was " not more than [that of] other people" (Fr Julian). Others felt that they were lonely in thought, linking to the sub-theme 'the priest on a pedestal'

– laity who would conveniently distance themselves from priests would in turn cause loneliness: “there are sometimes moments where I feel that I’m misunderstood” and “it is convenient not to know us”, expressed Fr Tony. At other times, participants felt that their role itself was perpetuating their loneliness: “I do have very few friends that are really trustworthy, but most of the time I end up on the listening side just the same” (Fr Nathan).

Some did mention that they lacked closeness with others, because of their role. Fr Chris explained that because of misunderstandings around celibacy, it was difficult for him to even hug another person and that “we too need to feel that arm that embraces you”. Fr Bertu expressed that at times “in a sense there is an emptiness”. Fr Marco elaborated that “loneliness is dangerous... Because I think loneliness can then lead to certain relationships. If there’s no community, you’re going to try to fill that emptiness elsewhere”.

Fr Marco explained how he copes with loneliness, in the absence of certain support systems:

> To tell you the truth, I fill it [the gap] with a lot of work… throughout the day I don’t notice it, but yes in the evening I feel a certain emptiness… I fill it with work though! Before I used to fill it with food for example… come on, eat to turn off the loneliness! (Fr Marco)

Further to this, Fr Isaac explained that loneliness is “not something that priests are immune to”, even in religious communities. Since some priests’ ministry involves constant travel, when they are uprooted “wherever I go, I always have to start over… I can’t build anything with anyone. I always have to start from the beginning” (Fr Nick). However, in the seminary many expressed that they were trained to be alone, and others trained themselves to: “there are moments of terrible loneliness, and yes it’s training yourself to – how do you face loneliness in a positive way?” (Fr Bertu).

The Road Not Taken. Though happy with the way their lives turned out, many talked about their past loves and their lives without a partner. The value of love also came up, as well as the value that marriage could have added to their ministry. For the sake of true anonymity and to avoid speculation, the quotes in this section will not be assigned to an individual. Some stories shared were deeply personal, so it is owed to the participants to safeguard them as much as possible. Some shared that they had to make the tough decision between choosing to marry and choosing to be a priest, especially when they had already started on the road to priesthood: "when I was 22 years old and I – the professor was explaining Aristotle and I was dreaming of this girl – I realised there's something I need to go over again". There was still that sense of certainty that they had chosen the right road, with another participant recounting that,

> the most significant relationship I had for me came during a period when I was already seriously contemplating the priesthood. And still, there were those moments where I would say okay this is fantastic, you know being with someone, and this is great, and this is beautiful, and this is, you know, all the positive adjectives. But I would ask myself, do I want to be doing this for the rest of my life? And I'd say no.

He continued to say that the decision was emotionally painful, but also very formative. Others had a harder time making their choice. When he had already started formation, one participant felt that "I don't have any experience, I don't know what it means to love. Am I going to become a priest and not know what it means to love? I said, I'm gonna stop". Although this was a turbulent experience for him, he too went with the road of priesthood, however there were still a few regrets about the road not taken. This idea of experiencing romantic love before entering the priesthood was expressed over and over again, as it was understood as being enriching for one's ministry. This came especially from participants who had entered the priesthood later in life and had experienced what they called a "normal" life.

There was also a sense of loss experienced by some, with the idea of a married priesthood being brought up at times: “If I could get married I would be richer than I already am” and “I believe, from my experience, that when you have a wife you can live out the priesthood in a better way”. There was also a distinction made between romantic love and sex, which are intertwined but often conflated: “we need to make the distinction between celibacy as not having physical sex. Celibacy does not mean you don’t have a hand to hold when you need it”. Others felt the loss of the love that comes with partnership: “the issue is of love, that you feel loved by somebody. It’s not sex. [emphasising] sex is a reflection of something much deeper, it’s a lack of understanding of what real love is”. Once again, loneliness came through but also a desire to have a partner to share simple things with, like the preparation of meals together and having someone to take care of them when they are sick. As one participant stated, “I think it’s a distinction between what’s good and what’s better”.

Theme 6: The Value of Celibacy: And That Has Made All the Difference

Frost (1915) ends his poem with the words “*two roads diverged in a wood and I, I took the one less travelled by. And that has made all the difference*”. Whilst admitting that celibacy comes with its challenges, participants also stressed that celibacy adds a lot of value to their ministry: “it is a gift that we need to learn to receive” (Fr Nick). Whilst explaining the theological arguments behind celibacy, there were also practical advantages. Celibacy was also described as a calling that was almost separate from the call to priesthood, in the sense that one could sometimes be called to be a priest but not entirely accept the call to be celibate. Due to this distinction, the call to celibacy needed to be fully integrated for one to live the priesthood as peacefully as possible, and without regrets related to the road not taken. Hence, the need to work on oneself constantly was also highlighted by participants.

Positive Perceptions of Celibacy. Participants explained that "celibacy is not a no, but a yes. It is a yes to everyone, saying no to one person to say yes to everyone" (Fr Tony) and that "you are freer to give yourself to others, wherever the need be and whenever the need be" (Fr Bertu). Celibacy is seen as a way to be "completely dedicated to the community" (Fr Nathan). Celibacy was constantly described as a way to practice priesthood unencumbered, as well as a way of loving not just one person deeply, but a whole flock: "we don't belong to anyone. So in the end we love everyone, rather than one particular person" (Fr Isaac). It also was not seen as an imposition by most, but as a choice: "Nobody imposed it on me. I accepted it and I knew" (Fr Bertu). The moments of joy that celibacy brought greatly outweighed the struggles that were faced. Moreover, as Fr Julian explained,

> We are not being deprived from intimacy, we are being deprived from a particular type of intimacy. I am still invited and encouraged to be emotionally intimate with people, to be intellectually intimate with people... maybe the physical, or rather the sexual side is the specific part… (Fr Julian).

There were also practical implications of celibacy which the participants mentioned. Having a family would diminish the effectiveness of their ministry, since it would affect the way they make decisions – "there's no one in the middle" (Fr Tony). Fr Bertu explained that finances would be a stumbling block, since finances are important in a family and "that can become an obstacle, because when I make my choices, apostolic choices, I [would] have to choose what brings me more money". Similarly, pastoral work abroad would become more difficult, since "in my work with street children, I would be out very often all night. If I were married, that would be very difficult" (Fr Bertu). It also presented further complications for religious priests, as it would affect how they live together. As Fr Marco exclaimed, "It's not possible for religious! Religious priests are not going to bring their wife… or their husband, here". Fr Julian explained that it was a matter of "taking something away (*niċċaħħad*) to give

myself more fully in another area". It gave participants more liberty, to be able to sublimate all the time and care that it would have taken to raise a family into their service to the community, because that "takes your whole life" (Fr Nathan).

Continuous Self-Growth. The necessity to keep working on oneself was brought to light. Participants explained that integrating celibacy into one's life is a challenge, but a manageable one: "the fact that I'm conscious of this choice takes away nothing of the struggles, but makes it worth it" (Fr Nathan). Fr Nick explains this using the story of Sysiphus:

> For me celibacy is a bit like that rock, boulder, whatever, that I have to push up the mountain, and I know that when I arrive at the top I'll have to start all over again, because it is a decision I need to make everyday. But I know that I'm doing it, and I'm doing it liberally (Fr Nick).

Working on oneself also included consulting with spiritual directors, mentors, psychologists, and also through prayer. Only through this self-improvement were priests able to fully integrate celibacy into their lives. As Fr Tony explained, "not everyone is in the same place", and sometimes there will be frustrations which push back their progress. When celibacy is not well-integrated, it causes a sense of frustration because "it's like wanting roses without thorns. I'm very conscious that I have chosen the rose but with thorns" (Fr Nathan).

Participants also explained that celibacy looks different at different ages, which is why working on oneself was so important, because "in each and every stage you have to renew your choice within those circumstances" (Fr Nathan), that "it's not a choice you make once and then it's over" (Fr Bertu) and that "in the seminary there needs to be good guidance on what celibacy is and what it means at 30, 40, and 50" (Fr Chris). Fr Julian elaborated by saying that "I have made my decision with these constraints in mind". Also, participants expressed that God was giving them a choice, and that he "writes straight on our messy lines

(*Alla jikteb dritt fuq il-linja mgħawwġa tagħna*)" (Fr Nick), that they had the option of other rites if they wished to marry, and that they would not be punished for taking another road: "God gives us liberty… otherwise as soon as I first left [the priesthood] he would have told me 'stay where you are, or I'll send a thunder strike your way' (*nibagħtlek sajjetta)*".

Theme 7: Married Priesthood: Can I Travel Both?

There were instances where participants entertained the possibility of a married priesthood, because "I'm not going to go home and find God [physically] at home" (Fr Nick), and that "I felt called to a vocation. I would have chosen to be married, to be a married priest" (Fr Chris). Sexual desires do not disappear, and "choosing it voluntarily takes nothing away from all the sexual frustrations and sexual attractions" (Fr Nathan). Fr Bertu explained that "I think it would make much more sense when there is a free choice", and Fr Chris questioned whether this was the answer to avoiding having "priests who are unhappy, haughty, not happy with themselves. That's all suppression". "I mean the apostles themselves were married" explained Fr Marco and other participants, alluding to the possibility that there might be a reality where one does not have to choose either one road or the other. "Is all the sacrifice necessary? Am I doing something wrong by loving someone?", were questions postulated by Fr Nick, who had mixed feelings about the concept, because he did express loneliness but at the same time his vocation provided peace and filled a need that "no human need could ever fill… with all the good and bad, in pain or not."

Married to the Priesthood. The participants viewed their vocation as a marriage of sorts, because "just like a man, another man would marry and give himself completely to be a good father and husband… he gives himself completely to the family, just as every priest, in celibacy one gives himself… we're not single" (Fr Nathan). Fr Tony expressed that "to me it's the same as when you're part of a couple and one of them is sick or has a chronic illness". When asked why he continues going through the trouble of taking care of her, the husband

would answer “because I love her”. Fr Tony saw it as exactly the same thing. Fr Bertu further elaborated on the commitment to one’s community, explaining that

> I have committed myself not to a single person but to a community. A community that is my religious community, a community that is the Church, but also a community that is society at large (Fr Bertu).

The participants also had different ways of signalling this commitment, with some like Fr Julian and Fr Chris wearing a ring on their ring fingers: “I thought this might be a common symbol that might be understood by others” (Fr Julian). Committing to the priesthood is a choice just like marriage, because you commit to God and “it’s that person and no other” (Fr Nathan). Like a marriage, the vocation was described as something which needs to be nurtured because,

> … like marriage, like anything else, when you decide to opt out, or not pay attention anymore – it’s like this room. If I decide not to pay attention to the water leaking in or to the humidity, then I’m going to get carried away (Fr Tony).

There was also a clear sentiment that it is a disservice to marriage if one enters into it for the sexual element. Fr Julian explained that,

> …so many couples do not have sex… okay if I had wanted to live a carefree and hedonistic life, I would have gone with Nina, Pina, and Salvina… this whole reality that I should have gotten married for all the sex I would have had… that’s not the beauty of marriage (Fr Julian).

Vocation Versus Relationship. It is worth noting that the participants emphasised that relationships are not always as desirable as they are painted to be: “[being married] it’s not the bed of roses that people present it to be. Because you’ll also have your family issues. I have enough issues in my ministry…” (Fr Julian). Fr Tony, for example, understood that even though the couple is portrayed as an impenetrable fortress at times, “I know people who

are married and lonely. Much more than a priest could ever feel". Participants also took into account that choosing not to marry is a loss for some but not for others, and at the same time they are making that choice to get to something better. This sentiment was also expressed when participants entertained the idea of choosing marriage over priesthood:

> I think that if I had chosen another road I wouldn't be so fulfilled in life, cause that was what was meant for me. I would be happy still, but I would always have looked back and said 'Maybe I should have become a priest' (Fr Chris).

Fr Nick shared similar sentiments, explaining that when observing married men who did not pursue the vocation, he noticed "that priests are more content than those that felt the vocation to priesthood but decided to get married… [there is] a sense of frustration, just as I am frustrated because I am not married, but this passes, that does not". This did not negate that priests still sometimes feel the desire to go in the other direction, but at the same time participants were at peace with their choice. Fr Nathan explains that:

> The challenge is there, and it would be stupid to ignore it or to try to present ourselves as somewhat made of stone or marble. We leave those for the altars. We're renouncing something because we're choosing something [else] (Fr Nathan).

Then again, there were priests who were in favour of at least pursuing a relationship before the priesthood: "I believe that it would be a blessing if one is able to experience love before becoming a priest. Because celibacy… you have to know what you are leaving behind" (Fr Chris).

In this chapter, the qualitative phase of the study was described. The research question, methodology, procedure and sample were outlined, as well as the measures taken to ensure trustworthiness. The results obtained through eight interviews with priests were also described, with seven main themes emerging from the data. In the following chapter, the

quantitative and qualitative findings will be integrated to present a full picture of what the data reveals about the realities faced by priests in the Maltese Islands.

Chapter 6: Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to determine whether celibacy and loneliness are intertwined, whether priests are lonely, and whether other factors are affecting the loneliness of priests. The findings indicate that celibacy is contributing to loneliness in priests, but there are also other factors to be considered. In this chapter, the quantitative and qualitative findings will be integrated and discussed in the light of the literature. Moreover, the implications of the study will be elaborated on, and recommendations for practice, policy, and future research will be presented. The limitations of the study will also be outlined. The impact of the study will be addressed through a few concluding points.

Main Findings

Are Priests Lonely?

Perhaps the most pertinent finding lies in the mismatch between the quantitative and qualitative findings on loneliness. When assessed quantitatively, the scores for loneliness were low, and none of the factors measured seemed to have a significant impact on loneliness. The open-ended question at the end of the questionnaire gave a somewhat different view. Had the study been purely quantitative, then one could have concluded that priests are not lonely. However, the open-ended question at the end of the questionnaire and the qualitative findings told a different story. Through these findings it emerged that priests are in fact experiencing loneliness, but they are possibly not talking openly about it. This aligns with previous findings on the under-reporting of loneliness in men due to them being less likely to open up (Wagner & Reifegerste, 2024). Most from a sample of 149 priests described loneliness as frustrating, numbing, painful, a burden, hell, void, unwanted, notwithstanding that some also described loneliness as a human condition that will be experienced by everyone at some point. Since priesthood can be quite isolating, where one is

placed on a pedestal and needed by everyone but known by few, it is possible that loneliness is rife, but likely not always noticeable to an observer.

Crowded Loneliness

There was also a difference between diocesan and religious priests, who have different ways of life and thus do not experience loneliness in the same ways. For example, diocesans tended to describe loneliness as isolating, whereas religious priests associated it with being forgotten. This links to their ways of life as well, since diocesan priests tend to live alone whilst being tasked with manning a parish, whilst religious priests tend to live in religious communities (Fitzgerald, 2024). Both definitions refer to previous findings stating that priests are at risk of facing crowded loneliness (Eagle et al., 2018). Even through the language used by the priests in the sample, it is noticeable that living conditions and religious order can contribute to the way loneliness is experienced. On the one hand, diocesan priests might face crowded loneliness in their parish, since they are constantly meeting people but might lack their own support structures, the latter of which was found to contribute to poor mental health in priests (Ruiz-Prada et al., 2021). On the other hand, religious priests might face crowded loneliness in a busy living community, where one does have support structures in place through their religious brothers, but might be too busy to find time to spend with them, a sentiment often shared by participants.

Thinking of loneliness as isolation indicates that one is feeling physically alone, lacking companionship, or feeling certain pressures of their service without having peers to share that with (Hamm & Eagle, 2021). Since diocesan priests often serve alone or in small teams in a parish, their loneliness might be coming from this sense of distance and separation from others, stemming from long hours and their need to be there for others constantly without reciprocation. This distance from others that priests sometimes feel has been cited in other studies (Abbott, 2000; Baumann et al., 2019; Ruiz-Prada et al., 2021). Diocesan priests also

face a lack of structural support which results in them having to serve in multiple parishes. All this can be quite isolating, and indicates a need for increased support both on a deeper and personal level, as well as more support in sharing the weight of parish responsibilities, especially since previous studies have cited that such increased responsibilities are resulting in negative psychological outcomes (Isacco et al., 2016).

On the other hand, when one perceives their loneliness as being forgotten, as was the case with many religious priests, this might relate to a type of loneliness that comes from being surrounded by like-minded others but at the same time feeling alone, a sentiment expressed by seminarians in previous studies (Naparan et al., 2020). Hence, the idea of feeling forgotten might indicate that priests in religious orders feel a stronger need to belong, and when their community does not satisfy that need it might result in this form of loneliness. It is less about being physically alone, and more about feeling significant, visible, or unique in a group which one dedicates a lot of time to. In fact, fulfilling relationships with other priests have been cited as the main source of social support for priests in previous studies (Weafer, 2014). This might indicate a need for more structured conversations about one's place in the group, and a desire to shift community life towards a more communal way of living, rather than running the risk of convents becoming akin to hotels where religious priests are too busy to engage with their communities.

The 'In-Betweeners'

Those in the vocation for less than ten years or more than 30 years reported less loneliness than those in the in-between period. The younger novice priests might not have been in the priesthood long enough, and thus might be more optimistic and still be in the initial period of idealisation and enthusiasm that follows ordination. On the other hand, those in the priesthood for over 30 years might have had their fair share of the tribulations of priesthood, whilst also experiencing all the good that comes with it, and might thus be

comfortable enough not to feel the desire to challenge what they are used to. This aligns with previous findings, namely that the older a priest becomes, the more coping strategies they can develop (Ruiz-Prada et al., 2021) and the less burnout they report (Francis, 2018). It was the in-betweeners who associated loneliness with emptiness and pain. This is notwithstanding that priests who have been ordained for less than ten years associated loneliness mostly with lovelessness, and those ordained for over 30 years associated it with a burden. Hence, although loneliness was mostly reported by in-betweeners, and they might need the most timely intervention, it does not negate that many priests outside of the in-between period also had negative associations with loneliness.

The lowest reports of commitment to celibacy was amongst the in-betweeners, which might make sense when considering that those practicing priesthood for less than 10 years might have not been in the vocation long enough to start feeling the effects of celibacy – an assumption made in previous studies (Baumann et al., 2017) – whereas those over 30 years in the vocation might have gotten used to that way of life, or might find it is not worth it to change their lifestyles after 30 or more years of priesthood. In this in-between phase, it could be that priests might be at a point where they become weary and discouraged, and where they experience the most acedia. This reflects previous findings on attitudes towards celibacy, as older priests were found to have adapted to the tribulations of celibate life, whilst younger priests were assumed to have more enthusiasm than their older counterparts (Baumann et al., 2017). This is also highly dependent on whether celibacy was integrated well or poorly during formation and over the course of priests' lives, as is stated in previous research (Stanosz, 2004). Loneliness was less felt when one had a positive attitude towards celibacy, and when they were committed to it. Moreover, those forming part of a movement like Neo-Cathecumenical and Charismatic priests reported a stronger commitment to celibacy,

possibly because they have more outlets to form positive relationships in a community setting which could buffer against loneliness.

"Rġulija"

The notion of "*rġulija*" and different conceptualisations of manhood also came across through participants' narratives, as certain stereotypes also resulted in feelings of isolation at times. It was found that the belief of certain negative or old-fashioned stereotypes about men increased with age, however a nuanced result was that this was not the case for priests aged between 18-29, who held the highest scores for the belief of such stereotypes. Since none of the priests who volunteered to be interviewed were of these ages, there was not the availability of in-depth results. Interestingly, through the multiple correspondence analysis it was revealed that those aged between 18-29 described loneliness as "a part of the human condition", indicating towards the stoicism and bravado that can sometimes be associated with men of that age (Ratcliffe et al., 2023). The priests interviewed gave different descriptions of '*rġulija*' [manhood] , since their conceptualisations of manhood were healthy and aligned with Christ's masculinity, in line with other authors' descriptions of biblical masculinity (e.g., Boisvert, 2019; Rogers, 2019). At the same time, it was also expressed that in their earlier years some participants felt this need to prove their masculinity to others, since the priesthood was assumed to diminish it, in line with previous research where men experience tension when living a life which was not stereotypically masculine (Ravenhiss & de Visser, 2019; Schüßler, 2024). Hence, feelings of isolation might have stemmed from this mismatch between the way priests display their masculinity and the way other people expected them to act. However, as opposed to previous research, participants did not express embarrassment or pressure to engage in sexual activity to prove their manhood (Boislard et al., 2016; Duckworth & Trautner, 2019). Although the participants did not express any embarrassment about being celibate, which contradicts previous research, this is to be

expected since this is a way of life that they have chosen. Apart from these stereotypes, results indicate that loneliness stemmed from family expectations, poor adjustment to the priesthood, inadequate training, emotional exhaustion, the priest-laity divide, and lack of structured support. This relates to previous findings on burnout asserting that the excessive demands of priests' practice and insufficient support systems increase the risk of priests having poor mental health (Ruiz-Prada et al., 2021). However, the findings are unique in that previous findings were not specifically related to loneliness in priests.

The Priest's Systems

Since a priest does not live in a vacuum, one must understand the ecological systems which shape their context. These five systems can amplify certain issues, including loneliness (Choi, 2025). Although some systems were highlighted in the main findings, there are further details which can be explained through the five ecological systems which shape one's functioning (Bronfenbrenner, 1994).

The Microsystem

Although celibacy can contribute to loneliness as it is removing a type of intimacy and relationship from the priest's microsystem, having a strong microsystem did act as a buffer to loneliness, aligning with the literature (Ruiz-Prada et al., 2021; Weafer, 2014). In fact, priests who had good relationships within their community, with their lay friends, and with other priests or the rest of their congregation expressed less loneliness than those who did not have these systems in place. This was uniquely so for the parish priest, who forms a second family within the parish. However, this is not the reality for all diocesan priests, who despite minding a parish and sometimes two parishes might still not have close ties with the community. With the increase in individualism across the Maltese islands, a lack of community structures and dwindling community involvement could be causing a decrease in support structures for the diocesan priest, who forms his microsystem outside of the home.

Moreover, because priests can often be placed on a pedestal and since people do not often take the time to know a priest, relationships are often one-sided, a sentiment often expressed by the participants. Parishioners see priests as their spiritual leaders and someone to go to for help and guidance, and this might be resulting in a lack of reciprocity of emotional intimacy. If the priest is constantly listening and giving, and at the same time living without an intimate partner or a community of caring persons, a strong microsystem is needed to keep his cup filled.

The Mesosystem and Exosystem

Structures within the mesosystem did not emerge clearly from the findings, as there were fragmented connections between priests' different microsystems. However, the interactions between some of the priests' families and their vocation did have some negative effects, with some feeling like they were pushed into an arranged marriage with the priesthood. This did cause feelings of loneliness, but also feelings of resentment towards the vocation and towards the family. The exosystem on the other hand caused tensions, as the laws dictated by the Vatican Council and expectations from the diocese did not always sit well with participants. Since priests were often left holding two conflicting beliefs, some did seem to be experiencing cognitive dissonance (Hamel, 2014). Reference again can be made to the internalisation of vocational attitudes – the degree to which an individual has internal consistency between the beliefs proposed by the Church and his own value system (Rulla, 1971). When celibacy is not accepted or integrated, the resulting cognitive dissonance might be isolating, as it is possible that the priest would retreat from discussing these beliefs with his peers. This is also reflected in the increasing workloads and expectations being placed on priests, which coupled with a lack of emotional support might be affecting how lonely priests feel. Local and foreign mediascapes are part of priests' exosystem as well, and thus any

institutional scandals such as the sexual abuse of minors and public criticism might also be amplifying all these negative effects.

The Macrosystem and Chronosystem

Possibly one of the most harmful systems for priests is their macrosystem. Some norms embedded in Maltese and Gozitan culture, as well as stereotypes, might be having adverse effects on priests. The tendency for people to gossip was prominent when discussing Gozo, but the secularisation of the Maltese Islands could also be affecting how priests live their vocation. Moreover, both priesthood and celibacy are becoming increasingly countercultural. This could be reflected in a more individualistic, sexualised, secularised, and alienating culture taking over the Maltese Islands. Furthermore, attitudes towards different sexualities are becoming more positive, contrasting with the Church's traditional moral framework. This broader cultural framework might be a reason why priests are feeling so isolated. Their lifestyle is not fully congruent with the way of life of the community that they are trying to connect with and minister to. This is extended through the chronosystem, since priests are living in a time where what they learn in formation is not in line with generational changes (Armbruster, 2022). Coupled with a lack in communal life which this generation of priests is likely facing, as well as a lower social status than they once shared, these factors in their chronosystem might be resulting in more isolation as they are not as revered and socially accepted as they might have been in the past, despite being placed on a pedestal that distances them emotionally from the laity.

Celibacy and Loneliness

The findings suggest that celibacy and loneliness could be interrelated. Additionally, loneliness is could be further exacerbated when celibacy is not integrated well, or when one feels that they have been forced into celibacy. This mirrors previous findings, which found that priests who do not integrate celibacy well may become lonely, alienated, and bitter

(Abbott, 2000; Baumann et al. 2017; McGavin, 2011). There was a sense of sexual frustration experienced by some, and some also clearly stated that celibacy was a burden for them, in line with previous findings in the Maltese context (Galea, 2011). It is important to acknowledge that not all priests are facing the same reality. Although loneliness did emerge as a pertinent issue in the qualitative results, the quantitative results showed the opposite. Conversely, although priests might be happy, as cited in previous research (Francis & Crea, 2018), it does not necessarily negate that they might also be lonely. On the other hand it may be argued that even married men might experience loneliness. The question remains however whether celibate priests experience loneliness more often and to a higher degree.

Coping. Celibacy was not portrayed by participants as a useless custom, but rather a way to minister effectively. Participants highlighted how being celibate allowed them to be more committed and present within their communities, whilst also allowing them to love a wider range of people. This aligns with previous research stating that celibacy is a helpful practice, and that it enables the full dedication to one's servients (Baumann et al., 2017; Besançon, 2009; Issaco et al., 2015; Manuel & Manuel, 2012). Moreover, research shows that social support is an important protective factor (Eagle et al., 2018; Ruiz-Prada et al., 2021). This is reflected in the results, as those who had a strong support network of friends and parishioners were not as distraught by the issue of loneliness. Nonethless, those who found a sense of purpose and who felt that their life had meaning did not experience loneliness less, as is noted in previous research (Crea & Francis, 2022). However, there was a sense of comfort in their choice, expressed either through the way their calling was described, or through their acceptance of the absurdity of their choices. It was understood that loneliness is a normal part of life, and that even though it might be harder for priests to overcome it due to the nature of their work, it was rarely viewed as an impossible feat.

What Are The Factors Exacerbating Loneliness in Priests?

Previous research has highlighted how levels of burnout and depression amongst priests are increasing (de Lima Dias, 2019). Although not specifically highlighted in the results of this study, the participants' narratives did allude to this reality being faced by Maltese priests. In religious contexts, priests seemed on the verge of burnout whilst narrating their experiences, since they live with people who they do not have the time to know, and since their workloads do not allow for them to help one another. Diocesan priests also alluded to being on the brink of burnout, with parish life becoming increasingly demanding when combined with all the administrative responsibilities of their role and the need to handle everything on their own at home. This aligns with previous research, where insufficient support systems and the excessive demands of priests' work were seen as a risk factor to poor mental health (Ruiz-Prada et al., 2021). There are also personality factors, with introversion being linked to emotional exhaustion (Crea et al., 2024). This is also in line with the results of the study, since participants acknowledged that the priest's personality is an indicator of whether he will flourish in the priesthood and be able to form meaningful connections.

Protective Factors. Research also shows that priests seem to be flourishing more than the general population (Vaidyanathan, 2024). In this study although this seemed to be the case through the quantitative results, since loneliness scores were low across the board, the qualitative results were mixed. On the whole participants expressed having a very rich life and a very satisfactory one, however there were others who were not flourishing as much. Having a strong relationship to God has also been reported as a protective factor (Issaco et al., 2015). The results of the current study do line up with this finding, as although not explicitly mentioned, participants did explain that prayer and feeling guided and loved by God were helpful in moments of loneliness. These were also buffers to acedia, in line with previous research (Sultana, 2018).

Implications

Why Could Vocations be Decreasing?

The findings related to celibacy counteract one another. Whilst qualitative findings do indicate that celibacy could be decreasing the desire to join the priesthood, it is the in-betweeners who have the lowest commitment to celibacy, not those who have recently joined or who are still in the process of becoming. This can be explained by the reality that it was ordained priests who were sharing their narratives, not prospective priests or ex-priests. Had prospective priests been interviewed, their narratives might have aligned with the finding that those in the priesthood for less than ten years have the highest commitment to celibacy, possibly because they have not been in the formation long enough to experience the fatigue that ordained priests were expressing. Most interviewees were in fact in-betweeners themselves. Celibacy might be a deterrent to prospective priests as a result of an increasingly individualistic society which does not necessarily push for the sacrifice of one's own joy for the good of others. Moreover, society has also become more sexualised (Richards & Barker, 2016), and this importance given to sex might be affecting the desire to join the priesthood. Coupled with the increased desire for young people to make money, the priesthood does not remain entirely appealing.

However, priests are also less visible than they were before. Participants in their 30s and 40s explained how the priest was a notable character in their lives, someone to look up to. Now, when a priest is visible it is often in a negative light, displaying traits that might not be very appealing to a prospective seminarian (e.g., Ballano, 2023; Morrison & Fitzpatrick, 2024). There are also many more career options nowadays, ones that do not have the strict rules which young people have become aversive to and which still hold status within society. It is also possible that because more men are coming out, and it is more acceptable to do so, there might be less men being forced into the priesthood because they do nothave a better alternative.

Apart from these possibilities, it was revealed through the results that men might not wish to lose the chance to have families, with a wife or husband and their own children. The desire for a married priesthood was expressed, and it was posited as a way to increase vocations. It seems that, to use Frost's (1915) metaphor of the two roads diverging in a yellow wood, the possibility of travelling both should be considered, that one should not be forced to be take both roads, but it might be worthwhile to give them the choice of whether to travel the first, the second, or to merge both.

Celibacy is not the only deterrent to becoming a priest, however. It was expressed that seminary formation needs a reform, in the way sexuality is spoken about and in the way seminarians are trained to be alone. Education must always come from a point of preparing students to face challenges in both their personal lives and their ministry. Rather, the reality is a simple "sex talk", given by someone who has possibly not experienced it, as a means of putting a band aid on a much larger wound, something which has also been found in previous studies (Armbruster, 2022). This reflects the theological discourse over the past decade, where theologians are discouraging the denial and stifling of sexuality and opting to move towards a more integrated approach to it during formation (Njinu, 2016). The stereotype of the model priest might be an issue that some men do not want to have to face, and thus it is necessary to find ways to change the way priests are portrayed to the laity.

Priests are not the only people facing loneliness and isolation – this is a societal failing that needs to be addressed. However, the loneliness that current priests are expressing might be holding others back from considering the vocation. Although loneliness, celibacy, and the desire to marry have been reported to be some of the most common reasons for leaving Catholic priesthood (Hamm & Eagle, 2021; Pietkiewicz, 2016; Schoenherr & Vilariño, 2013), context is important, and one cannot attribute the decline in vocations to just one contributing factor.

Recommendations for Policy, Practice, and Future Research

Policy and Practice

Although the reform of Vatican II might be an unreachable goal for now, the findings indicate a dire need for reform in the Maltese and Gozitan dioceses. Firstly, seminary teachings on sexuality should focus on how to live a celibate life at different ages, as this changes over one's lifespan. Secondly, participants expressed that it is important to show things as they are, not to paint the life of the priest as a holy life which does not have any thorns. This might result in less frustration in priests, as prospective seminarians would have a very clear picture of what they might need to face once they have made the commitment. Thirdly, seminarians need to be encouraged to go out of the four walls of the seminary more than they currently do, so that they can make mistakes and have real life experiences before they fully commit to the priesthood. This would also have secondary positive effects – being allowed the chance to meet other people more often might allow for seminarians to form long-lasting relationships which will serve them throughout their priesthood. Similarly, lay pastoral assistants should become standard in parishes, allowing not only for the alleviation of the workload which parish priests must face but also allow for stronger relationships to be formed between priests and lay people. Lay administrators could also be very important, particularly opening up such roles to pensioners who worked in professions such as management or accounting and are now willing to contribute some time to their parish. Delaying the age of ordination might also result in priests with better social networks and more integrated celibacy, since they would have had time to mull over their calling and to decide whether choosing the vocation is right for them.

Ongoing formation is already given, however certain practices should not remain optional. It might be worthwhile to integrate more psychology classes, or courses on mental health, so as to better prepare priests to cope with their ministry. This is not a criticism of current attempts. The recent seminar titled *Vocational Discernment: The Psychological*

Approach organised by the Seminary Vocations Centre held in late October 2025 is to be commended. Here a clinical psychologist who is also a priest delivered a seminar on the psychological dynamics of discernment, an initiative which should be commended and repeated. However, it might be worth holding such seminars more frequently to target more people, and it might also be interesting to introduce more lay psychologists from various backgrounds in the mix, to focus more strongly on certain facets of mental health and coping.

This could also be coupled with ongoing psychological supervision, just as is given to mental health professionals. Priests should also be encouraged to speak to mental health professionals when they are facing loneliness, so that it can be nipped in the bud and does not become an ongoing problem. A possibility would also be to hold psychological screenings at regular intervals, so that problems including but not limited to loneliness can be flagged as early as possible. Counselling in particular could be useful for those priests who are not as pre-disposed to forming social ties, so as to help them develop the necessary skills. This does not disparage or undermine the utility of good spiritual direction, but is rather a suggestion for a more multi-disciplinary approach. This is especially so for the in-betweeners, priests who have been in the priesthood for between ten to 30 years, who according to the results of the study are the most prone to be facing loneliness and low commitment to celibacy. Mental health support in general should be normalised, especially in a profession that requires the individual to be so close to so many people.

From this research one can also highlight how not to approach the lonely priest, and how to instead form human relationships with them. Suggestions include:

- To avoid putting priests on a pedestal, as they are just as human as anyone else;
- To attempt to make a relationship with a priest less one-sided by being on the listening side every once in a while;

- To keep in mind, especially when interacting with young priests, that it might be difficult for them to live up to the expectations we have built in our heads. Young priests are young *men* too.
- To avoid addressing them as 'Father' in informal interactions, and to instead use their name, as this humanises them. This is the same as not addressing your colleagues or friends as 'Miss' or 'Dr' in normal conversation;
- To not judge priests based on existing stereotypes – not all priests are paedophiles or sex offenders, not all priests are rigid, timid, or delicate;
- To not make religion the only personality trait of the priests in our lives – they are not always in a rush to talk about God, and not every gift they are given needs to be related to spirituality;
- To not judge priests who do not wear their collar – when one is not at work, they do not wear their uniform;
- To allow priests to make mistakes – they forgive people for a living, most small errs and grievances deserve that same treatment.

Future Research

Although this study addressed a gap in Maltese research, it was only a starting point. More detailed research studies pertaining to the personality traits of priests in relation to loneliness should be carried out. Moreover, the dioceses could conduct a comprehensive survey to assess the wellbeing of their clergy, in order to uncover the issues which must then be remediated in practice. This could consequently affect how pastoral care and matters of retention are addressed. It would also be worthwhile to compare attitudes towards celibacy held by prospective priests, as well as ex-priests. Further to this, future research could focus on priests who left the priesthood, as this might provide insight that could further help to support ordained priests. This research should not stop at priests, but should also be extended

to female religious and consecrated laypeople, as there might be nuances between genders which could provide some interesting insights. Married ex-priests could also be interviewed, to determine whether upon experiencing both realities they have developed a preferred one, and why.

It is not just priests who are facing the loneliness epidemic, and thus it is essential that constant statistics on loneliness in the Maltese and Gozitan population are generated. These already exist (e.g., Briguglio et al., 2024; Clark et al., 2019; Clark et al., 2022; Azzopardi et al., 2025), however comparisons between priests and laity have not as yet been carried out. Doing so could help determine whether it is a problem that is more prominent amongst clergy members or whether it is being faced across the board. Since age did not come out as a distinguishing factor in this study, it might be worthwhile examining the relationship between loneliness and age in clergy members in a more in-depth manner. This could be done through a one-time study, or through a longitudinal study that follows priests over time to gain their understanding of how celibacy evolves with their age. Future research could also explore the relationship between loneliness and gender in the clergy. Sexuality is also understudied, and thus a more in-depth study examining sexuality and sexual orientation in clergy might also be of interest.

Future research could also move to higher orders within the Church structure, including gaining perspectives from provincials and bishops about celibacy and loneliness, or about sexuality. Since MUSEUM members are also called to be celibate, this study could be replicated with that population to compare results. Another interesting study would be one looking into the experiences of consecrated lay people, who choose to be celibate in order to better serve their communities. It might also be useful to study seminarians, to gauge what seminary practices they believe could be improved. Given the nuances of Maltese and Gozitan parishes, future research could also focus on a cross-locality or cross-regional study

on community dynamics and parish life, to determine which parishes might require additional support in order to diminish the effects of loneliness and burnout. The lay person's perspective of celibacy might also be worth studying, since some perceptions and attitudes held might be further isolating priests currently.

To that effect, the long-term effect of celibacy on mental health could also be explored in future studies, both qualitatively and quantitatively. The coping mechanisms employed by priests to manage sexual frustrations and the need for intimacy could also be explored further. With cultural changes sweeping across the Maltese islands, future research could focus on the experiences of priests in more sexually liberal societies, to act as a blueprint for pastoral practice in a society which is more sexualised. This might also inform formation practices, as it might allow for a means to teach priests how to integrate their celibacy in a society where sex is being given more importance. The experiences of gay priests and nuns might also be interesting to examine within a celibate framework, since although celibacy is still a requirement, the way it is lived might differ from that of heterosexual priests or nuns. The possible models of optional celibacy in other rites could also be explored, and a comparative study might reveal some insights which Roman Catholic priests could benefit from.

Limitations

No research endeavour is without its limitations. Firstly, the span of time over which the data was collected might have limited the validity and trustworthiness of the findings, since many months spanned before all the data was collected and thus the effect of changing stories in the media might have impacted certain priests' willingness to participate as well as the answers obtained. Secondly, the quantitative findings might have been affected by social desirability bias, since participants might have responded to questions in ways that were desirable rather than entirely true. The quantitative sample was also imbalanced, with

diocesan participants greatly outnumbering religious ones, as well as priests residing in Malta outnumbering those residing in Gozo, although this might still reflect the relative population sizes. The quantitative sample was also quite small, limiting the generalisability and breadth of the results.

Thirdly, the qualitative findings might have been affected by the Hawthorne effect, where participants might have not been entirely truthful or behaved differently than they normally would because they were being observed. Participants might have chosen their words carefully for this reason, since they might have assumed that the results of the study might be sensationalised or used to harm their practice. Being interviewed by a young lay woman might also have affected the results of the study, since participants might not have felt comfortable sharing certain details. Additionally, participants who came forward to be interviewed might not be representing the majority, since those willing to discuss the subject might be a particular type of priest, perhaps more open, with stronger views, or with a particular desire for change. Again, the data needs to be taken in context, and thus it being collected at a time where celibacy was being highly debated can be considered a limitation.

Concluding note

Through this study, celibacy and loneliness in the priesthood were explored and explained through the nuances of the Maltese context. What was revealed is that loneliness in priests exists, but that celibacy is not the only factor contributing to its existence. The intention was not to use celibacy as a scapegoat for loneliness in priests, but to determine whether this was a dominant factor in priest's loneliness; and it was. We must also acknowledge that not all priests are facing the same reality, and that the findings of this study are only a snapshot of the lives of those questioned, within which many different realities existed. This study highlights the possible avenues that need to be addressed in order to decrease loneliness in the priesthood, as well as certain structural reforms which could help,

whilst also making known the realities that priests face on a daily basis, good and bad. The results should be considered a starting point for a wider conversation to be held, one that centres not only celibacy but also the wider systems which are affecting the mental health of priests.

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Appendices

Appendix A: FREC Approval of Phases 1 and 2

L-Università ta' Malta

Andrea Catania <andrea.catania.19@um.edu.mt>

Research Ethics Application - Approved by FREC, no UREC decision needed
1 message

SWB FREC <research-ethics.fsw@um.edu.mt> 28 February 2024 at 12:50
To: Andrea Catania <andrea.catania.19@um.edu.mt>
Cc: Mary Anne Lauri <mary-anne.lauri@um.edu.mt>, Gottfried Catania <gottfried.catania@um.edu.mt>

REDP Application ID: SWB-2024-00002

Dear Andrea Catania,

Since your supervisor has confirmed that the changes have been carried out AND/OR the gatekeepers' permissions have been obtained and uploaded (as per email below), your ethics application regarding your research titled *Sex and the clergy: An insider perspective on celibacy* has been **approved**.

Faculty Research Ethics Committees are authorised to review and approve research ethics applications on behalf of the University of Malta, except in the case of sensitive personal data. In this regard, your ethics proposal **does not need to be sent to UREC-DP**. Hence, **you may now start your research**.

Disclaimer: *The research team should note that only the English versions of the documents submitted have been reviewed by FREC. It is the duty of the research team to ensure that all documents in Maltese (or any other language) are faithful translations of the English version.*

Regards,

L-Università ta' Malta

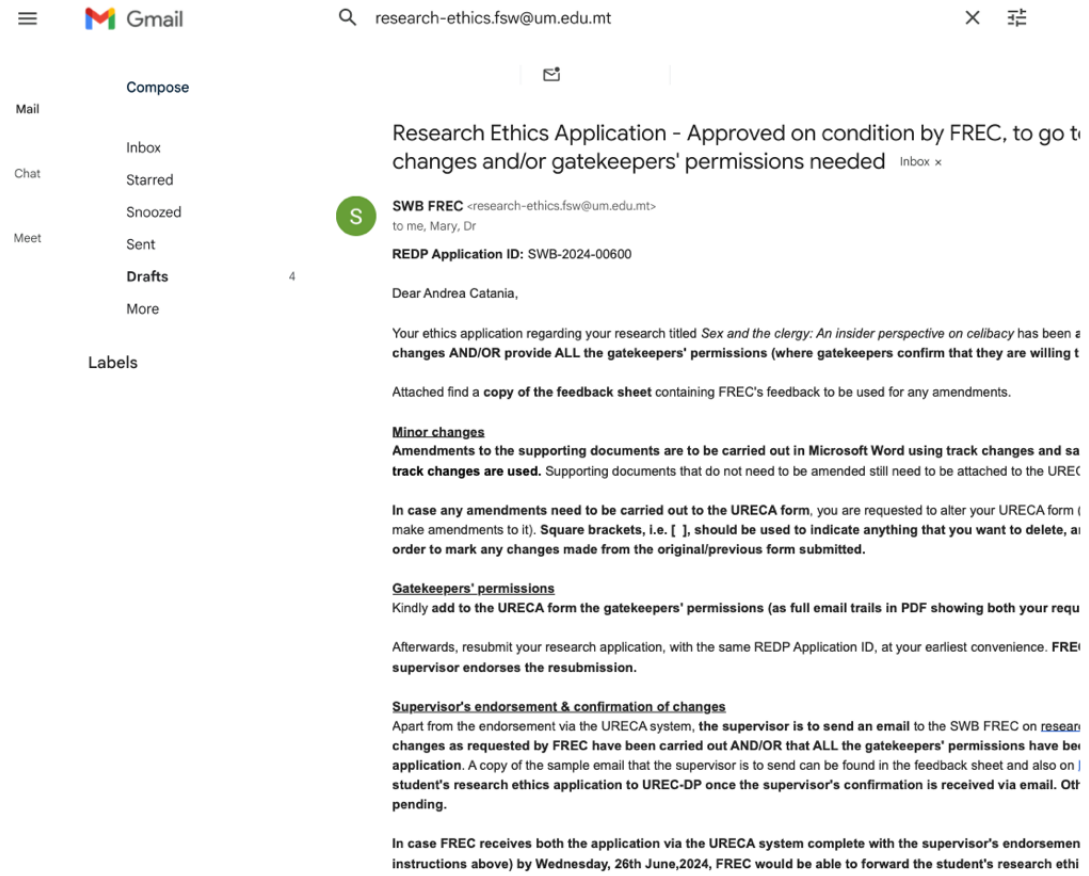
Faculty Research Ethics Committee

Faculty for Social Wellbeing
Room 113, Humanities A Building
+356 2340 2237 / 3220

Website: www.um.edu.mt/socialwellbeing/students/researchethics

On Tue, 27 Feb 2024 at 19:12, Mary Anne Lauri <mary-anne.lauri@um.edu.mt> wrote:

> **ALL the changes as requested by FREC have been carried out AND/OR that ALL the gatekeepers' permissions have been obtained and uploaded to the URECA application**.
>
> Mary Anne Lauri
>
> L-Università ta' Malta
>
> **Prof. Mary Anne Lauri**
> B.A. (Hons)(Melit.),M.Sc.(Lond.),Ph.D.(Lond.),C.Psychol.
>
> Department of Psychology, Faculty for Social Wellbeing
> Room 230, Old Humanities Building (OH)
> +356 2340 2350



Gmail research-ethics.fsw@um.edu.mt

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Research Ethics Application - Approved on condition by FREC, to go t
changes and/or gatekeepers' permissions needed Inbox ×

S **SWB FREC** <research-ethics.fsw@um.edu.mt>
to me, Mary, Dr

REDP Application ID: SWB-2024-00600

Dear Andrea Catania,

Your ethics application regarding your research titled *Sex and the clergy: An insider perspective on celibacy* has been a
changes AND/OR provide ALL the gatekeepers' permissions (where gatekeepers confirm that they are willing t

Attached find a **copy of the feedback sheet** containing FREC's feedback to be used for any amendments.

Minor changes
Amendments to the supporting documents are to be carried out in Microsoft Word using track changes and sa
track changes are used. Supporting documents that do not need to be amended still need to be attached to the UREC

In case any amendments need to be carried out to the URECA form, you are requested to alter your URECA form (
make amendments to it). **Square brackets, i.e. [ ], should be used to indicate anything that you want to delete, a**
order to mark any changes made from the original/previous form submitted.

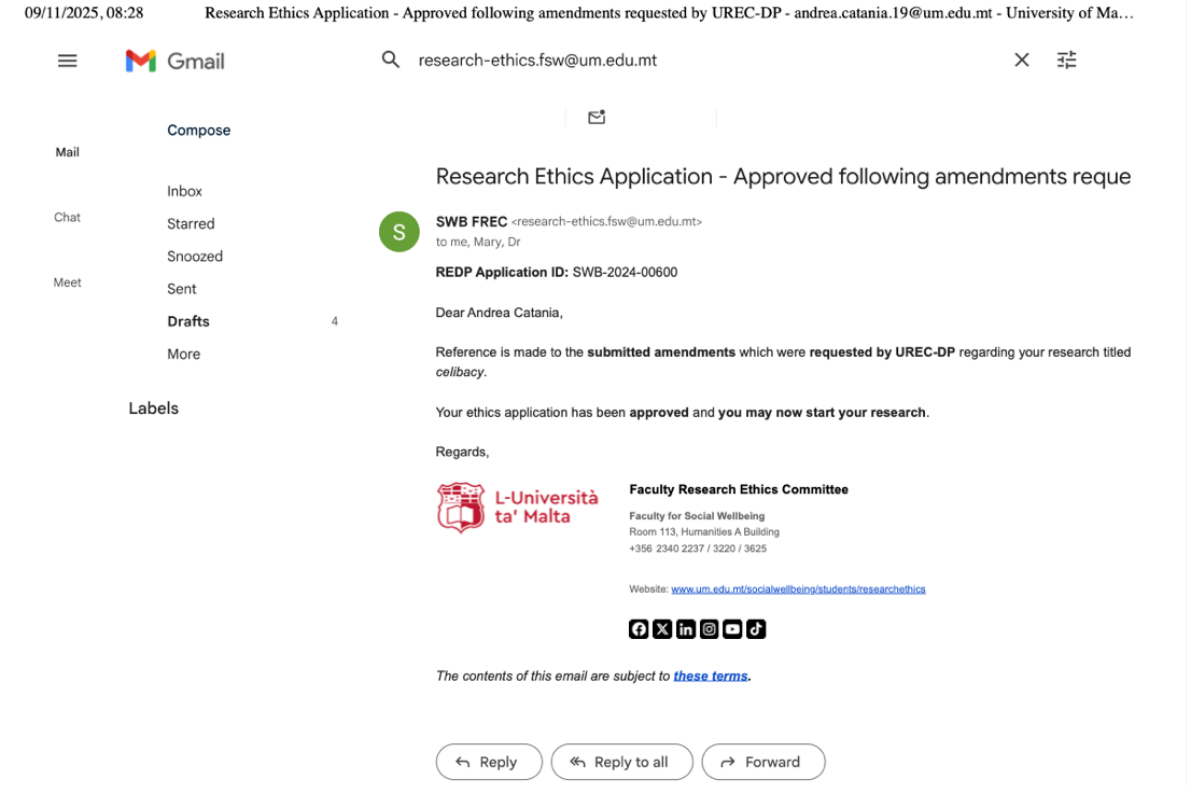
Gatekeepers' permissions
Kindly **add to the URECA form the gatekeepers' permissions (as full email trails in PDF showing both your requ**

Afterwards, resubmit your research application, with the same REDP Application ID, at your earliest convenience. **FRE**
supervisor endorses the resubmission.

Supervisor's endorsement & confirmation of changes
Apart from the endorsement via the URECA system, **the supervisor is to send an email** to the SWB FREC on resear
changes as requested by FREC have been carried out AND/OR that ALL the gatekeepers' permissions have be
application. A copy of the sample email that the supervisor is to send can be found in the feedback sheet and also on
student's research ethics application to UREC-DP once the supervisor's confirmation is received via email. Oth
pending.

In case FREC receives both the application via the URECA system complete with the supervisor's endorsemen
instructions above) by Wednesday, 26th June,2024, FREC would be able to forward the student's research ethi

Appendix B: UREC Approval of Phase 2



09/11/2025, 08:28 Research Ethics Application - Approved following amendments requested by UREC-DP - andrea.catania.19@um.edu.mt - University of Ma…

Gmail research-ethics.fsw@um.edu.mt

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Research Ethics Application - Approved following amendments reque

SWB FREC <research-ethics.fsw@um.edu.mt>
to me, Mary, Dr

REDP Application ID: SWB-2024-00600

Dear Andrea Catania,

Reference is made to the **submitted amendments** which were **requested by UREC-DP** regarding your research titled *celibacy*.

Your ethics application has been **approved** and **you may now start your research**.

Regards,

L-Università ta' Malta

Faculty Research Ethics Committee

Faculty for Social Wellbeing
Room 113, Humanities A Building
+356 2340 2237 / 3220 / 3625

Website: www.um.edu.mt/socialwellbeing/students/researchethics

The contents of this email are subject to these terms.

Reply Reply to all Forward

Appendix C: Data Management Plan

Sex and the Clergy: An Insider Perspective on Celibacy

Data Management Plan

24/08/2024

The nature of the data that will be collected

Data collection

The aim of this phase of the research is to understand experiences of celibacy in priests,particularly Catholic Diocesan and Religious Priests , with a special emphasis being made on manhood beliefs.

Data will be collected from Maltese or Gozitan individuals who are Catholic Diocesan or Religious Priests. Participants will be invited to participate in an interview lasting approximately an hour in a place and at a time that is convenient for them. Interviews will be held in either English or Maltese, depending on what is most convenient for the participant. Interviews will be semi-structured and will allow participants to share their thoughts on and experiences of celibacy throughout their priesthood. Due to the nature of the questions being asked, interviews will be held face-to-face.

The nature of collected data

The expected size of the dataset will be 4 to 6 1-hour interviews which will later be transcribed.

The tools and software required to view the data will be oTranscribe, an application which allows the transcriber to slow recordings down as necessary and transcribe at their own pace. The software does not save the recordings to the cloud, so recordings will not be compromised. Transcripts are never saved on the software, and the only data which the software collects is that of the person transcribing, i.e. name, surname, and email address. Actual data belonging to participants is not recorded, and the content is stored on the user's computer as it is exported to a document. Local driver storage ensures that transcripts cannot be accessed through any source except the computer on which they were transcribed. oTranscribe as a software is GDPR compliant.

The data collected will be pseudonymised. Participants will be given a pseudonym, and any specifically identifiable information mentioned during the interview will be omitted during the transcription process. Such information includes names, parishes in which the participants practice, and autobiographical data which would make them identifiable. The pseudonyms that link participants' data to their identity will be stored securely and separately from the

data, in an encrypted file on an encrypted external hard disk or flash drive, and only the researcher and supervisor will have access to this information.

There will be no secondary sources of datasets. All data will be collected by the researcher.

The way in which the data will be managed

Interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed. The researcher will be responsible for managing the data, with the help of the research supervisor.

Storage and backup during research process

During the project lifetime, the data will be stored on an encrypted external hard disk or flash drive. Any printed material will be stored in a locked drawer and shredded once no longer needed. The only people with access to the data will be the researcher (Andrea Catania) and supervisor (Mary Anne Lauri). If necessary, data access will also be given to the examiners of the study. Any data will be backed up on a password-protected hard drive which will be stored in a locked drawer. All personal data, including interview recordings, will be stored offline in an encrypted, external device which will be stored in a locked drawer. The data will be erased by the end of June 2026, once the study is completed and published or assessed.

Legal and ethical requirements

The research will involve human subjects and personal data will be collected, namely data related to one's religion and sex life.

Informed consent will be obtained from all participants prior to data collection. A consent form and information letter outlining all that is expected of the participants will be given, with particular reference being made to the type of questions that will be asked during the interview. Participants may opt out of the research at any time, and may choose not to answer any questions which they are not comfortable answering. Consent forms will also be stored in a locked drawer and destroyed by the end of June 2026, once the study is completed and published or assessed.

Participants have rights under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and national legislation to access, rectify, or request the erasure of their data. Participation is voluntary, and participants can withdraw at any time without providing reasons and without any negative repercussions. Participants will be informed that there are no direct benefits for their participation.

Completion of the project

After the end of the research project, data will be destroyed by the end of June 2026.

Data sharing

Although data will be shared through the codes and themes generated following transcription of the interviews, the actual recordings and transcripts will not be publicly available. Pseudonyms will be used when quoting participants, and no form of identifiable data will be shared at any point. Participants will be informed that quotes from their interviews may be reproduced, and they have the right to ask for any quotes to be removed from the final report. The raw data, meaning the interview recordings and transcripts, will not be available for sharing. Commercial use of the data will not be allowed. This would compromise participants' privacy and breach confidentiality.

This approach will safeguard participants by ensuring that the data is collected, processed, and stored in a secure manner while respecting their rights and privacy.

Appendix D: Information Letter and Consent Form – Online Questionnaire

04/02/2024

Information letter

My name is Andrea Catania and I am a student at the University of Malta, presently reading for a Master of Science in Psychological Studies. I am conducting a research study for my dissertation titled *Sex and the clergy: An insider perspective on celibacy*. This is being supervised by Professor Mary Anne Lauri. This letter is an invitation to participate in this study. Below you will find information about the study and about what your involvement would entail, should you decide to take part.

The aim of my study to investigate whether there is a relationship between celibacy, manhood beliefs and loneliness in the Maltese context. Your participation in this study would help contribute to a better understanding of attitudes towards celibacy, manhood beliefs and loneliness in priests within the Maltese context. Any data collected from this research will be used solely for research purposes.

As a participant, you need to be:

1. A priest or member of the clergy
2. Over 18 years of age
3. Male
4. A Maltese or Gozitan resident

Should you choose to participate, you will be asked to answer an anonymous questionnaire that should take approximately 5minutes.
The questionnaire data collected will be anonymised and treated confidentially. The only persons having access to the data will be myself and my supervisor.
Participation in this study is entirely voluntary; in other words, you are free to accept or refuse to participate, without needing to give a reason.
If you choose to participate, please note that there are no direct benefits to you. Your participation does not entail any known or anticipated risks.
All data collected will be stored in an anonymised form and erased within a year of the publication of the study. Since I am collecting data anonymously, the questionnaire will not collect your IP addresses, which may constitute personal data. Thus, once you submit the questionnaire you cannot withdraw.

Kindly note that all material will be in English, so you will need to understand and read English in order to complete the questionnaire.
A copy of this information sheet is being provided for you to keep and for future reference.
Thank you for your time and consideration. Should you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me by e-mail on andrea.catania.19@um.edu.mt; you can also contact my supervisor over the phone: +356 23402350 or via email: mary-anne.lauri@um.edu.mt.
Should processing this questionnaire cause you any distress, please find a list of support services in this link: https://paths.care/support-services/ for your perusal

Sincerely,

Andrea Catania Prof Mary Anne Lauri

andrea.catania.19@um.edu.mt

mary-anne.lauri@um.edu.mt
+356 23402350

QUESTIONNAIRE CONSENT – ANONYMOUS DATA COLLECTION

My name is Andrea Catania and I am currently reading for a Master of Science in Psychological Studies at the **University of Malta**.

I am conducting research that aims to investigate whether there is a relationship between celibacy, manhood beliefs and loneliness in the Maltese context. The survey that you have been invited to complete forms part of this study. This will take you approximately 5 minutes to complete. Any data collected from this survey will be used solely for purposes of this study. There are no direct benefits or anticipated risks in taking part. Participation is entirely voluntary, i.e., you are free to accept or refuse to participate.

At no point will you be asked to provide your name or any other personal data that may lead to you being identified. Since I am collecting data anonymously, the questionnaire will not collect your IP addresses, which may constitute personal data. Thus, once you submit the questionnaire you cannot withdraw.
Kindly note that all material will be in English, so you will need to understand and read English in order to complete the questionnaire.

If you wish to participate in this study, please click the button that says "I agree to participate".
Should you have any questions or concerns, you may contact myself or my supervisor on the details provided below.

Yours Sincerely,

Andrea Catania
andrea.catania.19@um.edu.mt

Prof. Mary Anne Lauri
mary-anne.lauri@um.edu.mt

+356 23402350

DECLARATION BY RESPONDENT: I hereby confirm that I am 18 years of age or older. I am aware that completing and submitting this anonymous questionnaire implies that I am participating voluntarily and with full informed consent on the conditions listed above.

- I agree to participate – begin survey
- I do not wish to participate – exit the survey

Appendix E: Information Letter and Consent Form in English - Interview

24/08/2024

Information letter

My name is Andrea Catania and I am a student at the University of Malta, presently reading for a Master of Science in Psychological Studies. I am conducting a research study for my dissertation titled *Sex and the clergy: An insider perspective on celibacy*. This is being supervised by Professor Mary Anne Lauri. This letter is an invitation to participate in this study. Below you will find information about the study and about what your involvement would entail, should you decide to take part.

The aim of my study to explore the experience of voluntary celibacy in relation to priests' sense of manhood. Your participation in this study would help contribute to a better understanding of celibacy within the Maltese context. Any data collected from this research will be used solely for research purposes.

<u>As a participant, you need to be:</u>

1. A Catholic Diocesan or Religious Priest
2. Residing in Malta or Gozo

Should you choose to participate, you will be invited to participate in an interview lasting approximately an hour in a place and at a time that is convenient for you. Interviews will be held in either English or Maltese, depending on what is most convenient for you. Interviews will be semi-structured and will allow you to share your thoughts on and experiences of celibacy throughout your priesthood. You will be asked questions about your decision to take the vow of celibacy, your feelings on mandatory celibacy, and the ways in which you have integrated celibacy in your life.

The data collected will be pseudonymised and your personal data within the pseudonymised transcripts treated confidentially. The only persons having access to the data will be myself and my supervisor. If necessary, the examiners will also have access to pseudonymised data. Pseudonyms will be assigned to each participant and no identifiable details will be included in the transcription and analysis of the data. All personal data, including interview recordings, will be stored offline on an encrypted, external device which will be stored in a locked drawer.

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary; in other words, you are free to accept or refuse to participate, without needing to give a reason. You are also free to withdraw from the study at any time, without needing to provide any explanation and without any negative repercussions for you. Should you choose to withdraw, any data collected from your interview will be erased as long as this is technically possible.

If you choose to participate, please note that there are no direct benefits to you. Your participation does not entail any known or anticipated risks. Whilst your participation does not entail any known or anticipated risks and all efforts will be made to ensure the questions posed do not cause any psychological distress, notwithstanding, if you feel that the semi-structured

interview has distressed you in any way, you may make use of the support services information sheet that the researcher will provide at the beginning of the interview. This document comprises a list of free services. Should you choose to use fee-paying services, you will have to pay for such services yourself.

Please also note that, as a participant, you have the right under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and national legislation to access, rectify and where applicable ask for the data concerning you to be erased. All data collected will be stored in a pseudonymised form and erased by the end of June 2026, when this study is complete and published or assessed.

A copy of this information sheet is being provided for you to keep and for future reference.

Thank you for your time and consideration. Should you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me by e-mail on andrea.catania.19@um.edu.mt; you can also contact my supervisor over the phone: +356 23402350 or via email: mary-anne.lauri@um.edu.mt.

Sincerely,

Andrea Catania
andrea.catania.19@um.edu.mt

Prof Mary Anne Lauri
mary-anne.lauri@um.edu.mt
+356 23402350

24/08/2024

Participant's Consent Form

I, the undersigned, give my consent to take part in the study conducted by Andrea Catania. This consent form specifies the terms of my participation in this research study.

1. I have been given written information about the purpose of the study; I have had the opportunity to ask questions and any questions that I had were answered fully and to my satisfaction.
2. I also understand that I am free to accept to participate, or to refuse or stop participation at any time without giving any reason and without any penalty. Should I choose to participate, I may choose to decline to answer any questions asked. In the event that I choose to withdraw from the study, any data collected from me will be erased as long as this is technically possible (for example, before it is anonymised or published), unless erasure of data would render impossible or seriously impair achievement of the research objectives, in which case it shall be retained in an anonymised form.
3. I understand that I have been invited to participate in an interview in which the researcher will conduct an interview that will take approximately an hour. I understand that the interview is to be conducted in a place and at a time that is convenient for me.

4. If I opt in, I allow the researcher to contact me and provide me with a possibility to review excerpts from the transcription of our interview. Should I deem it necessary, I have the right to ask for modifications to be made. I understand that by not ticking the 'opt in' option below, I will not be contacted by the researcher and subsequently will have forfeited my opportunity to review the excerpts

    ☐ I opt in for excerpt review and suggestions for amendment to what will be published from my interview as long as it is technically possible.
    Contact number: _____
    Email address: _____

5. I understand that my participation does not entail any known or anticipated risks.
6. I understand that whilst my participation does not entail any known or anticipated risks and all efforts will be made to ensure the questions posed do not cause any psychological distress, notwithstanding, if I feel that the semi-structured interview has distressed me in any way, I am aware that I may make use of the support services information sheet that the researcher will give me at the beginning of the interview. I am aware that this document comprises a list of free services. I am also aware that if I choose to use fee-paying services, I will have to pay for such services myself.
7. I understand that there are no direct benefits to me from participating in this study. I also understand that this research may benefit others by contributing to a better understanding of the topicin the Maltese context.
8. I understand that, under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and national legislation, I have the right to access, rectify, and where applicable, ask for the data concerning me to be erased.
9. I understand that all data collected will be stored in a pseudonymised form and erased by the end of June 2026, when this study is complete and published or assessed.
10. I understand that with regard to the transcripts and recordings, only the researcher (Andrea Catania), research supervisor (Prof Mary Anne Lauri) and, if necessary, the examiners of this study, will have access to this information.
11. I have been provided with a copy of the information letter and understand that I will also be given a copy of this consent form.
12. I am aware that, by marking the first-tick box below, I am giving my consent for this interview to be audio recorded and converted to text as it has been recorded (transcribed).

    ☐ I agree to this interview being audio recorded.
    ☐ I do not agree to this interview being audio recorded.

13. I am aware that extracts from my interview may be reproduced in these outputs, either in anonymous form, or using a pseudonym [a made-up name or code – e.g. respondent A].
14. I am aware that my data will be pseudonymised; i.e., my identity will not be noted on transcripts or notes from my interview, but instead, a code will be assigned. The codes

that link my data to my identity will be stored securely and separately from the data, in an encrypted file on the researcher's password-protected computer, and only the researcher and supervisor will have access to this information. Any hard-copy materials will be placed in a locked cabinet/drawer. All personal data, including interview recordings, will be stored offline on an encrypted, external device which will be stored in a locked drawer. Any material that identifies me as a participant in this study will be stored securely for the duration of the study and erased following publication of the study. This data will only be accessed by the researcher and the research supervisor, and, if necessary, the examiners of this study.

15. I am aware that my identity and personal information will not be revealed in any publications, reports or presentations arising from this research.
16. I am aware that although all material has been provided in English, I am free to speak in either English or Maltese, or both, during the interview.

I have read and understood the above statements and agree to participate in this study.

Name of participant: _____
Signature: _____
Date: _____

Andrea Catania
andrea.catania.19@um.edu.mt

Prof. Mary Anne Lauri
mary-anne.lauri@um.edu.mt
+356 23402350

Appendix F: List of Support Services

FREE & FEE-PAYING SUPPORT SERVICES

Name of student researcher: Andrea Catania
Course: Master of Science in Psychological Studies
Student's contact email: andrea.catania.19@um.edu.mt
Student's contact number: 99602342

Research supervisor: Professor Mary Anne Lauri
Supervisor's email: mary-anne.lauri@um.edu.mt
Supervisor's contact number: +356 23402350

Title of Research Study: **Sex and the clergy: An insider perspective on celibacy**

Dear Participant,

I hope this email finds you well.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank you for your participation in this study. I appreciate your involvement and cooperation throughout this entire process.

I would like to remind you of the aim of this study; namely to explore the experience of voluntary celibacy in relation to priests' sense of manhood.

This study was not anticipated to cause distress and the interview questions were formatted in as sensitive a manner as possible. However, if your participation has led you to experience any distress or discomfort for whatever reason, then overleaf I have included some information about services that offer free and fee-paying professional support that you might find helpful.

Kindly do not hesitate to contact me if you have any queries. If you require any additional information or wish to report any concerns about this study, please do not hesitate to contact both myself, on 99602342 or my research supervisor on +356 23402350.

Kind regards,

Andrea Catania

Richmond Foundation

info@richmond.org.mt +356 21224580/ 21482336/ 21480045

Supports both individuals who are experiencing mental health problems as well as those around them. Apart from supporting individuals by offering therapeutic help, Richmond Foundation also guides individuals by teaching the necessary skills to live and work independently. Their services include support groups, assisted living solutions, educational programmes, as well as counselling services.

Supportline 179 (24/7 access)

This is Malta's national helpline acting to provide support, information about local social welfare and other agencies, as well as a referral service to individuals who require support. It is also a national service to individuals facing difficult times or a crisis. Their primary mission is to provide immediate and unbiased help to whoever requires it.

Kellimni.com (24/7 access)

http://kellimni.com/ +356 21244123/21335097

kellimni.com is an online support service in which trained staff and volunteers are available for support 24/7 via email, chat and smart messaging. This service is managed by SOS Malta.

FREE SERVICES

Crisis Resolution Malta crisismalta@gmail.com/ +356 99339966

Offers immediate care. Crisis resolution 24/7. The team of volunteers who answer the phone are all professionals, and the consultation service is free.

Crisis Intervention Mater Dei +356 25453950

Supports in various crisis situations related to mental health. Monday to Friday 7am-5.30pm.

PAID PROFESSIONALS

Counsellors: Malta Association for the Counselling Profession (MACP) www.macpmalta.org

Council for the Counselling Profession (CCP) ccp.msfc@gov.mt

Family therapists: www.ift-malta.com

Psychologists: Malta Chamber of Psychologists mcp.org.mt

Malta Psychology Profession Board mppb.msfc@gov.mt

Malta Association of Psychiatrists: map.org.mt

Psychotherapists:
www.facbook.com/MaltaAssociationForPsychotherapy

Free 24/7 Mental Health Services
1579 – National Mental Health Helpline
1770 – Richmond Foundation Mental Health Helpline
179 – Supportline 179 is the national helpline offering support, information about local social welfare services and other agencies.
Olli.chat – Mental health chat service offered by Richmond Foundation.
Kellimni.com – Online support service run by trained staff and volunteers reachable through chat, email and smart messaging.
2141 5183 – Mental Health Services Malta refer to a national mental health services offering both inpatient and community services.

Appendix G: Questionnaire

Demographic data

How old are you?

_____

What role do you hold in the clergy? (e.g. priest, monk, deacon, seminarian, etc)

_____

What spirituality/order/movement do you follow? (e.g. Ignatian, Franciscan, Charismatic, etc)

_____

For how many years have you been a priest or other clergy member?

_____

Where do you live?

☐ Malta ☐ Gozo ☐ Other

Priestly celibacy is great and fulfilling.

☐ Strongly disagree ☐ Disagree ☐ Neither agree nor disagree ☐ Agree ☐ Strongly agree

I feel that I lack companionship.

☐ Hardly ever or never ☐ Some of the time ☐ Often

Celibacy helps to minister to the people more effectively.

☐ Strongly disagree ☐ Disagree ☐ Neither agree nor disagree ☐ Agree ☐ Strongly agree

I am able to tackle the problem of loneliness in celibate life.

☐ Strongly disagree ☐ Disagree ☐ Neither agree nor disagree ☐ Agree ☐ Strongly agree

Celibacy is an unnecessary burden imposed on the Catholic priests.

☐ Strongly disagree ☐ Disagree ☐ Neither agree nor disagree ☐ Agree ☐ Strongly agree

I feel isolated from others.

☐ Hardly ever or never ☐ Some of the time ☐ Often

If offered an option, I would choose to be a celibate priest again.

☐ Strongly disagree ☐ Disagree ☐ Neither agree nor disagree ☐ Agree ☐ Strongly agree

Formation in the seminary helped me to a great extent to integrate celibacy in my life and pastoral ministry.

☐ Strongly disagree ☐ Disagree ☐ Neither agree nor disagree ☐ Agree ☐ Strongly agree

I feel left out.

☐ Hardly ever or never ☐ Some of the time ☐ Often

Celibacy in no way helps to relate better to issues concerning the problems of the family.

Strongly disagree ☐ Disagree ☐ Neither agree nor disagree ☐ Agree ☐ Strongly agree ☐

Men should be emotionally strong in all situations.

☐ Strongly disagree ☐ Disagree ☐ Neither agree nor disagree ☐ Agree ☐ Strongly agree

Success is important for all men.

☐ Strongly disagree ☐ Disagree ☐ Neither agree nor disagree ☐ Agree ☐ Strongly agree

Men are self-reliant.

Strongly disagree ☐ Disagree ☐ Neither agree nor disagree ☐ Agree ☐ Strongly agree ☐

I believe a man should be tough.

☐ Strongly disagree ☐ Disagree ☐ Neither agree nor disagree ☐ Agree ☐ Strongly agree

How often do you feel lonely?

☐ Never ☐ Hardly ever ☐ Occasionally ☐ Some of the time ☐ Often/always

Do all the priests you know practice celibacy?

Yes ☐ No ☐

In one word, what does loneliness feel like to you?

_____

Appendix H: Times of Malta Article

TIMES OF MALTA 90 YEARS

Are celibate priests lonely?

A University of Malta research study is under way into attitudes towards priestly celibacy and masculinity

Opinion | Comment | Religion

6 March 2024 | Andrea Catania and Mary Anne Lauri |

3 min read

The lack of a seemingly important pillar of manhood in the lives of priests could be having effects that we are not being made aware of. Photo: Shutterstock.com

With all the hubbub surrounding Archbishop Charles Scicluna's opinions on priestly celibacy, many voices are being amplified while others have been lost.

Several clergy members have been open about their opinions for or against the celibacy mandate following the archbishop's interview with The Sunday Times of Malta (January 7, 2024). However, many did not wish for their opinions to be out in the open and be publicly scrutinised or criticised by others.

Furthermore, it is important for priests and the rest of society that discussion be held about the effect that celibacy is having on priests' psychological well being.

First, there is loneliness – a common psychological buzzword being thrown around. The loneliness epidemic the country is facing needs to be understood and addressed. It is not just celibate people who feel lonely.

Is loneliness caused by the absence of a partner or of a family? Since companionship, particularly romantic love and sexuality, are so deeply ingrained and emphasised by society, does the lack of it have any effect on clergy members?

Or could it be that priests find fulfilment in their promise of celibacy as they see in it both a deeper commitment to God and neighbour? Giving oneself to God and others through celibacy can be considered by priests as a way of enhancing their humanity. Some may feel

that celibacy frees them from an exclusive commitment to one person, thus enabling them to find fulfilment in their commitment with the community.

Perhaps one's calling for priesthood need no longer be mutually exclusive of the relationship or partnership with another human being, which includes a sexual relationship, although it goes beyond that as well.

It might be worth considering the idea that both can co-exist in the Latin rite of the Catholic Church as they do exist, albeit in different forms, in the Catholic Oriental rite and in Protestant churches.

We do not know much about priests' loneliness, perhaps as a result of the sensitivity of the issue. Could this loneliness be a deterrent to those considering the idea of joining the priesthood? Or, since married people feel loneliness too, could it be that celibacy is not a prime factor of loneliness?

Secondly, there is the matter of manhood. The Catholic Church often emphasises hegemonic and stereotypical forms of masculinity within the Church. Importance to sex has been highlighted as one of the main tenets of the 'masculine' man.

Again, priests themselves are not often very vocal about their opinions on masculinity. The lack of a seemingly important pillar of manhood in the lives of priests could be having effects that we are not being made aware of. Or could it be that priests find a new dimension of their masculinity in their altruistic commitment to the community?

All of these aspects of celibacy are being researched as part of a project within the University of Malta's Faculty of Social Well-being. The qualitative and quantitative research methods are addressed to priests who would like to express their attitudes towards celibacy and masculinity.

If you wish to contribute, please fill in the anonymous questionnaire through the link below.

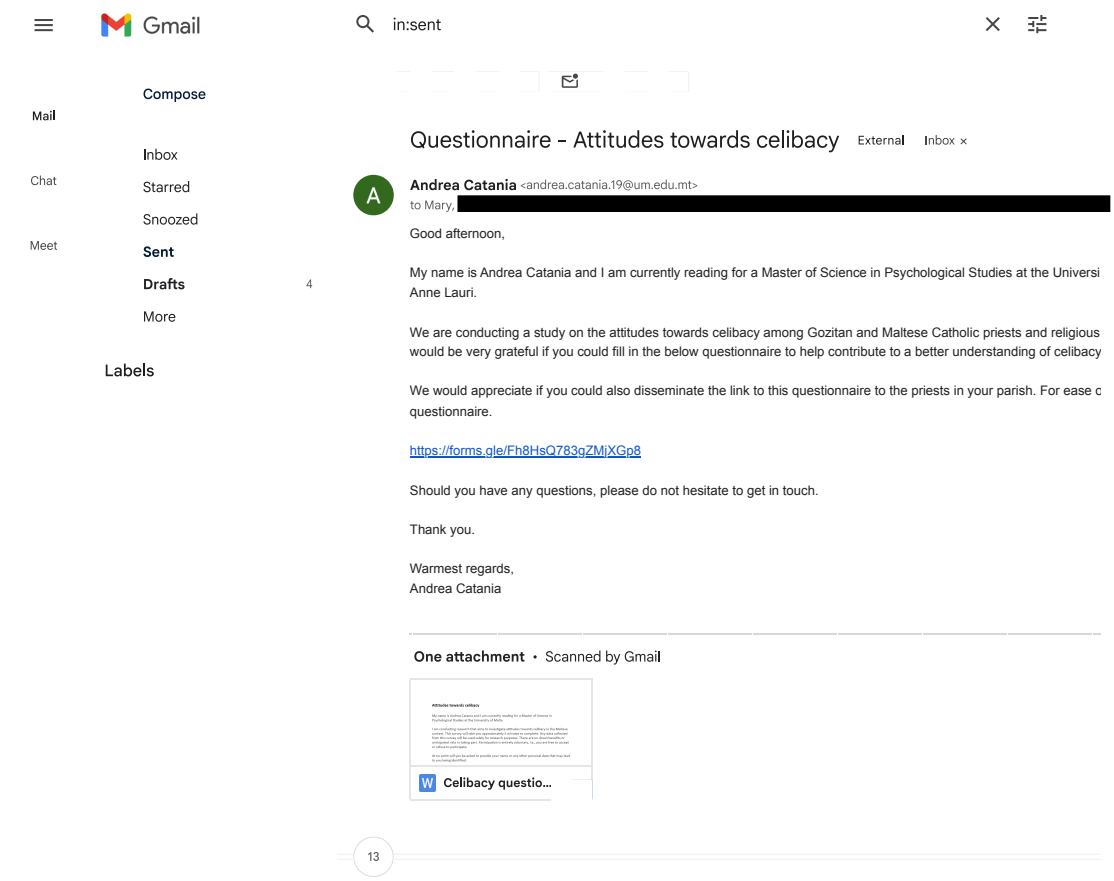
https://forms.gle/rgnMae3Dr7XWteWGA

Andrea Catania

Mary Anne Lauri

Andrea Catania and Prof. Mary Anne Lauri, from the Faculty of Social Well-being at the University of Malta, are conducting this research.

Appendix I: Sample Email to Priests



Appendix J: Interview Guide

Interview guide

Research question: how do priests experience celibacy?

Age, diocesan or religious, how long you have been a priest?

According to research, someone who is masculine is usually defined as someone being strong, unemotional, successful, self-reliant, and tough. How much do you identify with this definition?

A lot of theories present masculinity in this way, but we know that not all men are this way. What are your thoughts on this?

As a priest, how do these norms affect the practice of your vocation?

What made you decide to become a priest? If you had to describe how you live your faith, what would you say?

How do you feel about mandatory celibacy in priesthood?

How did you integrate celibacy into your life?

How do you, as a celibate priest, fulfil the need for relationships in your vocation?

(If religious) how many members are there in your home?

Do you feel that you have any roots in the community? If yes, what kind of connection do you feel you have?

Would you describe yourself as lonely? In what way?