

An Exploration of the Big-Five Personality Traits among the Priests of the Catholic Diocese of Yola in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Personality awareness has been regarded as a significant part of growth and personal development among the clergy across the world. The study was aimed to understand the Big Five personality traits among Catholic priests in the Diocese of Yola, Nigeria. The study was grounded in the Five-Factor Theory of Personality. The study employed descriptive research design. The study utilized a sample size of 48 priests using a census method. The data was collected using the Big Five Inventory (BFI-20). The data was analyzed using descriptive statistics and particularly mean with SPSS Version 32. The results showed that priests had a mean extraversion score of 3.25 with a standard deviation of 0.76, suggesting a moderate level of sociability and energy, leaning slightly toward introversion. A mean score of 3.47 and a standard deviation of 0.68 for agreeableness indicate a moderately high level of compassion, altruism, and cooperation among the priests. With a mean score of 3.55 and the lowest standard deviation (0.59), conscientiousness appears to be the most dominant and consistent personality trait among the priests. The mean score of 3.54 for openness, with a standard deviation of 0.62, suggests that the priests generally exhibit intellectual curiosity and imagination, though some variability exists and finally, the mean neuroticism score of 3.18 with a higher standard deviation of 0.81 indicates moderate emotional sensitivity, with notable variation among individuals. The study recommends to the Bishops and Superiors of congregations to consider organizing seminars and workshops to the priests in order to create more awareness on their personality growth and development.

Keywords: Big Five Personality Traits, Extroversion, Openness to experience, Agreeableness Conscientiousness, Neuroticism, Catholic priests, Diocese of Yola, Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

The pursuit of meaning and fulfillment in one's vocation is a central dimension of human development, especially for those engaged in religious ministry. Catholic priests, as pastoral agents, are expected to embody spiritual leadership while simultaneously managing psychological, emotional, and interpersonal demands inherent in pastoral work. Ministry satisfaction—the experience of fulfillment, joy, and contentment derived from ministerial responsibilities—is thus not only essential for personal well-being but also for sustained commitment and effectiveness in pastoral duties. While much attention has been given to the theological and sacramental dimensions of priesthood, far less empirical focus has been directed toward the psychological traits that influence priests' satisfaction in ministry.

The Big Five Personality Traits—openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism—provide a robust framework for examining individual differences that may shape clergy experiences. This Five-Factor Model (FFM), widely accepted in personality psychology, captures the stable psychological dispositions that underlie emotional regulation, interpersonal behavior, and vocational engagement. Each trait represents a critical psychological domain: conscientiousness encompasses diligence and organization; agreeableness involves cooperation and empathy; extraversion refers to sociability and energy; neuroticism reflects emotional instability and vulnerability; and openness denotes curiosity, creativity, and adaptability. These traits have been extensively linked to work satisfaction and performance across professions, including education, healthcare, and ministry.

In the context of religious leadership, personality traits can significantly impact pastoral interactions, stress coping mechanisms, and resilience to burnout. Research indicates that clergy with high levels of conscientiousness and agreeableness often report greater ministry satisfaction, while those high in neuroticism experience more emotional distress and dissatisfaction. For instance, studies by Francis et al. (2007), Village et al. (2012), and Moyo (2015) affirmed that priests with emotionally stable, conscientious, and relational personalities tend to navigate ministry demands more successfully. Similarly, Klein (2011) and Ruffin (2003) linked neuroticism to burnout and diminished pastoral efficacy among Protestant clergy, findings echoed in various cross-cultural studies (Zhang et al., 2021; Chen et al., 2022).

Despite this growing body of literature, most studies have focused on Western or non-Catholic contexts, leaving a notable gap in understanding how personality influences clergy satisfaction within African Catholic settings. In Nigeria, limited studies among Protestant pastors (e.g., Olatunji, 2017; Akande, 2019) have begun to explore this intersection, but Catholic dioceses—particularly in the northern regions—remain underrepresented in empirical research. The Catholic Diocese of Yola, situated in the northeastern part of Nigeria, presents a unique socio-pastoral context shaped by insecurity, poverty, communal expectations, and ecclesiastical structures. These factors can intensify the psychological demands of ministry, thereby influencing how personality traits interact with pastoral satisfaction.

Moreover, anecdotal reports from within the diocese suggest rising concerns over pastoral fatigue, interpersonal tensions among clergy, and reduced ministry zeal—issues potentially linked to unaddressed personality-related challenges. Seminary training and ongoing formation programs often overlook psychological self-awareness and emotional development, despite their critical role in promoting priestly maturity and resilience. As Hoge (2002) observed, formation programs that neglect personality development risk producing ministers who are ill-equipped to handle the psychological rigors of pastoral life.

Recognizing these gaps, the present study aims to examine how the Big Five personality traits influence ministry satisfaction among Catholic priests in the Diocese of Yola. The research is guided by the question: *How do the Big Five personality traits influence ministry satisfaction among Catholic priests in the Diocese of Yola?* This inquiry seeks to identify the dominant traits among priests in the diocese and to assess their correlation with levels of ministry satisfaction. The study is informed by the Five-Factor Theory of Personality (McCrae & Costa, 1999) and Job Satisfaction Theory (Locke, 1976), both of which posit that personality traits shape affective and behavioral responses to vocational environments. Previous studies affirm the utility of these theories in explaining occupational satisfaction (Judge et al., 2002; Clarke & Robertson, 2005). However, their application to religious vocations in African Catholic contexts remains scarce.

A review of relevant literature highlights both the potential and the limitations of existing research. Antonio et al. (2016), for example, studied personality among Catholic priests in Italy, identifying high agreeableness and low neuroticism but omitting satisfaction outcomes. Tackett et al. (2017) found similar patterns among social workers and clergy in the U.S., showing that extraversion, conscientiousness, and agreeableness predict satisfaction, while neuroticism detracts from it. However, cultural and contextual differences limit the generalizability of these findings to Nigerian settings.

In the African context, Gregory et al. (2013) found unique trait configurations in African samples, suggesting that personality expressions and their vocational implications may differ from Western norms. Yet, this study excluded clergy. Similarly, Yu et al. (2021) identified mediating variables such as social support in the personality–satisfaction relationship but did not explore religious professions.

The present study, therefore, addresses three critical gaps in the literature: the underrepresentation of Catholic clergy in personality research, the scarcity of African-based studies linking personality to ministry satisfaction, and the lack of contextually grounded, empirical insights for diocesan formation and support strategies. By focusing on Catholic priests in Yola, Nigeria, this research contributes original data to the field of psychology of religion and offers practical implications for pastoral leadership, seminary education, and clergy well-being. It affirms that personality is not merely a background factor but a dynamic influence on how priests experience, navigate, and find satisfaction in their vocational calling. The study was aimed to understand the Big Five personality traits among Catholic priests in the Diocese of Yola, Nigeria.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted descriptive research design to understand the Big Five personality traits among Catholic priests in the Diocese of Yola, Nigeria. Additionally, a descriptive dimension was incorporated to summarize the key characteristics of the participants and variables, providing a foundational understanding of the study population. The research was carried out within the Roman Catholic Diocese of Yola, situated in Adamawa State in northeastern Nigeria. This Diocese, part of the Ecclesiastical Province of Jos, includes priests serving across diverse parish contexts, both urban and rural. The target population and sample size comprised all 48 Catholic priests currently serving in the Diocese, as confirmed by diocesan administrative records. Given the relatively small and accessible size of the population, a total enumeration or census method was employed, allowing the researcher to include every member of the population, thereby minimizing sampling error and enhancing the generalizability of the findings within the context.

Data were collected using The Big Five Inventory (BFI-20), a 20-item abbreviated version of the original BFI-44, was employed to assess personality traits across five dimensions: Openness, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Neuroticism. This instrument has shown cross-cultural reliability in various international studies and provided a concise yet robust measurement of personality traits. To ensure validity, the research instruments underwent review by academic supervisors and were pilot-tested with ten priests from the neighboring Diocese of Jalingo. Feedback from the pilot test confirmed their contextual appropriateness, supporting both content and face validity. Construct validity was further affirmed by relying on well-established, previously validated tools. Reliability was evaluated using Cronbach's Alpha, with both instruments yielding coefficients above the acceptable threshold of 0.70, thereby confirming their internal consistency. Prior to data collection, ethical clearance was obtained from the university, and formal authorization was secured from the Diocese of Yola. Participants were contacted through a combination of email and personal visits, with appointments scheduled to accommodate their pastoral responsibilities.

Data collection was carried out using email-distributed questionnaires, supplemented by follow-up interviews conducted via email after obtaining verbal consent through a telephone call. Participants were assured of confidentiality, voluntary participation, and the right to withdraw at any point, and completed questionnaires were retrieved either personally or electronically. The analysis of the collected data was conducted using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Descriptive statistics were used to present the distribution of personality traits among priests.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study sought to examine the Big Five personality traits among Catholic priests in the Diocese of Yola. Descriptive statistics were computed to summarize the distribution of personality traits across the sample. Table 1 presents the minimum and maximum scores, means, and standard deviations for each of the five traits.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Personality Traits among Catholic Priests of Yola

Personality Trait	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Extraversion	48	1.00	5.00	3.25	0.76
Agreeableness	48	1.00	5.00	3.47	0.68
Conscientiousness	48	1.00	5.00	3.55	0.59
Neuroticism	48	1.00	5.00	3.18	0.81
Openness	48	1.00	5.00	3.54	0.62

The results show that conscientiousness had the highest mean score ($M = 3.55$), closely followed by openness ($M = 3.54$) and agreeableness ($M = 3.47$), indicating that these are the most prominent personality traits among the priests. Extraversion and neuroticism had comparatively lower mean scores, suggesting moderate tendencies in sociability and emotional sensitivity.

The mean extraversion score of 3.25 ($SD = 0.76$) reflects a moderate level of sociability and energy, slightly inclined toward introversion. This is in line with the findings of Francis, Robbins, and Wulff (2005), who noted that clergy often display introspective and reserved dispositions, shaped by the contemplative nature of their vocation. The moderate variability in responses suggests that while some priests are outgoing, many prioritize inward reflection—a valuable trait in spiritual leadership.

Agreeableness recorded a mean of 3.47 ($SD = 0.68$), pointing to a moderately high level of compassion, altruism, and cooperation. This supports Piedmont's (2005) view that religious commitment is closely associated with prosocial behavior and empathy. High agreeableness is advantageous in cultivating harmonious parish relationships and providing compassionate pastoral care. The relatively low variation suggests that these interpersonal strengths are widely shared among the priests.

Conscientiousness emerged as the most dominant and consistent trait, with the highest mean score (3.55) and the lowest standard deviation (0.59). This aligns with Piedmont and Leach's (2002) observations that religious workers who score high in conscientiousness typically demonstrate a strong sense of duty, reliability, and ethical conduct. Such qualities are crucial for the structured and multifaceted responsibilities of ministry, including liturgical duties, counseling, and parish administration.

Neuroticism had a mean of 3.18 and the highest standard deviation (0.81), indicating moderate emotional sensitivity with significant individual differences. This finding reflects the emotional complexities of pastoral work, as clergy often engage with human suffering, grief, and interpersonal conflicts. Koenig et al. (2012) highlighted the heightened risk of stress and burnout among clergy, pointing to the need for emotional resilience and institutional support mechanisms. While some priests appear well-adjusted, others may benefit from counseling and self-care interventions.

Openness yielded a mean score of 3.54 ($SD = 0.62$), suggesting that the priests generally value intellectual curiosity, imagination, and adaptability. According to Piedmont (2005), openness fosters deeper spiritual reflection and greater flexibility in addressing contemporary challenges in ministry. The moderate variability indicates a range between traditionalist and progressive orientations, reflecting the tension between doctrinal fidelity and creative engagement that often characterizes religious leadership.

Overall, the results suggest that the priests exhibit high levels of conscientiousness, agreeableness, and openness, traits that support effective and compassionate ministry. The moderate levels of extraversion and neuroticism point to the complex interpersonal and emotional dynamics of the priestly vocation, with implications for pastoral training, psychological support, and self-care strategies within the diocesan framework.

CONCLUSION

The study investigated the personality traits of priests in the Catholic Diocese of Yola using the Big Five Personality Framework—Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Neuroticism, and Openness. The findings revealed that the dominant personality traits among the priests are conscientiousness, openness, and agreeableness, all of which are conducive to effective ministry. High conscientiousness suggests that most priests are responsible, disciplined, and dependable—qualities essential for the structured demands of pastoral life. Openness reflects their willingness to embrace new ideas and adapt to diverse ministerial contexts, while agreeableness indicates a strong disposition toward kindness, cooperation, and pastoral sensitivity. Moderate scores in extraversion and neuroticism, with greater individual variability, suggest a balanced mix of introverted and extroverted personalities as well as differing emotional responses to ministry challenges. These traits point to the emotional and social diversity among the clergy, reflecting the complex and dynamic nature of priestly life. Overall, the study underscores that the priests possess personality profiles that support successful ministry,

while also identifying areas—particularly in emotional well-being and social adaptability—that require attention to sustain long-term ministry satisfaction.

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