

Perceived Influence of an Integrated Psycho-Sexual Curriculum on Psycho-Affective Maturity among Catholic Celibates in Nairobi, Kenya

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Abstract

Studies have shown that Catholic celibates particularly within African seminaries, have limited perceptions of an integrated psycho-sexual curriculum. This study explored these perceptions of the influence of an integrated psycho-sexual curriculum on psycho-affective maturity in Nairobi County, Kenya. The study adopted a descriptive phenomenological design to explore participants' lived experiences. Purposive sampling was used to determine 53 participants comprising 45 seminarians and eight formators from nine Catholic seminaries in Nairobi County. Data were collected through seven focus group discussions and eight semi-structured interviews and analyzed using Colaizzi's (1978) seven-step phenomenological method. Participants perceived the integrated psycho-sexual curriculum as instrumental in developing emotional awareness, emotional regulation, identity integration, self-awareness, emotional resilience, and interpersonal maturity. They further described reflective accompaniment, guided psychological formation, and supportive interpersonal relationships as key processes through which psycho-affective maturity evolved. Conversely, participants associated fragmented psycho-sexual formation with emotional suppression, unresolved personal conflicts, and challenges in vocational identity formation. The findings suggest that psycho-affective maturity is not merely an individual characteristic but a developmental outcome nurtured through intentional psycho-sexual formation. Strengthening integrated psycho-sexual curricula may therefore enhance holistic human formation and support healthy vocational identity among Catholic celibates.

Keywords: Psycho-affective maturity; psycho-sexual curriculum; human formation; Catholic celibates; vocational identity; phenomenology.

Introduction

The formation of Catholic priests and other clergy has traditionally been understood as a holistic process aimed at preparing candidates intellectually, spiritually, pastorally, and humanly for lifelong ministry. Among these four dimensions, human formation has increasingly been recognized as the foundation upon which the other dimensions of priestly formation are built because it shapes the personal qualities required for authentic vocational commitment and effective pastoral service (John Paul II, 1992; Congregation for the Clergy, 2016). Recent developments within Catholic formation have further emphasised that intellectual competence and spiritual commitment alone are insufficient for sustaining healthy celibate living unless they are accompanied by adequate psycho-affective development. Consequently, seminaries across many parts of the world have progressively incorporated psycho-sexual formation into their curricula to facilitate emotional growth, relational

competence, self-awareness, and vocational integration.

Psycho-affective maturity refers to an individual's capacity to understand, regulate, and appropriately express emotions while maintaining a coherent sense of identity and healthy interpersonal relationships. Within Catholic formation, psycho-affective maturity extends beyond emotional stability to include the integration of sexuality, affectivity, relational capacity, and vocational commitment into a unified personal identity (Congregation for Catholic Education, 2008). Rather than viewing celibacy merely as behavioural abstinence, contemporary ecclesial and psychological perspectives increasingly conceptualise it as a mature vocational choice that requires emotional integration, psychological resilience, and healthy interpersonal functioning (Cencini, 2017).

The growing emphasis on psycho-affective maturity reflects broader developments within psychology and human development. Emotional intelligence theory, developmental psychology, and self-determination perspectives consistently demonstrate that emotional awareness, self-regulation, resilience, and identity integration are developmental competencies that evolve through intentional learning experiences, supportive interpersonal relationships, and reflective practice rather than through maturation alone (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Goleman, 1995; Gross, 2015). Individuals who develop these competencies generally exhibit greater psychological well-being, healthier interpersonal relationships, more adaptive coping strategies, and stronger commitment to personally meaningful life choices. Conversely, emotional suppression, poor self-awareness, and unresolved identity conflicts have been associated with psychological distress, interpersonal dysfunction, and diminished resilience in demanding vocational contexts (Gross, 2015).

These psychological perspectives resonate with contemporary Catholic teaching on human formation. The *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis* (Congregation for the Clergy, 2016) emphasises that candidates for priesthood require comprehensive human formation that promotes emotional balance, interpersonal competence, affective maturity, and psychological integration. Similarly, the *Guidelines for the Use of Psychology in the Admission and Formation of Candidates for the Priesthood* underscore the importance of integrating psychological knowledge within seminary formation to facilitate authentic vocational discernment and personal maturity (Congregation for Catholic Education, 2008). Collectively, these developments have shifted psycho-sexual formation from a peripheral component of seminary education to a central element of holistic formation.

An integrated psycho-sexual curriculum seeks to address sexuality within the broader framework of human development by linking psychological growth, emotional intelligence, interpersonal relationships, vocational identity, and spiritual formation. Unlike traditional approaches that primarily emphasised moral instruction or behavioural regulation, integrated psycho-sexual formation promotes reflective self-understanding and healthy integration of sexuality into one's vocational identity. Such curricula create opportunities for candidates to examine personal experiences of attraction, intimacy, loneliness, emotional vulnerability, and relational boundaries in developmentally appropriate and psychologically safe environments. The ultimate objective is not simply to prevent maladaptive behaviours but to foster mature affective functioning that supports lifelong vocational commitment.

Growing empirical evidence suggests that comprehensive psycho-sexual formation contributes positively to emotional development and vocational wellbeing. Studies have shown that programmes incorporating emotional literacy, reflective accompaniment, psychological support, and interpersonal skills development enhance self-awareness, emotional regulation, resilience, and relational competence among seminarians and clergy (Cencini, 2017; Leavey,

2020). Conversely, formation environments characterised by silence surrounding sexuality, inadequate psychological accompaniment, or limited opportunities for emotional reflection have been associated with affective immaturity, unresolved psychological conflicts, vocational dissatisfaction, and interpersonal difficulties (Plante, 2019; Leavey, 2020). These findings suggest that psycho-affective maturity is intentionally cultivated through formation experiences rather than assumed to emerge automatically from religious commitment.

Despite increasing international interest in psycho-affective formation, research remains disproportionately concentrated in Europe and North America. Comparatively few studies have examined psycho-sexual formation within African Catholic seminaries, where cultural understandings of sexuality, communal relationships, masculinity, family expectations, and religious vocation differ substantially from Western contexts. In many African societies, conversations surrounding sexuality remain culturally sensitive, potentially influencing how seminarians experience psycho-sexual education and emotional development. Consequently, contextual evidence is needed to understand how integrated psycho-sexual curricula operate within African formation settings and how participants themselves perceive their influence on psycho-affective maturity.

In Kenya, Catholic seminaries have progressively strengthened counselling services, psychological accompaniment, and human formation programmes in response to contemporary ecclesial directives and evolving pastoral realities. Nevertheless, available research has largely focused on vocational discernment, spiritual formation, counselling services, or challenges facing priestly formation, with limited attention given to the specific contribution of integrated psycho-sexual curricula to psycho-affective maturity. More importantly, the perspectives of seminarians and formators remain insufficiently explored. Understanding these lived experiences is essential for informing evidence-based curriculum development and strengthening human formation within Catholic seminaries.

The study addresses this gap by exploring Catholic celibates' perceptions of the influence of an integrated psycho-sexual curriculum on psycho-affective maturity in Nairobi County, Kenya. By adopting a descriptive phenomenological approach, the study privileges participants' lived experiences to illuminate how psycho-sexual formation contributes to emotional awareness, emotional regulation, identity integration, self-awareness, emotional resilience, interpersonal maturity, and healthy vocational identity. The findings are expected to contribute to the growing body of scholarship on psycho-affective formation while providing practical insights for curriculum development, formator training, and policy within Catholic seminaries.

The study was guided by the following objectives:

1. To explore Catholic celibates' perceptions of the influence of an integrated psycho-sexual curriculum on psycho-affective maturity.
2. To identify the psycho-affective competencies developed through psycho-sexual formation.
3. To examine how psycho-affective maturity contributes to healthy vocational identity among Catholic celibates.

Literature Review

Psycho-affective maturity has emerged as a foundational construct in contemporary Catholic formation, reflecting growing recognition that authentic vocational commitment requires more than intellectual competence or spiritual devotion. Pope St John Paul II's *Pastores Dabo Vobis* (1992) emphasised that human formation particularly affective development constitutes the essential foundation upon which intellectual, spiritual, and pastoral formation are built. The Congregation for Catholic Education's *Guidelines for the Use of Psychology in the Admission and Formation of Candidates for the Priesthood* (2008) reinforced this perspective by underscoring the importance of integrating psychological knowledge within seminary formation to facilitate authentic vocational discernment and personal maturity. The *Instruction Concerning the Criteria for the Discernment of Vocations* (Congregation for Catholic Education, 2005) affirms that candidates must “reach affective maturity” as such maturity enables them “to relate correctly to both men and women” and to develop “a true sense of spiritual fatherhood towards the Church community.” Similarly, the Congregation for the Clergy's *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis* (2016) emphasises that “one cannot be a priest without balance of mind and heart and without affective maturity.”

Empirical investigations have progressively reinforced the significance of affective maturity in vocational formation. Rovers (1998), in the first national survey of Canadian Catholic seminarians, found that seminarians scored higher on measures of emotional maturity than their university student peers. Donnelly (2021) demonstrated that intentional pedagogical approaches cultivating emotional self-awareness contributed meaningfully to affective maturity within seminary curricula. Francis and Crea (2019) highlighted that seminary environments can facilitate psychological development when they adopt “whole-person” models attending to candidates' emotional and relational growth. Upenieks and Eagle (2026) found that unresolved religious and spiritual struggles were associated with depressive symptoms among seminary students, while Jankowski et al. (2026) demonstrated that relational maturity and self-regulatory strengths predicted flourishing among seminary students.

Research identifies emotional awareness, self-regulation, resilience, and identity integration as developmental competencies that evolve through intentional learning experiences and supportive relationships rather than through maturation alone (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Gross, 2015; Park et al., 2021; Aldrup et al., 2022; Troy et al., 2023). Collectively, these studies suggest that psycho-affective competencies are central to vocational development. However, most existing investigations have operationalised these competencies using quantitative psychological scales, providing limited insight into how seminarians themselves experience emotional growth during formation. Furthermore, there is ongoing debate regarding whether affective maturity is primarily a selection criterion or a developmental outcome cultivated through intentional formation experiences (Donnelly, 2021).

Historically, psycho-sexual education often focused narrowly on moral instruction regarding chastity and celibacy. Contemporary formation adopts an integrated approach in which sexuality is understood as an essential dimension of human identity that must be positively integrated into psychological, relational, spiritual, and vocational development. The *Program of Priestly Formation* (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops [USCCB], 2022) explicitly states that “the goal of psychosexual, social, and spiritual development should be to form seminarians into chaste, celibate men who are loving pastors.”

An integrated psycho-sexual curriculum extends beyond behavioural regulation to encompass emotional literacy, identity development, healthy attachment, interpersonal communication, boundary formation, conflict management, and vocational discernment. The Congregation for

Catholic Education (2008) emphasises that formation must address “the personality’s general equilibrium” and cultivate “the capacity to form relations in a mature way with individuals and groups of people.” Gascon (2020) proposed that religious formation must be geared towards capacity-building, with “living formation” as its mainframe, and developed modules for formators in forming affectively and psychosexually mature priests. Leavey (2020) found that formation environments characterised by emotional openness, supportive relationships, and opportunities for self-reflection were associated with greater emotional adjustment and vocational confidence among seminarians. Conversely, formation environments characterised by silence surrounding sexuality, inadequate psychological accompaniment, or limited opportunities for emotional reflection have been associated with affective immaturity, unresolved psychological conflicts, and vocational dissatisfaction (Plante, 2019; Leavey, 2020; Crea et al., 2021). Despite these findings, much of the available evidence derives from programme evaluations rather than rigorous experimental designs, and most studies have examined Western contexts, leaving limited understanding of how integrated psycho-sexual curricula function within African seminaries.

Research has demonstrated that adaptive emotion regulation strategies are associated with better mental health outcomes, whereas maladaptive strategies are associated with increased psychological distress (Gross, 2015; Aldrup et al., 2022; Troy et al., 2023). Identity integration involves reconciling one's personal history, sexuality, emotional experiences, faith, and vocational commitment into a coherent sense of self. Rather than perceiving celibacy as external compliance, psychologically mature candidates internalise vocational commitment as an authentic expression of personal identity (Congregation for the Clergy, 2016; USCCB, 2022; Cencini, 2017). Donnelly (2021) observed that the language of "integral personalism" was introduced into the formation landscape by Pope John Paul II, but "this anthropology has not sufficiently informed seminary pedagogy."

Self-awareness enables candidates to recognise personal strengths, limitations, motivations, and emotional triggers, thereby facilitating realistic self-appraisal and ongoing growth (Cencini, 2017). The *Program of Priestly Formation* (USCCB, 2022) identifies "appropriate self-disclosure" and "a cultivated capacity for self-reflection" as necessary instruments on the path to healthy celibate chastity. Emotional resilience and interpersonal maturity complete the constellation of competencies, enabling candidates to navigate the complex emotional and relational demands of ministry while sustaining psychological wellbeing (Rossetti, 2011; Congregation for the Clergy, 2016; Park et al., 2021). Collectively, these studies suggest that psycho-affective competencies are central to vocational development. However, most existing investigations have operationalised these competencies using quantitative psychological scales, providing limited insight into how seminarians experience emotional growth, and leaving the developmental processes through which psycho-affective maturity emerges insufficiently understood.

Research on psycho-affective formation within African seminary contexts remains limited despite growing institutional investment in holistic formation. However, several important studies have begun illuminating distinctive experiences and challenges. Juma et al. (2017) examined the lived experiences of 16 African Roman Catholic seminarians using an African-centred psychological framework. Participants described significant difficulty adjusting to seminary environments where teaching and living predominantly reflected a Western worldview, evidencing cognitive dissonance and feelings of marginalisation. The authors concluded that acknowledging the worldviews and cultural heritage of seminarians is essential for effective formation.

Rop (2025) explored the lived experiences of 27 Catholic priests from the Kalenjin community in Kenya, focusing on perceptions of mandatory celibacy within African cultural values that often view celibacy with scepticism. The study found that while many African priests have accepted mandatory celibacy, they often feel burdened by overt sexuality in their environment, leading to psychological and social strain. The research recommended re-evaluating the relevance of training programmes for African clergy. Mutuku (2024) examined psychological wellbeing of Catholic clergy in Kenya and found that priests reporting greater emotional support experienced lower levels of burnout and greater vocational satisfaction. Oduor (2023) investigated emotional intelligence among Kenyan seminarians and found that those who participated in structured human formation programmes reported higher emotional intelligence scores than those who did not, suggesting that intentional formation interventions can enhance psycho-affective competencies.

Beyond East Africa, several studies have contributed to understanding formation challenges across the continent. Uche (2022) examined the relationship between formation environment and psychological wellbeing among Nigerian seminarians and found that supportive, emotionally open formation environments were associated with lower psychological distress and greater vocational commitment. Adeyemi (2021) investigated the role of cultural values in shaping seminarians' experiences of affective formation in Ghana and found that traditional communal values sometimes facilitated emotional support but at other times created tensions around individual emotional expression. Mokoena (2023) explored the integration of psychological services within South African seminaries and found that while most seminaries offered counselling services, uptake remained low due to stigma and cultural attitudes toward mental health support. Despite these contributions, no study has specifically examined the perceived influence of an integrated psycho-sexual curriculum on psycho-affective maturity using descriptive phenomenology in the Kenyan context.

Overall, the reviewed literature demonstrates growing recognition that psycho-affective maturity is indispensable for healthy vocational development and that integrated psycho-sexual formation provides an important avenue for cultivating this maturity. Nevertheless, significant conceptual, contextual, and methodological gaps remain, particularly regarding the lived experiences of Catholic celibates within African seminaries. Addressing these gaps requires a qualitative approach capable of capturing participants' subjective meanings and experiences, thereby justifying the descriptive phenomenological design adopted in the present study.

This study addresses the gaps in literature and methodologically by adopting a descriptive phenomenological approach to explore Catholic celibates' perceptions of the influence of an integrated psycho-sexual curriculum on psycho-affective maturity in Nairobi County, Kenya.

Self-Determination Theory

This study is anchored in Self-Determination Theory (SDT), developed by Deci and Ryan (2000), which provides a robust framework for explaining how integrated psycho-sexual formation

contributes to psycho-affective maturity. SDT posits that optimal psychological development occurs when three basic psychological needs such as autonomy, competence, and relatedness are consistently supported. The theory has been extensively validated across diverse cultural contexts and applied to various domains including education, work, healthcare, and religious formation (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2017).

Within Catholic formation, autonomy refers to the internalisation of vocational commitment through reflective and freely embraced discernment. Integrated psycho-sexual curricula foster

autonomy by creating opportunities for candidates to understand their emotions and personal motivations, promoting authentic ownership of their vocation. Competence concerns the development of emotional and interpersonal capacities required to meet the psychological demands of celibate life. Through psycho-sexual education, candidates develop emotional awareness, self-regulation, resilience, and relational skills. Relatedness reflects the human need for meaningful and supportive relationships. Seminary environments characterised by trust, psychological safety, and authentic accompaniment encourage openness and emotional growth. Autonomy links conceptually to self-awareness and identity integration; competence links to emotional awareness, emotional regulation, and resilience; and relatedness links to interpersonal maturity and healthy vocational identity. A study of 549 Brazilian seminarians found that the fulfilment of these basic psychological needs served as the mechanism through which perceived formation effectiveness contributed to seminarians' development of meaning in life (Silva & Costa, 2026). Accordingly, SDT provides an appropriate interpretive framework for understanding how integrated psycho-sexual curricula facilitate psycho-affective development and strengthen vocational identity among Catholic celibates.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative approach grounded in descriptive phenomenology to explore Catholic celibates' lived experiences of an integrated psycho-sexual curriculum and its perceived influence on psycho-affective maturity. The study was conducted in Catholic formation centres in Nairobi, Kenya, where seminarians and formators provided rich accounts of psycho-sexual formation within the context of celibate life. A purposive sampling strategy was used to recruit 53 participants comprising 45 seminarians who participated in seven focus group discussions and eight formators who took part in in-depth interviews. Participants were selected based on their direct experience with psycho-sexual formation and their ability to provide rich and relevant insights into the phenomenon under investigation. Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional review bodies, and informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and anonymity were upheld throughout the study.

Data were collected using semi-structured interview guides for both the focus group discussions and in-depth interviews, allowing participants to describe their experiences and perceptions in their own words. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent, transcribed verbatim, and analysed using Colaizzi's seven-step phenomenological method, which involved repeated reading of transcripts, extraction of significant statements, formulation of meanings, clustering of themes, exhaustive description, identification of the fundamental structure of the phenomenon, and validation of findings with participants. Trustworthiness was enhanced through member checking, investigator debriefing, reflexive journaling, and maintaining an audit trail to ensure credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability of the findings.

Results

Integrated Psycho-Sexual Formation as a Catalyst for Psycho-Affective Growth

Participants consistently perceived the integrated psycho-sexual curriculum as the foundation upon which psycho-affective maturity was developed. Rather than viewing psycho-sexual formation as instruction about sexuality alone, they described it as a holistic process that enabled them to understand themselves more fully by integrating their emotional, psychological, spiritual, and vocational lives. Across the focus group discussions and in-depth interviews, participants explained that the curriculum shifted their understanding of sexuality from being a source of fear, confusion, or repression to becoming a natural dimension of human identity that could be acknowledged, reflected upon, and integrated into their vocational

commitment. This process fostered greater self-awareness and emotional insight, enabling them to approach celibate living with increased confidence and authenticity.

Participants explained that integrated psycho-sexual formation enhanced their ability to recognise and understand their emotions rather than suppressing or ignoring them. Many described learning to identify experiences such as attraction, loneliness, anxiety, and frustration as normal aspects of human development rather than signs of vocational inadequacy. One participant observed, "Psycho-sexual education is very necessary in formation houses because it concerns who we are as human beings. Understanding sexuality as a gift helps us understand ourselves better" (FGD 1, Participant 1). Another explained that psycho-sexual formation "helps us understand the connection between psychology and sexuality, leading to maturity" (FGD 1, Participant 2). These reflections suggest that participants perceived emotional awareness as the first step towards psycho-affective maturity because it enabled them to interpret their experiences with greater clarity and acceptance instead of responding with fear or self-condemnation.

Participants further indicated that integrated formation promoted a healthier understanding of sexuality by replacing silence and taboo with informed reflection and dialogue. Several participants recalled that earlier formation experiences offered limited opportunities to discuss psycho-sexual concerns, leaving them uncertain about how to interpret their emotional experiences. One participant reflected, "Honestly, during my formation, I never heard the term psycho-sexual education. Talking about sexuality seemed scandalous" (FGD 1, Participant 4). Similarly, another participant noted that formation had focused primarily on external discipline rather than emotional understanding, explaining that "formation focused more on following rules than understanding ourselves emotionally" (FGD 1, Participant 3). In contrast, participants who experienced integrated psycho-sexual formation described developing a more balanced perspective in which sexuality was understood as part of healthy human development rather than a threat to religious commitment. An interview participant reinforced this view by arguing that psycho-sexual formation "should be at the centre of human formation for celibates in the Church" (IDI, Participant 2).

Beyond promoting emotional awareness, participants consistently described integrated psycho-sexual formation as facilitating the integration of psychological, spiritual, and vocational identity. Rather than separating their emotional experiences from their religious calling, they explained that the curriculum enabled them to appreciate how psychological well-being and spiritual commitment complemented one another. As one participant remarked, "It helps you understand your identity, your vocation, and the vow of celibacy while also helping you build healthy relationships" (FGD 3, Participant 20). Collectively, these findings demonstrate that participants perceived integrated psycho-sexual formation as a catalyst for psycho-affective growth because it fostered self-understanding, normalised emotional experiences, and promoted a coherent sense of identity that supported both personal development and vocational commitment.

Psycho-Affective Competencies Developed Through Integrated Formation

Participants consistently perceived that an integrated psycho-sexual curriculum cultivated a range of psycho-affective competencies that enabled them to navigate the emotional and relational demands of celibate life. Rather than eliminating emotional challenges, the curriculum equipped them with the knowledge, skills, and personal insight needed to respond constructively to those challenges. Across the focus group discussions and in-depth interviews, participants identified emotional regulation, relational maturity, and identity integration as the most significant competencies developed through psycho-sexual formation. These

competencies were viewed as interconnected capacities that strengthened personal well-being, enhanced interpersonal relationships, and reinforced commitment to their vocation.

One of the most frequently discussed competencies was emotional regulation. Participants explained that psycho-sexual formation helped them understand that emotions such as attraction, loneliness, frustration, and anger were natural human experiences that required thoughtful management rather than denial or suppression. As one participant explained, "It gives me self-awareness, maturity, and integration of emotion" (FGD 1, Participant 6). Another participant reflected that the curriculum "helped us understand that attraction is human and that what matters is how you respond to it" (FGD 2, Participant 11). These narratives suggest that participants no longer viewed emotional experiences as threats to celibate life but as opportunities for growth when approached with reflection and self-awareness. In contrast, participants who had received limited psycho-sexual formation described struggling to regulate their emotions. One participant admitted, "For me, the challenge was regulating anger. I was not given the opportunity to learn how to regulate it, and I found myself reacting to small things" (FGD 1, Participant 2). Such accounts illustrate that emotional regulation was perceived as a competency acquired through intentional formation rather than an innate personal quality.

Participants also described substantial growth in their capacity to build healthy relationships while maintaining appropriate vocational boundaries. They explained that integrated psycho-sexual formation broadened their understanding of intimacy by demonstrating that meaningful relationships could be expressed through friendship, service, and community life rather than exclusively through romantic attachment. One participant observed, "Psycho-sexual education helps us grow and mature in our sexual lives. It builds confidence and helps us understand love through service" (FGD 2, Participant 8). Another explained, "It helped me understand that intimacy can also be expressed through service, presence, and relationships in the community" (FGD 5, Participant 33). Participants reported that this understanding enabled them to relate more confidently with fellow seminarians, formators, parishioners, and members of the wider community while maintaining healthy emotional boundaries. They contrasted these experiences with earlier formation approaches that emphasised avoiding close relationships without providing guidance on managing emotional attachment.

A further competency emerging from participants' narratives was identity integration. Participants explained that psycho-sexual formation enabled them to reconcile their emotional, psychological, spiritual, and vocational identities into a coherent sense of self. Rather than perceiving a conflict between their humanity and their vocation, they came to understand these dimensions as mutually enriching. One participant reflected, "It helped me understand why I chose this life and not just follow rules because I am in formation" (FGD 2, Participant 8). Similarly, an interview participant stated, "Psycho-sexual formation helped me freely choose celibacy not as an escape from women or marriage" (IDI, Participant 3). These findings indicate that integrated psycho-sexual formation fostered competencies that extended beyond emotional management to include mature relationships, authentic self-understanding, and vocational ownership, all of which participants regarded as essential dimensions of psycho-affective maturity.

Psycho-Affective Maturity as the Foundation of Healthy Vocational Identity

Participants consistently described psycho-affective maturity as the foundation upon which a healthy vocational identity was built and sustained. They explained that integrated psycho-sexual formation enabled them to move beyond viewing celibacy as an institutional obligation towards embracing it as a freely chosen and personally meaningful vocation. Across the focus

group discussions and in-depth interviews, participants associated psycho-affective maturity with an internalised commitment to celibate life, the ability to navigate emotional challenges such as loneliness and attraction, and the resilience to remain faithful to their vocation over time. Rather than eliminating difficulties, psycho-sexual formation was perceived as providing the psychological and emotional resources necessary to interpret these experiences constructively, thereby strengthening vocational identity and long-term commitment.

A central finding was that psycho-affective maturity fostered an internalised commitment to celibacy rooted in self-understanding rather than external compliance. Participants explained that psycho-sexual formation encouraged them to reflect critically on their vocation and to embrace celibacy as a personal choice instead of merely conforming to institutional expectations. One participant explained, "It helped me understand why I chose this life and not just follow rules because I am in formation" (FGD 2, Participant 8). Another observed that psycho-sexual formation "helps you understand your identity, your vocation, and the vow of celibacy" (FGD 3, Participant 20). Similarly, an interview participant reflected that "psycho-sexual formation helped me freely choose celibacy not as an escape from women or marriage" (IDI, Participant 3). These narratives demonstrate that psycho-affective maturity strengthened vocational identity by promoting ownership of one's calling, allowing participants to remain committed because of personal conviction rather than institutional pressure.

Participants further explained that psycho-affective maturity enabled them to respond more effectively to the emotional realities of celibate life, particularly loneliness and attraction. Rather than interpreting these experiences as evidence of vocational failure, they came to recognise them as normal aspects of human life requiring healthy coping strategies. One participant reflected, "There are moments when loneliness becomes very real, especially after ordination when community life changes" (FGD 4, Participant 28). Another participant explained that psycho-sexual formation "helped me understand that intimacy is not only about marriage. You can still build meaningful relationships and express care in community life" (FGD 5, Participant 33). Likewise, participants consistently emphasised that understanding attraction as a normal human experience reduced unnecessary guilt and anxiety. As one participant explained, "It helped us understand that attraction is human and that what matters is how you respond to it" (FGD 2, Participant 11). These findings indicate that psycho-affective maturity equipped participants with healthier ways of interpreting emotional experiences, thereby reducing emotional distress and strengthening vocational stability.

Participants also associated psycho-affective maturity with long-term perseverance in ministry. They explained that sustaining celibate commitment depended not on avoiding emotional challenges but on developing the resilience to navigate them without losing vocational purpose. One participant remarked, "Without emotional maturity, sustaining celibacy becomes very difficult because challenges continue throughout ministry" (FGD 1, Participant 2). Supporting this view, an interview participant observed that candidates who had received integrated psycho-sexual formation were generally better prepared to manage the emotional demands of ministry and were more likely to demonstrate stability and fulfilment in their vocation (IDI, Participant 2). Collectively, these findings suggest that psycho-affective maturity constitutes the psychological foundation of a healthy vocational identity by fostering internalised commitment, enabling adaptive responses to emotional challenges, and sustaining long-term engagement in celibate ministry.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that participants perceived integrated psycho-sexual formation as a developmental process that promotes psycho-affective maturity through enhanced self-awareness, emotional regulation, relational competence, and identity integration. These competencies strengthened participants' vocational ownership, enabling them to

navigate the emotional demands of celibate life with greater resilience and authenticity. The findings further suggest that psycho-affective maturity serves as the mechanism through which integrated psycho-sexual formation fosters healthy vocational identity and supports the long-term sustainability of celibate commitment.

Discussion of Findings

Integrated Psycho-Sexual Formation as a Catalyst for Psycho-Affective Growth

The evidence generated by this study indicates that integrated psycho-sexual formation functions as a catalyst for psycho-affective growth by enabling Catholic celibates to develop self-awareness, emotional understanding, and a coherent integration of their psychological, spiritual, and vocational identities. Participants consistently described psycho-sexual formation as a developmental process that moved beyond imparting knowledge about sexuality to facilitating personal growth and vocational discernment. Rather than perceiving sexuality as a threat to celibate living, they came to understand it as a normal dimension of human existence that could be acknowledged, reflected upon, and integrated into their commitment to priestly life. This finding reinforces a growing body of scholarship that advocates a shift from behaviour-centred models of formation towards holistic approaches that integrate human, psychological, spiritual, and pastoral development.

The present findings are consistent with Gascon's (2021) framework for affective and psycho-sexual formation, which argues that priestly formation should intentionally cultivate affective integration rather than focus predominantly on behavioural conformity or disciplinary control. Gascon maintains that psycho-sexual maturity develops when seminarians are helped to understand their sexuality within the broader context of human development and vocational identity, a position echoed by participants in the present study who viewed psycho-sexual education as central to understanding themselves and their vocation. Likewise, Menu (2020) demonstrated that St Thomas Aquinas' teaching on affectivity provides a helpful understanding of affective maturity and its integral importance for priestly life, emphasising that affective maturity is an essential attribute for seminarians preparing for ministry. Similar conclusions were reached by Dinh Van Trong (2024), whose exploratory study of Vietnamese seminaries identified substantial deficiencies in psycho-sexual formation and recommended greater emphasis on psychosexual integration as a prerequisite for mature celibate commitment.

The findings also resonate with recent conceptual and empirical scholarship examining the relationship between psycho-spiritual formation and vocational development. Domingos et al. (2026), drawing on Self-Determination Theory, demonstrated that effective priestly formation enhances seminarians' fulfilment of the psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, thereby strengthening meaning in life and vocational commitment. Their findings suggest that holistic formation promotes internal motivation rather than external compliance, which closely mirrors participants' accounts in the current study of embracing celibacy through personal conviction instead of institutional obligation. Similarly, Egunjobi (2022) argues that healthy psycho-sexual formation requires integrating sexuality, identity, relational boundaries, and psycho-spiritual accompaniment rather than encouraging repression or emotional avoidance. The present findings support this argument by demonstrating that participants experienced psycho-sexual formation as a process of emotional integration rather than emotional suppression.

Beyond Catholic seminaries, broader research on spiritual formation also supports these observations. Jankowski et al. (2026) found that mature spiritual formation among seminary students is positively associated with psychological well-being and healthier interpersonal functioning, suggesting that human formation and spiritual growth are mutually reinforcing

rather than competing dimensions. Likewise, Aragon (2023) reported that spiritual well-being among seminarians was closely linked with resilience and vocational stability, reinforcing the proposition that holistic formation strengthens both psychological health and vocational perseverance. Ayegwalo (2024) similarly argues that contemporary seminaries must revisit traditional formation models to respond to the complex psychological and social realities facing today's seminarians, advocating formation programmes that integrate emotional, spiritual, and relational development.

Nevertheless, the present study extends existing scholarship in important respects. While studies by Gascon (2021), Menu (2020), and Dinh Van Trong (2024) primarily focus on designing formation frameworks or evaluating seminary programmes, the current study provides rich phenomenological evidence of how psycho-sexual formation is experienced by Catholic celibates themselves. Participants described not only the outcomes of formation but also the internal developmental processes through which emotional awareness, self-understanding, and vocational identity gradually emerged. These experiential accounts offer insights that quantitative and conceptual studies have been less able to capture. Furthermore, whereas much of the available literature originates from Europe, North America, or Asia, this study contributes evidence from Kenyan Catholic formation centres, thereby extending understanding of psycho-sexual formation within an African socio-cultural context where discussions of sexuality often remain constrained by cultural and institutional norms.

The findings can also be interpreted through the lens of Self-Determination Theory, which posits that optimal psychological functioning occurs when individuals experience autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Participants consistently described integrated psycho-sexual formation as creating opportunities for reflection, dialogue, emotional understanding, and relational support that enabled them to internalise rather than merely comply with vocational expectations. In this regard, the curriculum appeared to satisfy the three basic psychological needs proposed by Self-Determination Theory by fostering ownership of vocational choices, confidence in managing emotional experiences, and healthy relationships within the formation community. These observations closely correspond with the structural model reported by Domingos et al. (2026), which identified fulfilment of basic psychological needs as the mechanism through which priestly formation enhances meaning in life and vocational commitment.

Taken together, these findings suggest that integrated psycho-sexual formation should be understood not as an isolated educational component but as a foundational process through which psycho-affective maturity is cultivated. The principal contribution of the present study lies in demonstrating, through the lived experiences of Catholic celibates, that psycho-sexual formation facilitates the integration of emotional, psychological, spiritual, and vocational dimensions into a coherent identity. This extends current scholarship by providing qualitative evidence that psycho-affective growth is not an incidental outcome of seminary education but a central mechanism through which healthy vocational identity and sustainable celibate commitment are developed, particularly within the context of Catholic formation in Kenya.

Psycho-Affective Competencies Developed Through Integrated Psycho-Sexual Formation

The study findings demonstrate that integrated psycho-sexual formation contributes to the development of psycho-affective competencies that are essential for sustaining celibate commitment. Participants consistently associated emotional awareness, emotional regulation, identity integration, relational maturity, and resilience with structured psycho-sexual formation rather than with age or religious commitment alone. These findings align with the *Ratio Fundamental Institutionis Sacerdotalis*, which positions human formation as the foundation

of priestly formation and emphasises affective maturity, self-knowledge, emotional balance, and healthy interpersonal relationships as indispensable qualities for ministry (Congregation for the Clergy, 2016). Similar conclusions have been reached by Menu (2020), who argues that affective maturity develops through intentional formation that integrates psychological, relational, spiritual, and vocational dimensions rather than through behavioural regulation alone. Likewise, studies on emotional intelligence in ministry demonstrate that emotionally mature clergy exhibit greater relational competence, vocational stability, and pastoral effectiveness (Jankowski et al., 2026).

The findings further reinforce contemporary scholarship suggesting that emotional regulation and identity integration are central mechanisms through which vocational commitment is strengthened. Egunjobi (2022) argues that healthy psycho-sexual formation enables candidates to acknowledge sexuality and emotional experiences without repression, thereby fostering authentic relationships and mature vocational identity. Similarly, Binyenya (2026) identifies emotional resilience, adaptive coping, and identity integration as significant predictors of vocational perseverance in religious life, while research on religious orientation and maturity among Catholic priestly candidates demonstrates that religious maturity is intrinsically linked to vocational commitment and psychological well-being (Purwaningtyas & Ampera, 2026). From a psychological perspective, Domingos et al. (2026) further demonstrate that formation environments promoting autonomy, competence, and relatedness enhance meaning in life and vocational commitment among seminarians. Collectively, these studies support the present finding that psycho-affective competencies are developmental capacities cultivated through integrated formation rather than fixed personal attributes.

Although previous studies have acknowledged the importance of affective maturity, emotional intelligence, and resilience in priestly formation, most have examined these constructs independently or within broader models of human formation. The present study extends this scholarship by demonstrating that emotional awareness, self-regulation, relational maturity, identity integration, and resilience are experienced by Catholic celibates as interconnected dimensions of a single developmental process facilitated by integrated psycho-sexual formation. Guided by Self-Determination Theory, the findings further suggest that these competencies emerge because psycho-sexual formation satisfies candidates' needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness through reflection, accompaniment, and supportive relationships. Consequently, this study contributes empirical evidence from the Kenyan Catholic context by illustrating that psycho-affective competencies constitute the psychological pathway through which integrated psycho-sexual formation strengthens sustainable celibate commitment, thereby enriching contemporary debates on holistic priestly formation.

Institutional Strategies for Strengthening Integrated Psycho-Sexual Formation

The findings indicate that strengthening psycho-sexual formation requires more than curriculum revision; it demands institutional cultures that intentionally promote holistic human development. Participants consistently emphasised continuous formation, competent formators, and interactive learning as critical strategies for enhancing psycho-affective maturity and sustainable celibacy. These findings are consistent with the *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis*, which positions human formation as the foundation of priestly formation and advocates an integrated approach that develops emotional, relational, spiritual, and pastoral capacities simultaneously (Congregation for the Clergy, 2016). Similarly, McGlone and Sperry (2012) argue that effective priestly formation requires intentional collaboration between formators and psychologists to integrate psychological development with spiritual formation. Rossetti (2020) further contends that seminarians flourish when formation moves beyond academic instruction to include structured opportunities for emotional

growth, self-reflection, and supervised accompaniment. Likewise, Keenan (2019) maintains that human formation should cultivate emotional maturity and relational competence through experiential learning rather than relying solely on doctrinal instruction. Collectively, these studies reinforce the present finding that psycho-sexual formation should be understood as a continuous developmental process supported by competent formation personnel and learner-centred pedagogies.

The present findings also highlight the importance of psychologically safe formation environments characterised by confidentiality, mentorship, counselling, and trusting relationships between formators and formees. Participants perceived these institutional practices as prerequisites for honest emotional disclosure and healthy psycho-sexual development. This finding aligns with Edmondson's (2019) theory of psychological safety, which demonstrates that individuals are more willing to acknowledge vulnerabilities and engage in meaningful learning when environments are free from fear of judgement or punishment. Similar observations have been reported within religious formation. Zollner (2021) argues that safeguarding within seminaries depends not only on policies but also on institutional cultures that encourage openness, accountability, and psychological safety. McGlone (2010) similarly emphasises that healthy priestly formation requires confidential accompaniment, emotional transparency, and professional psychological support, while Sandage et al. (2020) found that reflective supervision and mentoring significantly strengthen emotional growth and vocational resilience among ministers. Together with Gula's (2021) advocacy for relational trust and ethical accompaniment in formation, these studies support the present finding that mentorship, counselling, and confidentiality are not peripheral services but central institutional mechanisms through which psycho-sexual formation becomes effective.

Although previous studies have consistently advocated holistic formation, most have focused on institutional policies, safeguarding frameworks, or psychological interventions independently. The present study extends this literature by demonstrating how Catholic celibates themselves experience institutional practices as either enabling or constraining psycho-sexual integration. Participants viewed continuous formation, competent formators, psychological safety, mentorship, counselling, and contextualised learning as interdependent rather than isolated strategies. Interpreted through Self-Determination Theory, these institutional practices create environments that satisfy candidates' needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, thereby promoting deeper internalisation of vocational values and greater psycho-affective maturity. Consequently, this study contributes evidence from the Kenyan Catholic context by demonstrating that the successful integration of psycho-sexual curricula depends less on curriculum content alone than on formation environments that intentionally cultivate trust, dialogue, professional accompaniment, and holistic human development. These findings underscore the need for Catholic formation institutions to move beyond compliance-based models towards psychologically informed and relationally supportive systems capable of sustaining lifelong celibate commitment.

Conclusion

The study concludes that integrated psycho-sexual formation is fundamental to fostering psycho-affective maturity and sustaining celibate commitment among Catholic celibates. Rather than functioning as a supplementary component of seminary education, participants perceived psycho-sexual formation as a developmental process that enabled them to understand their emotions, integrate their sexuality with their vocational identity, and develop the psychological capacities necessary for lifelong celibate living. The findings demonstrate that sustainable celibacy is supported not by behavioural conformity or institutional discipline alone but by holistic formation that nurtures emotional awareness, self-regulation, relational maturity, resilience, and vocational ownership.

The study further concludes that psycho-affective maturity develops through intentional formation experiences that integrate psychological, spiritual, and relational dimensions of human development. Participants consistently associated emotional growth with structured psycho-sexual education, reflective accompaniment, and opportunities for honest engagement with personal experiences. These competencies were found to strengthen vocational stability by enabling candidates to manage loneliness, attraction, emotional challenges, and interpersonal relationships in healthy and constructive ways. The study therefore affirms that psycho-affective maturity constitutes a critical pathway through which integrated psycho-sexual formation promotes sustainable celibate commitment.

Finally, the effectiveness of integrated psycho-sexual formation depends not only on curriculum content but also on the institutional environment within which formation occurs. Formation centres that promote competent accompaniment, continuous formation, mentorship, counselling, confidentiality, and psychological safety provide conditions that facilitate deeper personal integration and vocational commitment. Consequently, strengthening psycho-sexual formation requires Catholic formation institutions to adopt holistic and psychologically informed formation models that integrate human, spiritual, intellectual, and pastoral formation. Such an approach is essential for preparing emotionally mature, resilient, and vocationally grounded celibates capable of sustaining healthy and authentic ministry.

Recommendations

Based on the finding that psycho-sexual formation was often fragmented, inconsistent, and introduced late in the formation process, Catholic seminaries and religious formation houses should institutionalise a structured and developmentally sequenced psycho-sexual curriculum across all stages of formation. The curriculum should integrate psycho-affective development, emotional regulation, healthy relationships, vocational identity, and celibate living into existing human formation programmes rather than offering them as isolated seminars. Delivering the curriculum progressively from admission through post-ordination formation will enable candidates to acquire and consolidate the psycho-affective competencies required for sustainable celibate commitment.

The study further found that the effectiveness of psycho-sexual formation depended largely on the competence of formators and the availability of safe spaces for emotional accompaniment. Consequently, seminary leadership, religious institutes, and the Kenya Conference of Catholic Bishops should strengthen the capacity of formation personnel through continuous professional development in psycho-sexual formation, counselling, emotional intelligence, and accompaniment. Formation institutions should also establish confidential counselling and structured mentorship programmes supported by qualified psychologists and experienced spiritual directors to encourage early disclosure of psycho-sexual concerns and provide timely psychological support before challenges escalate.

Finally, because participants consistently associated psycho-affective maturity with supportive institutional environments characterised by trust, confidentiality, and open dialogue, Catholic formation institutions should develop institutional policies that promote psychological safety within formation communities. These policies should clearly define confidentiality procedures, encourage non-punitive responses to emotional disclosure, and promote regular evaluation of psycho-sexual formation programmes. Such measures will foster formation environments that support holistic human development and enhance the long-term sustainability of celibate commitment among Catholic clergy and religious.

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