

The Role of Spiritual Intelligence in the Religious Life of Catholic Nuns: A Religious Psychology Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the role of spiritual intelligence in sustaining the religious life of Catholic nuns from the perspective of religious psychology. Monastic life demands psychological fortitude, spiritual commitment, and adaptive ability in community dynamics and pastoral ministry. However, previous studies have tended to highlight resilience, religious experience, or emotional intelligence, while the contribution of spiritual intelligence has rarely been explored empirically. Source searches were conducted on the Scopus, Google Scholar, and Garuda databases with the keywords spiritual intelligence, religious life, Catholic nuns, and psychological resilience. Out of the initial 50 documents, 17 articles were selected according to the inclusion criteria and analyzed using the thematic approach of Braun and Clarke (2006). The synthesis of literature produces four main themes. First, spiritual intelligence becomes a source of meaning in life through the appreciation of religious vows, the practice of spiritual reflection, and pastoral service. Second, spiritual intelligence aids emotional-spiritual integration in the community by emphasizing prayer, reflection, and forgiveness to manage interpersonal conflicts. Third, spiritual intelligence encourages pastoral ministry as a form of personal relationship with God, not just an institutional obligation. Fourth, spiritual intelligence strengthens psychological resilience through the process of meaning-making and transcendence of self that allows nuns to transcend the ego and discover the depth of meaning of life. This study affirms spiritual intelligence as an important determinant of the quality of religious life and provides practical implications for Catholic nuns' formation programs that integrate spiritual and psychological formation.

KEYWORDS

spiritual intelligence, religious psychology, Catholic nuns, resilience



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INTRODUCTION

Religious life is a vocation that requires earnestness, commitment, and perseverance in living spiritual values consistently. For nuns, this process includes the practice of prayer and contemplation, community dynamics, and involvement in pastoral ministry in the community. The challenges faced are not only spiritual, but also psychological and social, from community adaptation to the maintenance of intimacy with the Divine.

Various studies have examined these dynamics from different perspectives. Syahidah (2024) highlights the religious experiences of RSCJ nuns in Bandung, revealing the phenomenological dimensions of their spiritual journey. Sarereake and Nugroho (2023) discuss the resilience of Franciscan junior sisters, demonstrating how early formation shapes adaptive capacity. Meanwhile, Oeleu and Barus (2024) and Tima and Muti'ah (2014) emphasize the link between emotional intelligence and resilience, showing the importance of affective regulation in religious communities. Hagang (2015) examines the meaning of nuns' lives through existential-phenomenological approaches. Outside the context of nuns, studies on spiritual intelligence and prosocial behavior (Rachmasari, 2024) as well as students' psychological well-being (Fikriyyah, 2024) confirm the broad relevance of these concepts to quality of life.

Theoretically, spiritual intelligence has been conceptualized as a distinct form of intelligence. King (2008) emphasizes that spiritual intelligence is closely related to the search for meaning in life and self-regulation, while Zohar and Marshall (2000) place it as the foundation of intelligence that brings IQ and EQ together. Local findings also strengthen this relevance; Nugroho's study (2022) linked spiritual intelligence to the mental intelligence of pastoral workers in Java, providing contextual evidence within Indonesian Catholic communities.

However, the specific contribution of spiritual intelligence in sustaining religious life is still rarely studied. Most studies emphasize the emotional or existential dimension, whereas spiritual intelligence has the potential to explain how nuns cope with community dynamics, maintain ministry motivation, and integrate the meaning of life. Draper (2009) defines spiritual intelligence as the human capacity to explore deep meanings, live transcendent values, and unite all dimensions of existence in harmony. Different from intellectual intelligence (IQ) and emotional intelligence (EQ), spiritual intelligence emphasizes the search for meaning and inner appreciation. Goleman (1997) emphasized the importance of emotional intelligence in managing relationships, but in the religious realm that requires a transcendental orientation, emotional intelligence needs to be complemented by spiritual intelligence in order to form a complete religious personality.

Recent international research reinforces the relevance of this topic across diverse cultural contexts. Collazos Ugarte, Crea and Swaminathan (2024) in a study of nuns in Italy found that emotional intelligence, faith orientation, and time perspective are closely interacted in sustaining religious resilience. Khai and Medina (2024) demonstrated the significant relationship between spiritual well-being and psychological well-being among Catholic clergy in Myanmar. Similar findings were also shown by Chukwurah (2023) in Nigeria who found that spiritual intelligence is able to reduce psychological distress in seminarians. More recently, a scoping review by Nurse Education in Practice (2023) synthesized evidence on spiritual intelligence interventions, highlighting their potential to enhance mental well-being across various populations.

Based on these gaps, this study aims to examine the role of spiritual intelligence in the religious life of Catholic nuns, especially its contribution to psychological resilience, life meaning, and religious well-being. This paper is expected to enrich the literature on religious psychology in Indonesia and provide theoretical and practical implications for the nuns' formation program.

METHOD

This study employed a thematic literature review following the framework of Braun and Clarke (2006) to synthesize existing research on spiritual intelligence in the context of Catholic religious life. The literature search was carried out using the keywords spiritual intelligence, religious life, Catholic nuns, and psychological resilience and their equivalents in Indonesian. The databases used include Scopus, Google Scholar, and Garuda. Inclusion criteria were established as follows:

1. Scientific journal articles or dissertations published in 2010–2024;

2. Presenting empirical data or conceptual studies related to spiritual intelligence, religious life, or religious psychology;
3. Available in full text in Indonesian or English.

Exclusion criteria included: (a) studies focusing solely on general religiosity without specific reference to spiritual intelligence; (b) non-peer-reviewed sources; and (c) studies unrelated to Catholic religious communities or comparable contexts.

Of the initial 50 documents identified through database searches, 17 selected articles were analyzed using the thematic analysis of Braun and Clarke (2006). The stages include: (1) familiarization of data through repeated reading; (2) the creation of initial code to mark relevant concepts or findings; (3) theme search through code grouping; (4) theme review to ensure compatibility with the data; (5) definition and naming of themes; and (6) writing a report that presents the main theme along with quotes or summaries of findings from each source. Table 1 summarizes the review process:

Table 1. Literature Review Process

Stage	Description	Outcome
Initial Search	Database search using keywords	50 documents identified
Screening	Application of inclusion/exclusion criteria	32 documents excluded
Final Selection	Full-text review for relevance and quality	17 articles selected for analysis
Thematic Analysis	Coding and theme development following Braun & Clarke (2006)	4 major themes identified

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

1. Spiritual Intelligence as a Source of Meaning in Life

In line with Draper's (2009) definition, spiritual intelligence allows a person or individual to reflect deeply on the meaning of life and connect experiences with transcendental dimensions. For Catholic nuns, this transcendental dimension manifests specifically through three interconnected elements: religious vows (purity, poverty, obedience), pastoral ministry and spiritual reflection. Each element serves as both a practice and a pathway through which nuns experience and construct life meaning. Hagang's findings (2015) also emphasized the importance of the meaning of life in strengthening the religious vocation of nuns. More recent research by Khai and Medina (2024) corroborates this finding, demonstrating that spiritual well-being rooted in meaning-making processes significantly predicts overall psychological well-being among clergy members. This suggests that spiritual intelligence functions not merely as a cognitive capacity but as a lived experience that transforms daily religious practices into sources of profound existential meaning.

2. Emotional–Spiritual Integration in Community Dynamics

Interpersonal conflicts in the religious community of Catholic nuns can be controlled so as not to cause conflict through spiritual reflection, prayer, and forgiveness. In practice,

emotional–spiritual integration operates through three key mechanisms. In the application of spiritual reflection, a sister can every night reevaluate her daily activities, be grateful for the grace received, recognize weaknesses and then surrender them to the Divine in prayer. A Sister also needs to recite prayers in the context of community prayer, contemplative prayer and ministry prayer because prayer is actually the center of spiritual life, a means of community unity, the power of strength as well as the path to unity with God. And in the end, forgiveness is an important part so that the life of the community is maintained, forgiveness is also an effort to heal inner wounds, a reflection of God's infinite love. This is in line with Goleman's (1997) opinion that the regulation of emotions is extended to a transcendental dimension, as shown in the studies of Tima and Muti'ah (2014) and Oeleu and Barus (2024) on the role of emotional intelligence underpinned by spirituality. The Italian context study by Collazos Ugarte et al. (2024) further illuminates this integration, demonstrating how emotional intelligence and faith orientation interact synergistically to sustain resilience in religious communities. This cross-cultural evidence strengthens the universality of spiritual intelligence as a mediating factor between emotional experiences and spiritual growth.

3. Spiritual Intelligence as a Motivation for Pastoral Service

Rachmasari's research (2024) shows that spiritual intelligence encourages prosocial behavior. In the context of religious life, this prosocial orientation is manifested in pastoral service, educational work, health, humanity and service to the poor and displaced as a form of God's infinite love. Importantly, nuns with high spiritual intelligence interpret pastoral ministry as a manifestation of a personal relationship with God, not merely as an obligation of the monastery or the institute under its patronage. This intrinsic motivation distinguishes spiritually intelligent pastoral service from duty-driven service, resulting in greater sustainability and deeper personal fulfillment. The distinction aligns with self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), which posits that intrinsically motivated behaviors are more resilient to burnout and external pressures a particularly relevant consideration for those in demanding ministry contexts.

4. Contribution to Psychological Resilience

The literature on nuns' resilience (Sarereake and Nugroho, 2023) and the relationship between spiritual intelligence and psychological well-being (Fikriyyah, 2024) emphasizes that the meaning-making process and transcendence of self are the key to facing loneliness and ministry pressure. This is consistent with international studies, such as the research of Khai and Medina (2024) which shows the significance of spiritual well-being and psychological well-being among young and senior priests in Myanmar as well as Chukwurah (2023) on Catholic seminaries in Nigeria which emphasizes the role of spiritual intelligence in reducing psychological distress.

The integration of these two processes helps Catholic nuns find deep meaning in each inner experience and leads them to transcend the ego so that the meaning found does not stop at oneself but is directed to God the Creator and the service of love. Thus both become the spiritual-psychological foundations that sustain resilience, spiritual maturity and quality of life. Furthermore, the scoping review by Nurse Education in Practice (2023) provides systematic evidence that spiritual intelligence-based interventions can effectively enhance mental well-

being across diverse populations, including healthcare professionals and religious practitioners. This evidence base suggests that spiritual intelligence operates as a protective psychological resource, buffering against stress and facilitating adaptive coping in demanding vocational contexts.

A synthesis of the four themes reveals that spiritual intelligence serves as an integrative foundation in the life of Catholic nuns that not only strengthens emotional regulation but also leads to life meaning, resilience, and transcendental orientation. These findings complement previous studies that focused more on emotional intelligence or religious experiences alone. This result is in line with King (2008) who shows that spiritual intelligence plays an important role in developing meaning-making and life purpose. Zohar and Marshall (2000) even call it the most basic intelligence because it is the deepest source of human motivation.

Recent international research reinforces these findings across multiple cultural contexts. Collazos Ugarte et al. (2024) underline that emotional intelligence combined with faith played an important role in the religious life of Italian nuns. The Khai and Medina (2024) study in Myanmar and Chukwurah (2023) in Nigeria show that spiritual intelligence and spiritual well-being are determinants of psychological well-being in the Catholic religious community. Meanwhile, the scoping review by Nurse Education in practice (2023) emphasized that spiritual intelligence-based interventions can improve mental well-being, which is relevant for the nuns' formation program.

In the religious context, Kosasih's research (2022) demonstrates that religiosity has a significant positive impact on psychological well-being. Thus, religious spiritual intelligence can be understood as a determinant of the quality of religious life not only complementing emotional intelligence but also strengthening spiritual connectedness and a deep sense of meaning in life.

CONCLUSION

This research confirms that spiritual intelligence is an important determinant for the sustainability of the religious life of Catholic nuns. The four identified themes meaning-making, emotional-spiritual integration, pastoral motivation, and psychological resilience demonstrate the multifaceted role of spiritual intelligence in sustaining vocational commitment and well-being among religious women.

Based on these findings, religious formation programs are recommended to: (1) strengthen the practice of reflection and contemplation through structured spiritual exercises and guided meditation programs; (2) integrate emotion regulation training with spiritual coaching to foster holistic affective-spiritual development; and (3) provide spiritual intelligence-based religious psychology assistance that addresses both the transcendent and psychological dimensions of religious life.

Despite these contributions, this study has several limitations. First, as a literature review, it lacks primary empirical data from direct observation or interviews with Catholic nuns. Second, the limited number of recent studies (2019–2025) specifically addressing spiritual intelligence in religious contexts suggests the need for more contemporary empirical research. Future studies should employ mixed-methods approaches combining quantitative assessment

of spiritual intelligence with qualitative exploration of lived experiences. Additionally, longitudinal research examining the development of spiritual intelligence across different stages of religious formation would provide valuable insights for training program design.

Nevertheless, this study contributes to the growing body of evidence affirming spiritual intelligence as a critical psychological resource in religious vocations, with practical implications for formation programs seeking to nurture both the spiritual and psychological well-being of Catholic nuns.

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