

Mario Oscar LLANOS

José Alexander MARTÍNEZ

Salesian Pontifical University, Italy
Popiežiškasis saleziečių universitetas, Italija

When a Priest's Vocation Trembles: Priestly Crisis, Accompaniment, and the Path to Paschal Rebirth

KAI SUSVYRUOJA KUNIGO PAŠAUKIMAS: KUNIGYSTĖS KRIZĖ, PALYDĖJIMAS IR KELIAS Į VELYKINĮ ATGIMIMĄ

SUMMARY. This article explores the contemporary crisis of Catholic priests as a multidimensional phenomenon that is at once psychological, spiritual, ecclesial, and cultural. Drawing on international research on priestly burnout and malaise, as well as the magisterium of Pope Francis, it interprets crisis not simply as failure, but as a theological *locus* and a potential “second call” in the life of the priest. After analyzing the roots of the crisis—personal fragility, weakened spiritual life, structural factors, and a post-Christian cultural context—the article examines priestly solitude as both wound and possible space of grace. It then develops a theology and pedagogy of accompaniment that integrates episcopal care, priestly fraternity, personal spiritual guidance, psychological support and the contribution of laypeople. Attention is given to ongoing formation as prevention, to emerging ecclesial initiatives (such as Emmaus-type fraternities and specialized communities), and to structured processes of recovery for priests in serious difficulty. The article argues that caring for wounded priests is not a marginal task, but a concrete form of ecclesial charity and a test of the Church's credibility. In conclusion, it proposes the figure of the priest as a “paschal sign,” whose reconciled fragility can become a source of hope and accompaniment for others.

SANTRAUKA. Šiame straipsnyje šiuolaikinė katalikų kunigų krizė nagrinėjama kaip daugialypis reiškiny, apimantis psichologinę, dvasinę, bažnytinę ir kultūrinę plotmes. Remiantis tarptautiniais kunigų perdegimo ir savijautos tyrimais bei popiežiaus Pranciškaus mokymu, krizė interpretuojama ne vien kaip nesėkmė, bet ir kaip teologinis *locus* bei galimas „antrasis pašaukimas“ kunigo gyvenime. Išanalizavus krizės ištakas – asmeninį trapumą, susilpnėjusį dvasinį gyvenimą, struktūrinius veiksnius ir postkrikščionišką kultūrinį

kontekstą, – kunigo vienatvė suprantama kaip žaizda ir kartu kaip galima malonės erdvė. Toliau plėtojama palydėjimo teologija ir pedagogika, apimanti vyskupo rūpinimąsi kunigais, kunigų tarpusavio brolystę, asmeninį dvasinį vadovavimą, psichologinę pagalbą ir pasauliečių indėlį. Kaip prevencinė priemonė aptariamas nuolatinis ugdymas, skiriama dėmesio naujoms bažnytinėms iniciatyvoms (pavyzdžiui, „Emmaus“ tipo brolijoms ir specializuotoms bendruomenėms), organizuotai pagalbai, teikiama didelių sunkumų patiriantiems kunigams. Straipsnyje teigiama, kad rūpinimasis sunkumų patiriančiais kunigais yra ne antraeilė užduotis, bet konkreti bažnytinės meilės išraiška ir Bažnyčios patikimumo išbandymas. Galiausiai straipsnyje kunigas pristatomas kaip „vėlykinis ženklas“: jo priimtas trapumas gali tapti vilties ir palydėjimo šaltiniu kitiems.

KEYWORDS: priestly crisis, pastoral accompaniment, burnout and resilience, priestly fraternity, ongoing formation, wounded healers.

RAKTAŽODŽIAI: kunigystės krizė, pastoracinis palydėjimas, perdegimas ir atsparumas, kunigų brolystė, nuolatinis ugdymas, sužeisti gydytojai.

Introduction: Crisis as a Theological and Cultural *Locus*

In recent decades, the Church has found herself facing a phenomenon unprecedented in its breadth and complexity: the vocational and ministerial crisis of the priest. This is not merely a question of numbers or the average age of the clergy, but a crisis of meaning that touches the very root of priestly identity within the context of profound anthropological and cultural transformation.¹ In this article, we seek to explore this topic, which is of vital importance for the life of the Church at this particular moment of her history, and to propose a pedagogical-vocational approach to prevention and care.

We live in a “post-Christian time”—as Pope Francis reminded the Roman Curia—in which “we are no longer in a Christian regime,” since faith “no longer constitutes an obvious presupposition of common life” and “is often rejected, derided, marginalized and ridiculed.”² In this new context, the priest is no longer a socially recognized figure but rather a countercultural sign, called to bear witness to the Gospel in a fragmented, fluid, and often indifferent environment. The loss of symbolic reference points and the transformation of collective religiosity directly affect the personal experience of the priest, who often finds himself living out his ministry in solitude and with a strong sense of disorientation.

The phenomenology of the priestly crisis is now documented in various international studies. Giovanni Cucci, SJ, in a broad analysis published in *La Civiltà Cattolica*, speaks of a “structural crisis” of ordained ministry, marked by isolation, pastoral overload, lack of fraternity, and a diminished interior life. Data collected in France,

¹ Cf. Víctor Manuel Fernández, “La crisis cultural y la vida de los sacerdotes,” *Revista Vida Pastoral* no. 255 (2005), https://mercaba.org/ARTICULOS/C/crisis_cultural_y_la_vida_de.htm.

² Pope Francis, “Christmas Greetings of the Holy Father to the Roman Curia,” *Vatican.va*, December 21, 2019, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2019/december/documents/papa-francesco_20191221_curia-romana.html.

Italy, and Brazil reveal concerning rates of priests experiencing depressive symptoms, burnout, and ministerial disaffection. This malaise does not arise solely from individual difficulties but also from an ecclesial and cultural context that has undergone profound change: "The priest risks becoming," writes G. Cucci, "a functionary of the sacred, overwhelmed by bureaucracy and fragmentation, with little possibility of cultivating meaningful relationships."³

Behind this reality lies a silent suffering, often unacknowledged, that runs through the lives of many ordained ministers: a sense of uselessness, the perception of no longer being understood, and the inability to reconcile one's vocational ideal with the concrete daily life of ministry. In the words of the Pope to the members of the Dicastery for the Clergy: "Many priests are too alone. The journey is not made alone. It is essential that priests feel at home, part of a network of fraternal relationships."⁴

This solitude, more than a marginal symptom, is a sign of a deep ecclesial malaise that questions the entire Christian community: bishops, confreres, and lay faithful.

In this context, accompaniment cannot be reduced to an emergency strategy or a gesture of pity toward those in difficulty. It is a constitutive dimension of ecclesial life and of the very pastoral configuration of ordained ministry. To accompany means recognizing that the priest's fragility is part of the Church's fragility and that every crisis is a theological *locus* in which God brings about purification and renewal.

Priestly ministry puts one in contact with numerous wounds of humanity, and the priest must first come to terms with his own wounds. In this way, he can foster growth and help others to overcome the consequences of their wounds. The priestly crisis, in this light, is not a sign of failure but a possibility of a *paschal* conversion, in which the minister, passing through the night of doubt and weariness, rediscovers the truth of his being a servant of the Gospel.⁵

1. The Roots of the Crisis: A Complex Phenomenon

The causes of the priestly crisis cannot be reduced to a single dimension. It is a *multifactorial* phenomenon that weaves together psychological, spiritual, relational, and institutional elements. Analyzing these causes means grasping the depth of the malaise, but also identifying the paths of renewal that the Church is called to undertake.

³ Cf. Giovanni Cucci, "Solitudine e disagio del prete: un problema strutturale?" *La Civiltà Cattolica*, no. 2 (2023): 535–48.

⁴ Adriana Masotti, "El sacerdote necesita una sólida red de relaciones fraternas," *Vatican News*, June 6, 2024, <https://www.vaticannews.va/es/papa/news/2024-06/el-sacerdote-necesita-una-solda-red-de-relaciones-fraternas.html>.

⁵ Cf. Pope Francis, "Letter of the Holy Father to the Priests of the Diocese of Rome," *Vatican.va*, August 5, 2023, <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/letters/2023/documents/20230805-lettera-sacerdoti.html>.

1.1 Personal and Psychological Dimensions

Many priests experience a progressive inner erosion, a sense of chronic fatigue that goes well beyond physical tiredness. Adrián López Galindo, a Jesuit and psychologist, describes it as “luminous tiredness,” that which arises from generous dedication that is not sufficiently nourished.⁶ When pastoral life becomes a race without pauses, the risk is ministerial burnout: loss of motivation, spiritual apathy, irritability, and relational difficulties.⁷

López Galindo notes that priestly burnout “has the same characteristics as that found in helping professions, but with an additional wound: that of meaning. When the mission loses its inner meaning, tiredness turns into emptiness.”⁸ The lack of spaces for emotional processing and honest dialogue with other brothers can lead to forms of defensive solitude, in which the priest closes in on himself to protect himself from judgment or failure.

1.2 Spiritual Dimensions

At the root of the crisis, there is often a fragility in the relationship with God. When prayer becomes merely functional, the Eucharistic celebration mechanical, and contact with the Word is reduced to preparing the homily, the priest risks losing the source of his identity.

Pope Francis has recalled this in clear words: “A priest’s spiritual life grows not when we patch up forms, but when we give the initiative to the Spirit”⁹ The minister’s heart is worn down when it does not draw from the source of grace; the crisis is then not only a psychological problem, but a crisis of faith, which calls for a return to what is essential.

1.3 Ecclesial and Structural Dimensions

Many analyses highlight that priestly malaise is also *the fruit of institutional dynamics*. Pastoral individualism, the fragmentation of parishes, administrative bureaucracy, and the lack of real fraternity among priests create a context that fosters solitude.

The *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis* emphasizes that “the primary responsibility for his own formation lies with the priest himself,”¹⁰ but it immediately

⁶ Cf. Adrián López Galindo, “El acompañamiento es bueno y recomendable durante toda la vida del sacerdote,” *diocesisplascencia.org*, accessed March 14, 2026, <https://diocesisplascencia.org/adrian-lopez-galindo-el-acompanamiento-es-bueno-y-recomendable-durante-toda-la-vida-del-sacerdote/>.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Galindo, “El acompañamiento es bueno...”

⁹ Pope Francis, “To Participants in the General Chapter of the Servants of the Paraclete,” June 24, 2023, <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2023/june/documents/20230624-servi-del-paraclito.html>.

¹⁰ Congregation for the Clergy, “The Gift of the Priestly Vocation” (Vatican City: L’Osservatore Romano, 2016), <https://www.clerus.va/content/dam/clerus/documenti/ratio-2026/Ratio-EN-2017-01-03.pdf>.

specifies that this responsibility is not exercised in isolation; it must be supported by a network of fraternal relationships and by constant spiritual guidance. When such structures are lacking or are lived only formally, the priest risks living as a “functionary of faith,” trapped in a system that values efficiency more than communion.

1.4 Cultural and Social Dimensions

The culture of performance, which measures everything in terms of visibility and success, also influences the way many priests perceive their ministry. Today, the priest finds himself competing with media languages, responding to immediate needs, and managing communities that are increasingly small and weary.

In a world that values youth and efficiency, the elderly priest feels “out of time,” while the young priest struggles to find credible models. Secularization, together with mistrust toward religious institutions following the scandals of recent years, generates a climate of suspicion that affects even those who live with fidelity and dedication. In this context, daily fidelity becomes an act of silent heroism, a spiritual resistance that needs to be supported and recognized.¹¹

1.5 Toward a Critical Reading of the Literature

The literature examined so far—predominantly pastoral-theological in character and largely originating from within ecclesiastical institutions themselves (Cucci, López Galindo, Moronta, the documents of the Congregation for the Clergy)—offers a rich phenomenological account of priestly malaise, but a critical reading should not overlook its methodological and perspectival limits. First, much of this literature is qualitative and geographically confined to a handful of national contexts—chiefly France, Italy, Brazil, and other Latin American countries¹²—without the benefit of longitudinal or cross-cultural comparative data; conclusions drawn from these sources should therefore be read as indicative rather than as a comprehensive diagnosis of the state of the priesthood worldwide. Second, and more encouragingly, quantitative sociological research offers a more differentiated picture than the largely elegiac tone of pastoral commentary might suggest: the National Study of Catholic Priests conducted by The Catholic Project at the Catholic University of America—the largest survey of its kind in over fifty years, drawing on more than 3,500 respondents—found that priests as a whole report significant levels of well-being, while identifying burnout as disproportionately concentrated among younger, more recently ordained clergy, and noting

¹¹ Cf. Fernández, “La crisis cultural y la vida de los sacerdotes,” 2.

¹² Cf. Cucci, “Solitudine e disagio del prete: un problema strutturale?”; Fernández, “La crisis cultural y la vida de los sacerdotes.” The pastoral and empirical literature surveyed above is drawn principally from France, Italy, Brazil and other Latin American contexts, without claim to global representativeness.

that diocesan priests fare markedly worse than those belonging to religious institutes.¹³ This finding usefully complicates any narrative that treats the crisis as monolithic or historically constant: it appears instead to be unevenly distributed across generations and canonical states of life, with direct implications for where the preventive efforts discussed in Section 5 ought to be concentrated. Third, part of the literature on clergy loneliness situates the phenomenon within ministry as an occupation, rather than within the specificity of the Catholic priesthood: comparative studies of Protestant and Anglican clergy report analogous patterns of isolation, role strain, and diminished informal support networks,¹⁴ suggesting that some of what is attributed here to a distinctly Catholic “post-conciliar” or “post-Christian” crisis may in fact reflect broader structural features of ministry in contemporary societies. Finally, a strand of theological-sociological scholarship argues more pointedly that clericalism itself—the very ecclesial culture this article, following Pope Francis, criticizes—and, more specifically, the discipline of mandatory celibacy for diocesan clergy, are not merely aggravating circumstances but structural causes of isolation that spiritual and psychological accompaniment alone cannot resolve, and that instead require a rethinking of priestly common life.¹⁵ Engaging with this line of critique does not commit us to its structural conclusions, but it does require us to be explicit about a methodological choice: our analysis privileges a theological-pastoral reading of crisis as *locus theologicus*, without thereby denying that the sociological and institutional factors it raises deserve independent empirical scrutiny that lies beyond the scope of this contribution.

2. The Priest’s Solitude: Between Wound and Grace

Among the most evident features of today’s priestly crisis, solitude stands out. It takes many forms: psychological, affective, spiritual, relational, and institutional. It is a complex reality that should not be demonized but understood. Solitude can indeed become a space of spiritual fruitfulness when it becomes a place of encounter with God; yet it can also become an abyss of emptiness when it turns into isolation and disconnection from the ecclesial body.

¹³ The Catholic Project, “Well-Being, Trust, and Policy in a Time of Crisis: Initial Findings from the National Study of Catholic Priests,” *The Catholic University of America*, October 19, 2022, <https://catholicproject.catholic.edu/national-study-of-catholic-priests/well-being-trust-and-policy/>.

¹⁴ Cf. Ryan C. Staley et al., “Strategies Employed by Clergy to Prevent and Cope with Interpersonal Isolation,” *George Fox University, Digital Commons*, accessed March 14, 2026, https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/context/gscp_fac/article/1127/viewcontent/Strategies_employed_by_clergy_to_prevent_and_cope_with_interpersonal_isolation_Gathercoal.pdf.

¹⁵ Cf. Vivencio Ballano, “Acedia, Loneliness, and the Mandatory Celibacy of Catholic Parish Clergy: A Theological-Sociological Exploratory Analysis,” *SSRN Working Paper*, March 31, 2022, https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=4027454.

Father Giovanni Cucci, SJ, studying the phenomenon in different countries, observes that today priestly solitude is “more intense and more ambiguous” than in the past: the priest is constantly surrounded by people, activities and messages, yet often has no one with whom to share the most intimate part of his life. This relational and affective solitude can degenerate into a sense of inadequacy, disaffection, and even self-disesteem. Hyperactivism becomes a form of compensation: “doing” in order not to “feel”.¹⁶

Bishop Mario Moronta, a Venezuelan bishop and profound connoisseur of the presbyteral world, speaks of “ecclesial orphanhood”¹⁷: many priests do not feel part of a living fraternity, but rather of a functional system that uses them as long as they produce. It is a painful diagnosis that calls for a paradigm shift: from the model of the priest as solitary hero to the model of a brother among brothers. Pope Francis insists on this point: “The presbyter is a man of communion, not a soloist. We cannot be priests without others.”¹⁸

2.1 Necessary Solitude and Pathological Isolation

Not all solitude is negative. There is a necessary solitude, proper to spiritual life, which allows one to listen to God and to restore the heart. It is the solitude of Jesus in his moments of prayer, the solitude that purifies and sets free. However, when solitude is prolonged without support, it can become abnormal or toxic isolation, marked by mistrust, closure, resentment, or escape.¹⁹

The passage from one to the other is often imperceptible: a period of unprocessed fatigue, an unreconciled conflict, a pastoral disappointment can slowly cause the priest to slip into a solitude that wounds rather than heals.

2.2 Relational and Cultural Causes

The causes of such isolation are multiple: the numerical decrease of priestly communities, geographical dispersion, the weakening of friendships, mutual suspicion, and a clerical culture that discourages vulnerability.²⁰ To this we must add the new digital

¹⁶ Cf. Cucci, “Solitudine e disagio del prete: un problema strutturale?”; José María Recondo, *Aprendiendo a amar como pastores: Eros y Agape en el corazón sacerdotal*, 3rd ed., En diálogo (Buenos Aires: Agape Libros, 2015), 101–107; Cf. Giovanni Cucci, “Solitudine e disagio del prete: un problema strutturale?” *La Civiltà Cattolica* II, no. 4152 (2023): 535–548, <https://www.laciviltacattolica.it/articolo/solitudine-e-disagio-del-prete-un-problema-strutturale/>.

¹⁷ Cf. Mons Mario Moronta, “Corregir y ayudar a los sacerdotes,” *Pastoral de la vocación*, January 3, 2022, <https://pastoraldelavocacion.org/cuidar/corregir-ayudar-sacerdotes/>.

¹⁸ Pope Francis, “International Theological Symposium on the Priesthood,” February 17, 2022, <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2022/february/documents/20220217-simposio-teologia-sacerdozio.html>

¹⁹ Cf. Cucci, “Solitudine e disagio del prete: un problema strutturale?”.

²⁰ Cf. Fernández, “La crisis cultural y la vida de los sacerdotes”; Cucci, “Solitudine e disagio del prete: un problema strutturale?”.

context, which amplifies connections but does not necessarily deepen relationships. As Adrián López Galindo notes, “connection does not generate communion: a priest can have hundreds of contacts yet no friend with whom to share his heart.”²¹

In many cases, solitude is also institutionalized: there are no real spaces for sharing, life review, and mutual support. The priest—especially if elderly or wounded—risks becoming invisible.

2.3 Grace Within the Wound

Yet this experience, too, can become a place of grace. Solitude lived in truth can open the way to a new communion, one that is deeper and humbler. The goal is not to eliminate the wound, but to transfigure it.

The priest should not hide his weaknesses behind exhausting masks, but rather use them as paths of growth and transformation, discovering them as channels of mercy. Solitude, when welcomed in the light of faith,²² becomes a space of spiritual maturation, a *paschal* path that leads from isolation to communion.

3. Accompaniment: A Path of Closeness and Regeneration

Today, accompaniment is one of the key words in the magisterium of Pope Francis. It is not a psychological slogan, but a deeply evangelical category that refers to the very pedagogy of Jesus: walking beside others, listening, sharing, and rekindling hope. In the perspective of ordained ministry, to accompany means restoring to the priest the awareness of being part of a body, of a living communion, and not an isolated operator. It is a spiritual and human process that combines discernment, empathy, and ecclesial responsibility.²³

3.1 Episcopal Accompaniment

The first face of accompaniment is that of the bishop. He is, as Moronta underlines, “the first responsible for the spiritual and human health of his presbyters.”²⁴ His closeness is not merely juridical, but affective and pastoral: a bishop who knows his priests, listens to them, and visits them becomes a sign of fatherhood.

²¹ López Galindo, “El acompañamiento es bueno y recomendable durante toda la vida del sacerdote.”

²² Cf. Jorge Luis Zaruazua, “La soledad del sacerdote: Vocación en crisis,” *La soledad del sacerdote*, March 10, 2025, <https://articulosincensura.blogspot.com/2025/03/la-soledad-del-sacerdote-vocacion-en.html>.

²³ Cf. Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium: Apostolic Exhortation on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today's World*, November 24, 2013, 169–173, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html.

²⁴ Mons Mario Moronta, “Corregir y ayudar a los sacerdotes,” *Pastoral de la vocación*, January 3, 2022, <https://pastoraldelavocacion.org/cuidar/corregir-ayudar-sacerdotes/>.

Pope Francis has strongly asked that bishops “not leave their priests alone” and that they “cultivate relationships of trust and friendship with them.”²⁵ The bishop who accompanies is not an administrator, but an elder brother, capable of mercy and discernment. His attentive, even discreet, presence can prevent many crises before they explode.

3.2 Priestly Fraternity and Mutual Support

Alongside the bishop, the priesthood is the first network of care. Isolation is broken when priests rediscover the strength of fraternity, not as a formality or obligation, but as both gift and necessity.

“Priestly fraternities” or small groups for spiritual sharing, mutual help, or common interests and hobbies—present in many dioceses—are today precious instruments of accompaniment: places where one is listened to without judgment, where the Word is shared, and where people pray together.²⁶ Fraternity does not replace spiritual direction, but integrates it with a communal dimension of care, reminding us that ministry is lived in communion or it cannot endure.

3.3 Personal Spiritual Accompaniment

Every priest, like every believer, needs someone to accompany him in discernment. Spiritual tradition calls this person a spiritual director or spiritual father/mother, but today it is often preferable to speak of an accompanying person: someone experienced, capable of listening, welcoming, and guiding.

In the words of Pope Francis, “spiritual accompaniment is not a luxury, but a requirement of Christian life.”²⁷ For the priest, such accompaniment has a particular value: it is the space in which he can reread his own story, reconcile wounds, and rediscover the voice of his call. When consistent accompaniment is lacking, the risk is self-referentiality: the illusion of being able to manage everything alone.

3.4 The Contribution of the Human Sciences

Accompaniment cannot overlook an integral vision of the person. In many cases, beyond spiritual guidance, psychological or psychotherapeutic support is needed as a continuous process, until the person, together with the professional, recognizes that the difficulties that afflicted him have been overcome or integrated. There is no need

²⁵ Pope Francis, “A Seminaristi e sacerdoti che studiano a Roma,” *Vatican.va*, October 24, 2022, <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/speeches/2022/october/documents/20221024-seminaristi-sacerdoti.html>.

²⁶ Cf. Carlos Comendador, “Ocho consejos del Papa Francisco a los sacerdotes,” *Pastoral de la vocación*, November 25, 2022, <https://pastoraldelavocacion.org/cuidar/ocho-consejos-del-papa-francisco-a-los-sacerdotes/>; Masotti, “El sacerdote necesita una sólida red de relaciones fraternas.”

²⁷ Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 169.

to be afraid of psychology; it helps one to know oneself better and to heal wounds. From the seminary onward, psychological formation can support seminarians in self-knowledge.

The contribution of the human sciences makes it possible to distinguish between spiritual crisis and psychological distress, and to address competently situations of stress, grief, addictions, or unintegrated affectivity.²⁸ Collaboration among bishops, formators, and Christian-inspired professionals today represents a path of synergy in help: therapeutic, spiritual, and pastoral support.²⁹

3.5 The Role of the Laity

Accompaniment of priests is not the monopoly of the clergy. Many laypeople, men and women of mature faith, offer presence, listening, and friendship to their pastors. In an ecclesial culture that has often separated clergy from the People of God, this reciprocity is a sign of renewal. Laypersons do not accompany “from above,” but side by side: with discretion, prayer, and human closeness. When authentic and free, spiritual friendships can become a powerful antidote to the priest’s solitude and closure.³⁰

3.6 Accompaniment as an Ecclesial Style

Finally, accompaniment cannot remain an occasional or emergency initiative: it must become an ecclesial style and a culture of pastoral care. The synodal Church, as the current magisterium insists, is a Church that walks together, where no one is left behind.³¹

Accompanying priests who are wounded, weary, or in crisis is not only an act of charity; it is a witness to the merciful face of God and a prophecy of communion for the entire Christian people.³²

4. Conversion of the Heart as the Outcome of Crisis

Every crisis, if accepted in faith, contains a promise. It is not only a time of loss, but a threshold of transformation. In priestly ministry, crisis can become the occasion for a

²⁸ Cf. William César Castilho Pereira, *Sufrimiento psíquico de los presbíteros: dolor institucional* (Bogotá: Publicaciones CELAM, 2014).

²⁹ Cf. Congregation for the Clergy, *The Gift of the Priestly Vocation*, 192.

³⁰ Cf. Gaston de Mézerville, *Madurez sacerdotal y religiosa: un enfoque integrado entre psicología y magisterio*, 3rd ed., Vol. II (Bogotá: Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano, CELAM, 2003), 163–68.

³¹ Cf. Commissione Teologica Internazionale, “La Sinodalità nella vita e nella missione della Chiesa,” *Vatican.va*, March 2, 2018, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20180302_sinodalita_it.html.

³² Cf. Henri J. Nouwen, *Il guaritore ferito. Il ministero nella società contemporanea* (Brescia: Queriniana, 1995); “Cuando un sacerdote hiere: El testimonio de un acólito y la crisis del verdadero servicio,” *Ataque al poder*, March 29, 2025, <https://ataquealpoder.es/2025/03/28/el-peligro-de-olvidar-el-verdadero-servicio-reflexiones-sobre-la-vocacion-sacerdotal/>.

new beginning, for a deeper conversion that touches the heart and purifies vocational motivation.

4.1 Crisis as a “Second Call”

The priest who passes through trial experiences the truth of the Gospel: “Whoever loses their life for my sake will find it” (Mt 16:25). Many priestly accounts of rebirth speak of a second vocation, not in the sense of a new assignment or a change of ministry, but of a new way of belonging to Christ. Like Peter, who after his denial encounters the gaze of the Risen One (Jn 21:15–19), the wounded priest, too, can rediscover his identity not as moral perfection, but as grace received—not as the result of being freed from the “thorn in the flesh,” but as the experience of infinite love in the grace of Christ.³³

Pope Francis has often invited priests not to fear their own fragility: “The Lord does not call us because we are perfect, but because he loves us. Our fragility is the place of encounter with his mercy.”³⁴ This “second call” is often marked by humiliation and reconciliation. The priest learns to look at himself truthfully, to acknowledge limits and inconsistencies, and to ask for help. It is a process of self-emptying that purifies and makes him authentic. Crisis thus becomes a form of evangelical *kenosis*: not a defeat, but a return to what is essential, to the original love that ignited the vocation.

4.2 The Pedagogy of Jesus: Rebuilding Trust

Jesus does not respond to his disciples’ falls with reproach, but with a pedagogy of trust and closeness. In his dialogue with Peter, the Lord does not return to the question “Why did you betray me?” but instead asks, “Do you love me?” This is the key to accompaniment in times of crisis: not to fixate on the error, but to rekindle love.³⁵

Every journey of priestly healing passes through the experience of forgiveness. Those who experience mercy and grace become capable of understanding and forgiving others. What makes someone a true moral or spiritual authority is not efficiency, competence, or the strict policing of rules, but the spiritual experience of reconciliation and the awareness of the indwelling Trinity in one’s own heart.³⁶

³³ Hans U. von Balthasar, *Gli stati di vita del cristiano* (Milano: Jaca Book, 2017); Richard Rohr, *Falling Upward, Revised and Updated: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2023).

³⁴ Pope Francis, “Holy Chrism Mass,” *Vatican.va*, April 1, 2021, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2021/documents/papa-francesco_20210401_omelia-crisma.html.

³⁵ Cf. Carlo Maria Martini, *Le confessioni di Pietro. Meditazioni sul cammino vocazionale nell’apostolo* (Casale Monferrato: Piemme, 2005).

³⁶ Cf. Pope Francis, “A Seminaristi e sacerdoti che studiano a Roma,” *Vatican.va*, October 24, 2022, <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/speeches/2022/october/documents/20221024-seminaristi-sacerdoti.html>.

The spiritual accompanier, the bishop, or the community that walks with the priest must learn this gaze: helping him to recognize the voice of the Risen One within his own fall, asking, “Do you love me?” It is not a matter of minimizing responsibility, but of opening the way to real reconciliation, both personal and ecclesial.

4.3 Spirituality of Reparation and Ecclesial Purification

Every personal crisis also has an ecclesial dimension. The wounded priest does not carry only his own pain, but also that of the Church’s body. Pope Francis, addressing the Servants of the Paraclete—a congregation dedicated to the care of priests in difficulty—reminded them that “the priest who has erred or has fallen must not be discarded: the mercy of God precedes and accompanies him; the Church must be a sign of this mercy.”³⁷

This means that the journey of healing is never purely private but entails communal reparation: when one member is wounded, all are touched. When a local Church knows how to welcome and reintegrate a priest in crisis, it bears witness to the Gospel face of mercy; when instead it isolates or merely judges him, it betrays the logic of communion and the Gospel.

4.4 The Priest as a *Paschal* Sacrament

Like every disciple, the priest is one who has been converted by a personal *paschal* experience lived in communion with others. He does good to others not because he is perfect or intact, but because he has allowed his wounds to be healed by grace. This experience becomes a source of hope and joy for those who are in difficulty or crisis and ask for help and companionship.

The priest who goes through crisis and emerges renewed becomes a *paschal* sign for others: a credible witness of God’s tenderness, a shepherd capable of accompanying the wounded because he himself has known his own night.³⁸

5. Integral Prevention and Ongoing Formation

If crisis can be an opportunity for rebirth, it is equally true that the Church must prevent, as far as possible, situations of wear, isolation, and disorientation among priests. The *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis* insists on ongoing formation as a *forma mentis*, not as something added later: the priest remains a disciple for his entire life. In this perspective, prevention is not only psychological, but spiritual, communal, and structural; it concerns lifestyle, relationships, personal care, and the quality of ministry.

³⁷ Pope Francis, “To Participants in the General Chapter of the Servants of the Paraclete.”

³⁸ Ibid.

We repeatedly encounter, in many dioceses, cases of priests in urgent need of help; those responsible for priestly pastoral care are aware of them, but nothing is done until situations slip out of control, at which point the only response is to apply the law. This shows that accompaniment is itself a form of prevention.

5.1 Ongoing Formation as Prevention

Formation does not end with ordination; it is a journey that lasts a lifetime. “By virtue of a constant experience of discipleship, formation is a unitary and integral process that begins in the seminary and continues throughout the priest’s life as ongoing formation.”³⁹ To be formed means learning to manage one’s inner world, to recognize emotions, to cultivate human and affective balance, and to live healthy relationships. In his 2019 letter to priests, Pope Francis writes: “We are not supermen: we need to cultivate our humanity, to rest, to rejoice, to share, to let ourselves be accompanied.”⁴⁰ This cultivated humanity is the first form of prevention against the risk of alienation and burnout.

Among the most effective practices, we can recall:

- Care for sacramental and spiritual life: daily Mass, frequent confession, spiritual direction, retreats, meditation on the Word of God.
- Regular life review, personal and communal, helping to reread experiences and tensions in the light of the Word.
- Pastoral supervision, now common in various European countries, which offers spaces for professional and spiritual reflection on ministerial dynamics.
- Regular meetings of priestly fraternity, which strengthen bonds and prevent isolation.
- Attention to affective and relational balance, with integral maturation paths that include affectivity, corporeality, and emotion regulation.
- Promotion of a culture of rest and celebration, since chronic fatigue erodes faith and pastoral creativity.

5.2 Ecclesial Tools and Initiatives

In recent years, significant experiences of accompaniment and support have emerged:

- Mission Emmaus (France and Latin America),⁴¹ which offers periods of spiritual renewal for weary or wounded priests in a context of fraternity and prayer.

³⁹ Congregation for the Clergy, *The Gift of the Priestly Vocation*, 80.

⁴⁰ Pope Francis, “Letter of the Holy Father to Priests on the 160th Anniversary of the Death of the Curé of Ars, St John Vianney,” Vatican.va, August 4, 2019, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/letters/2019/documents/papa-francesco_20190804_lettera-presbiteri.html.

⁴¹ Cf. “Il metodo Emmaus,” *Centro Studi Missione Emmaus*, accessed March 17, 2026, <https://www.missioneemmaus.com/metodo-emmaus/>.

- Servants of the Paraclete, a congregation dedicated to the rehabilitation of ministers in difficulty, with an integrated spiritual and therapeutic approach.⁴²
- Diocesan listening centers or ecclesial therapeutic communities that offer personalized support, often in collaboration with Christian professionals.
- Online accompaniment programs,⁴³ which allow continuous and discreet contact for priests who are isolated or living in remote areas.

5.3 Structural Prevention and Co-responsibility

Preventing crisis also means rethinking ecclesial structures. Too many parishes entrusted to a single priest, the lack of pastoral teams, and an excess of bureaucracy are all factors that undermine the spiritual and physical health of ministers.

What is needed is an ecclesiological vision that is synodal and co-responsible, in which laypeople actively participate in the mission and relieve priests of the burden of “being competent in everything.” A Church that cares for its pastors is one that knows how to distribute burdens, value charisms, and guard fraternity. As Pope Francis said at a conference on the clergy: “The priest cannot be a solitary man. Without the community, his life dries up. The care of pastors is the task of the whole Church.”⁴⁴

6. Recovery and Care of Priests in Crisis

Alongside prevention, the Church is called to develop paths of recovery and care for priests who are going through moments of breakdown or moral, psychological, or spiritual crisis. The goal is not to create “emergency repair shops,” but to elaborate personalized accompaniment processes in which the priest can rediscover himself and the meaning of his ministry. Pastoral care for priests must provide specific spaces for priests who need this special accompaniment.

6.1 The Logic of Care

The word “care” evokes taking responsibility, drawing near, having the life of the other at heart. The Church as institution has the responsibility to care for priests at the different stages and in the various circumstances of their life: to care for the young who are beginning their journey, for the elderly who have concluded their active ministry,

⁴² Cf. Pope Francis, “To Participants in the General Chapter of the Servants of the Paraclete.”

⁴³ Cf. Galindo, “El acompañamiento es bueno y recomendable durante toda la vida del sacerdote.”

⁴⁴ Pope Francis, “To Participants at the Conference Promoted by the Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life, *Vatican.va*, February 18, 2023, <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2023/february/documents/20230218-convegno.html>; cf. Luciano Sandrin, *Ayudar sin quemarse: Cómo superar el burnout en las profesiones de ayuda* (Madrid: San Pablo Comunicación SSP, 2005), 134–37.

to support sick priests, and to tend to wounded priests.⁴⁵ The priest's solitude is, in many cases, the reflection of a Church that has forgotten to care for the hearts of its priests.⁴⁶

Caring for a priest in crisis means offering him time, listening, and trust: time to heal, listening to be recognized, trust to begin again. Recovery is not only a psychological matter, but also spiritual and ecclesial. The wounded person needs to feel that he still belongs to the community, that his dignity has not been erased, and that God's mercy is stronger than his fall.

In this perspective, care also becomes a sacramental sign: the Church that welcomes the wounded priest makes visible the face of the Good Shepherd who does not abandon any of his sheep. In the Gospel, the parable of the lost sheep (Lk 15:3–5) shows Jesus as the shepherd who cares for that one sheep, seeks it, places it on his shoulders, and saves it. The Church, as a mother, must do the same with her wounded priests: be concerned for them, seek them out, accompany, and heal them. The Church that preaches love and mercy must be the first to care for and value those who have dedicated their lives to her service.⁴⁷

6.2 Stages of Recovery

Every path of accompaniment must respect personal timing and the specificity of the crisis experienced. Nevertheless, we can identify some common stages:

1. Recognition of the crisis. Leaving denial and accepting the need for help is the first step. Without this act of truth, no journey is possible.
2. Welcome and suspension of judgment. It is essential to create a non-punitive environment in which the priest feels welcomed rather than exposed. The temporary suspension of ministerial responsibilities can become a time of grace if accompanied by a climate of trust.
3. Processing and therapeutic accompaniment. When needed, psychological or psychotherapeutic support helps to understand inner dynamics, old wounds, and affective distortions that have fed the crisis.
4. Reconciliation and spiritual discernment. In this phase, the priest—spiritually accompanied—rediscovers God's mercy and rereads his own story in the light of faith.
5. Gradual recovery of meaning and ministerial practice. Re-integration must be prudent and accompanied by a reference team (bishop, spiritual director, possibly psychologist). Trust is rebuilt while walking.

⁴⁵ Cf. "Cuando un sacerdote hiere."

⁴⁶ Cf. Zaruzua, "La soledad del sacerdote."

⁴⁷ Cf. "Cuando un sacerdote hiere."

Every stage requires patience, respect, and discretion. The rush to “fix” things can generate new wounds; by contrast, a long, humble, and personalized accompaniment can foster authentic transformation.

6.3 Communities of Welcome and Ecclesial Experiences

In recent decades, therapeutic communities and ecclesial fraternities dedicated to priests in difficulty have developed. Among the best-known experiences are:

- The Servants of the Paraclete, who welcome wounded priests and offer them a journey of spiritual and human healing. Pope Francis has thanked them for “the silent and precious work of mercy that restores life and hope to many presbyters.”⁴⁸
- Emmaus fraternities, born in France and replicated in Latin America, where priests can live a period of regeneration, prayer, and fraternal life, accompanied by interdisciplinary teams.
- Diocesan centers for listening and accompaniment, present in several Italian and French dioceses, often coordinated by psychologists and experienced spiritual guides, which help to prevent and treat crisis situations.⁴⁹

These experiences show that recovery is not utopia, but a realistic path of rebirth when communities believe in the possibility of forgiveness and renewal. Many priests who have completed such journeys recount that crisis has been for them a “second birth”: an opportunity for truth, freedom, and deeper humanity.

6.4 Shared Co-responsibility

The care of priests cannot be delegated to a few people or institutions. It is a broad ecclesial responsibility involving bishops, confreres, and lay faithful. The bishop is called to guard his priests like a family; confreres must support one another, avoiding judgment or indifference; laypeople can offer human support, prayer, and concrete closeness.

A Christian community that accompanies its wounded pastors becomes a sign of the Kingdom because it shows that weakness is not a reason for exclusion, but a space of grace. As Pope Francis writes in the *Motu proprio Vos estis lux mundi*: “Every wound in the ecclesial body is a wound for all, and each person is called to take on the pain of the other.”⁵⁰ Accompanying priests in crisis is therefore not a niche sector of pastoral

⁴⁸ Pope Francis, “To Participants in the General Chapter of the Servants of the Paraclete.”

⁴⁹ Cf. Masotti, “El sacerdote necesita una sólida red de relaciones fraternas”; Zaruzua, “La soledad del sacerdote.”

⁵⁰ Pope Francis, “Lettera Apostolica in forma di ‘Motu Proprio’ del Sommo Pontefice Francesco ‘Vos Estis Lux Mundi,’” *Vatican.va*, May 9, 2019, <http://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/it/bollettino/pubblico/2019/05/09/0390/00804.html#ES>; cf. Raffaella Mendicino, “La vittimizzazione secondaria,” *ProfessioneFormazione* 6, no. 3 (2015): 1–2, <https://www.onap-profiling.org/la-vittimizzazione-secondaria/>.

ministry, but a concrete form of ecclesial charity that restores to ministry its human and *paschal* dimension.

7. Toward a Pedagogy of Paschal Accompaniment: An Original Proposal

The preceding sections have brought together magisterial teaching, pastoral-theological literature, and ecclesial experience to describe the phenomenology of priestly crisis and the channels through which the Church already tries to respond to it. As we announced at the outset, our intention has not been merely to survey this literature, but “to attempt a proposal of pedagogical-vocational prevention and care.” We wish, therefore, to make explicit, as the properly original contribution of this article, a single interpretive key capable of holding together what would otherwise remain a catalogue of causes, wounds, and remedies. We propose to read the priestly crisis—and its possible resolution—through what we call the *paschal circle of accompaniment*: not a linear protocol to be applied once and completed, but a recurring pattern of four interconnected movements through which a wounded vocation can become, for the one who lives it and for those around him, a source of life.

7.1 First Movement: Naming the Wound

Every paschal dynamic begins with a *kairos* of truth: the priest, helped by an accompanier, ceases to manage his fatigue silently and names the crisis for what it is—psychological, spiritual, relational, or institutional. This movement corresponds to what Section 6.2 describes, in more clinical terms, as “recognition of the crisis,” but it is not merely a diagnostic act. Theologically, it is the moment in which the priest stops treating his fragility as a private failure to be hidden and begins to treat it as a *locus theologicus*, a place where, as we argued in the Introduction, God is already at work.

7.2 Second Movement: Kenotic Descent

Naming the wound is not yet healing. It opens onto a genuine descent—an experience of *kenosis*, self-emptying, in which the priest relinquishes the illusion of self-sufficiency that clerical culture so often cultivates.⁵¹ This is the most exposed and least controllable movement of the circle: it can be prolonged, nonlinear, and marked by resistance, shame, or anger, and it requires an accompanier able to remain present without rushing the process toward resolution, echoing the “suspension of judgment” already discussed in Section 6.2. What distinguishes this movement in our proposal is that the descent is not treated as a regrettable detour from ministry, but as its very *paschal* form: without a real Holy Saturday, there is no Easter to proclaim to others.

⁵¹ Cf. Balthasar, *Gli stati di vita del cristiano*.

7.3 Third Movement: Restored Communion

The third movement is where the five dimensions of accompaniment surveyed in Section 3—episcopal, presbyteral, personal-spiritual, psychological, and lay—cease to function as parallel, juxtaposed resources and become, in our proposal, a single fabric of relationships that the priest re-enters gradually and from a position of truth rather than performance. Communion restored in this sense is not a return to a previous equilibrium, since the crisis itself has altered the priest's self-understanding; it is a new configuration of belonging, in which asking for help is no longer experienced as a threat to priestly identity but as one of its constitutive acts.

7.4 Fourth Movement: Paschal Return

The circle closes—only to reopen at a deeper level—when the priest who has been accompanied becomes, in turn, capable of accompanying others: the *wounded healer* that H. J. Nouwen describes⁵² and the “second call” of Section 4 converge here into a single figure. This fourth movement is what allows us to speak, in the Conclusion, of the priest as a *paschal sign*: not because his wound has disappeared, but because it has been transfigured into a language legible to other wounded people. Crucially, in our proposal this movement is not the final stage of a therapy that is now complete, but the point at which the circle re-enters its first movement for someone else, or resumes for the same priest at a new depth—which is why we describe it as a circle and not a ladder.

Understood in this way, the paschal circle does not replace the operational stages of recovery outlined in Section 6.2, nor does it substitute for the concrete structures of episcopal, fraternal, psychological, and lay accompaniment described in Section 3: it interprets them theologically, showing why a pastoral practice that might otherwise appear as mere institutional risk-management is, in fact, a participation in the paschal mystery itself. This, we submit, is the most properly original claim of the present article: that the Church's care for priests in crisis is not adequately described either by a purely clinical model of recovery or by a purely edifying rhetoric of redemptive suffering, but requires precisely this circular, theologically grounded pedagogy—one in which naming the wound, descending into it, being re-woven into communion, and returning to serve are recognized as four movements of a single, repeatable paschal grammar.

Conclusion

From an evangelical standpoint, crisis is not the last word, but the womb of a new birth, where the priest can rediscover the truth about himself and the gratuity of grace.

⁵² Cf. Nouwen, *Il guaritore ferito. Il ministero nella società contemporanea*.

Saint Paul summarizes every experience of redeemed fragility: “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness” (2Cor 12:9). The priest who has gone through crisis and emerged reconciled is no longer the same: he becomes more human, more compassionate, and more truthful, relying less on his own efficiency and more on God’s fidelity. His spiritual authority no longer flows primarily from his role, but from the transparency of his heart.

In such a priest, what Pope Francis calls “the mystique of the everyday” is fulfilled: the capacity to live ministry as humble service, without masks, with a new interior freedom. The Church, in turn, is invited to transfigure her gaze and to see in the fragility of her ministers not a threat, but a possibility of renewal. Only a Church that knows how to care for her priests can be a fruitful and credible mother, and only a priest who has experienced mercy can proclaim it in truth.

In this light, accompanying priests in times of crisis is not an accessory task, but a ministry of communion and hope. Every gesture of closeness, every path of reconciliation and every community that welcomes a wounded pastor makes visible the tenderness of God and helps to build a more human, more fraternal and more evangelical Church, one that, like her Lord, does not break the bruised reed nor quench the smoldering wick (Is 42:3).

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Gauta: 2026 03 26

Parengta: 2026 09 15

Mario Oscar LLANOS, S.D.B. – Salesian priest, Professor at the Faculty of Educational Sciences and headmaster of the Institute of Vocation Pedagogy at the Salesian Pontifical University in Rome, Italy. Research area: Pastoral Care of Vocations and Counseling. E-mail mllanos@unisal.it.

Mario Oscar LLANOS S.D.B. – kunigas salezietis, teologijos daktaras, Popiežiškasis saleziečių universitetas, Roma, Italija. Popiežiškojo saleziečių universiteto Romoje Edukologijos fakulteto profesorius ir Pašaukimų pedagogikos instituto vadovas. Tyrimų sritis: pašaukimų sielovada ir konsultavimas. El. paštas mllanos@unisal.it.

José Alexander MARTÍNEZ – Fr., PhD candidate in Pedagogy for Vocation's Formation, Salesian Pontifical University, Rome Area, Italy. Research area: Vocational Pedagogy. E-mail jamartinez.29@hotmail.com.

José Alexander MARTÍNEZ – kunigas, Pašaukimo ugdymo pedagogikos doktorantas Popiežiškajame saleziečių universitete Romoje, Italijoje. Mokslinių tyrimų sritis – pašaukimų pedagogika. El. paštas jamartinez.29@hotmail.com.