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Psychological temperament and the Catholic priesthood: An empirical  
enquiry among priests in Italy

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**Abstract**

This study draws on psychological type theory that has its origins in the work of Jung (1971) and psychological temperament theory as proposed by Keirsey and Bates (1978) to explore the psychological preferences and profile of Catholic priests serving in Italy. Data provided by 155 priests demonstrated an overwhelming preference for sensing and judging (SJ at 76%), followed by intuition and feeling (NF at 12%), intuition and thinking (NT at 8%), and sensing and perceiving (SP at 5%). In their study of styles of religious leadership, Oswald and Kroeger (1988) characterise the SJ preference as ‘the conserving serving pastor’. The implications of these findings are discussed for leadership strengths and weaknesses in the Catholic Church.

*Keywords:* psychology, religion, clergy, psychological type, Catholic, Italy

## Introduction

### Psychological profiling of clergy

There has been a long-established interest both within the psychology of religion and pastoral sciences concerned with exploring the psychological profile of religious leaders, employing qualitative and quantitative techniques (Dittes, 1971; Francis & Jones, 1996). In this context, the quantitative approach has drawn on many of the established models, including: The Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (Hathaway & McKinley, 1967), employed, for example, by Cardwell (1967), Malony and Majovski (1986) and Stone (1989); The Cattell Sixteen Factor model (Cattell, Eber, & Tatsuoka, 1970) employed, for example, by Musson (1998, 2001) and Francis and Musson (1999); The Eysenck Three Dimensional model (Eysenck & Eysenck, 1975) employed, for example, by Towler and Coxon (1979), Francis (1991), and Loudon and Francis (1999); The Big Five Factor model (Costa & McCrae, 1985) employed, for example, by Rodgeron and Piedmont (1998), Galea (2010), and Joseph, Luyten, Corvelyn, and de Witte (2011); and the Psychological Type model as operationalised by a range of instruments including the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (Myers & McCaulley, 1985), the Keirsey Temperament Sorter (Keirsey & Bates, 1978) and the Francis Psychological Type Sorter (Francis, 2005), employed, for example, by Cabral (1984), Harbaugh (1984) and Holsworth (1984). Each of these models of personality brings its own strengths and limitations, and it is often difficult to harmonise findings across different models. It is for this reason that there is considerable value in co-ordinating studies employing the same model of personality across different groups of clergy in order to allow the findings to be compared and a more comprehensive and inclusive psychological profile of clergy to be constructed. In recent years profiles of Catholic priests have been generated in terms of psychological type theory in the United Kingdom (Craig, Duncan, & Francis, 2006), the United States of America (Burns, Francis, Village, & Robbins, 2013) and Australia

(Francis, Powell, & Robbins, 2010). The present study extends this pattern of research among Catholic priests in Italy.

### **Psychological type**

The basic building blocks of psychological type theory have their roots in the pioneering work of Jung (1971) as expanded and developed by the theory underpinning the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (Myers & McCaulley, 1985). These basic building blocks distinguish between two orientations (extraversion and introversion), two perceiving functions (sensing and intuition), two judging functions (thinking and feeling), and two attitudes toward the outer world (judging and perceiving).

The two orientations are concerned with where energy is drawn from; energy can be gathered either from the outside world or from the inner world. Extraverts (E) are orientated toward the outside world; they are energised by the events and people around them. They enjoy communicating and thrive in stimulating and exciting environments. They prefer to act in a situation rather than to reflect on it. They may vocalise a problem or an idea, rather than think it through privately. They may be bored and frustrated by silence and solitude. They tend to focus their attention on what is happening outside themselves and may be influenced by the opinions of other people. They are usually open individuals, easy to get to know, and enjoy having many friends. In contrast, introverts (I) are orientated toward their inner world; they are energised by their inner ideas and concepts. They may feel drained by events and people around them. They prefer to reflect on a situation rather than to act in it. They enjoy solitude, silence, and contemplation, as they tend to focus their attention on what is happening in their inner life. They may appear reserved and detached as they are difficult to get to know, and they may prefer to have a small circle of intimate friends rather than many acquaintances.

The perceiving functions are concerned with the way in which people receive and

process information; this can be done through use of the senses or through use of intuition.

Sensing types (S) focus on the realities of a situation as perceived by the senses. They tend to focus on specific details, rather than the overall picture. They are concerned with the actual, the real, and the practical and tend to be down-to-earth and matter-of-fact. They may feel that particular details are more significant than general patterns. They are frequently fond of the traditional and conventional. They may be conservative and tend to prefer what is known and well-established. In contrast, intuitive types (N) focus on the possibilities of a situation, perceiving meanings and relationships. They may feel that perception by the senses is not as valuable as information gained from the unconscious mind; indirect associations and concepts impact their perceptions. They focus on the overall picture, rather than specific facts and data. They follow their inspirations enthusiastically, but not always realistically. They can appear to be up in the air and may be seen as idealistic dreamers. They often aspire to bring innovative change to established conventions.

The judging functions are concerned with the way in which people make decisions and judgements; this can be done through use of objective impersonal logic or subjective interpersonal values. Thinking types (T) make judgements based on objective, impersonal logic. They value integrity and justice. They are known for their truthfulness and for their desire for fairness. They consider conforming to principles to be of more importance than cultivating harmony. They are often good at making difficult decisions as they are able to analyse problems in order to reach an unbiased and reasonable solution. They are frequently referred to as 'tough-minded'. They may consider it to be more important to be honest and correct than to be tactful, when working with others. In contrast, feeling types (F) make judgements based on subjective, personal values. They value compassion and mercy. They are known for their tactfulness and for their desire for peace. They are more concerned to promote harmony, than to adhere to abstract principles. They may be thought of as 'people-

persons', as they are able to take into account other people's feelings and values in decision-making and problem-solving, ensuring they reach a solution that satisfies everyone. They are often thought of as 'warm-hearted'. They may find it difficult to criticise others, even when it is necessary. They find it easy to empathise with other people and tend to be trusting and encouraging of others.

The attitudes towards the outside world are concerning with the way in which people respond to the world around them, either by imposing structure and order on that world or by remaining open and adaptable to the world around them. Judging types (J) have a planned, orderly approach to life. They enjoy routine and established patterns. They prefer to follow schedules in order to reach an established goal and may make use of lists, timetables, or diaries. They tend to be punctual, organised, and tidy. They may find it difficult to deal with unexpected disruptions of their plans. Likewise, they are inclined to be resistant to changes to established methods. They prefer to make decisions quickly and to stick to their conclusions once made. In contrast, perceiving types (P) have a flexible, open-ended approach to life. They enjoy change and spontaneity. They prefer to leave projects open in order to adapt and improve them. They may find plans and schedules restrictive and tend to be easygoing about issues such as punctuality, deadlines, and tidiness. Indeed, they may consider last minute pressure to be a necessary motivation in order to complete projects. They are often good at dealing with the unexpected. Indeed, they may welcome change and variety as routine bores them. Their behaviour may often seem impulsive and unplanned.

Psychological type data can be reported and interpreted in a number of different ways, drawing on the four dichotomous type preferences (the two orientations, the two perceiving functions, the two judging functions, and the two attitudes), on the 16 complete types (like ISTJ or ENFP), on the four dominant types (dominant sensing, dominant intuition, dominant feeling, or dominant thinking) or on the eight dominant and auxiliary pairs (like dominant

thinking with auxiliary intuition, or dominant intuition with auxiliary thinking). Recent studies that illustrate the application of psychological type theory among church leaders include research among Anglican clergy serving in Wales (Francis, Payne, & Jones, 2001; Francis, Littler, & Robbins, 2010). Anglican clergy serving in England (Francis, Craig, Whinney, Tilley, & Slater, 2007; Francis, Robbins, Duncan, & Whinney, 2010), Methodist circuit ministers in Britain (Burton, Francis, & Robbins, 2010), and Newfrontiers lead elders (Francis, Gubb, & Robbins, 2009).

### **Psychological temperament**

Drawing on psychological type theory, Keirsey and Bates (1978) proposed an interpretive framework distinguishing between four temperaments characterised as SJ, SP, NT and NF. In the language shaped by Keirsey and Bates (1978) the Epimethean Temperament characterises the SJ profile, people who long to be dutiful and exist primarily to be useful to the social units to which they belong. The Dionysian Temperament characterises the SP profile, people who want to be engaged, involved, and doing something new. The Promethean Temperament characterises the NT profile, people who want to understand, explain, shape and predict realities, and who prize their personal competence. The Apollonian Temperament characterises the NF profile, people who quest for authenticity and for self-actualisation, who are idealistic and who have great capacity for empathic listening. Oswald and Kroeger (1988) built on Keirsey and Bates' (1978) characterisation of the four temperaments to create profiles of how these four temperaments shape four very different styles of religious leadership.

The Epimethean Temperament (SJ) is styled 'the conserving, serving pastor'. SJ clergy tend to be the most traditional of all clergy temperaments, bringing stability and continuity in whatever situation they are called to serve. They proclaim a single and straightforward faith, committed to down-to-earth rules for the Christian life. They serve as

protectors and conservers of the traditions inherited from the past. If change is to take place, it emerges by evolution, not revolution. They excel at building community, fostering a sense of loyalty and belonging. They bring order and stability to their congregations, creating plans, developing procedures and formulating policies; and they are keen that these procedures should be followed. They can be trusted for their reliability, punctuality and efficiency. They are effective pastors, showing particular concern for the young, the elderly, and the weak. They are realists who offer practical and down-to-earth solutions to pastoral problems.

The Dionysian Temperament (SP) is styled 'the action-oriented pastor'. SP clergy tend to be the most fun loving of all clergy temperaments, possessing a compulsive need to be engaged in activity. They have little need for or interest in the abstract, the theoretical, and the non-practical aspects of theology and church life. They are flexible and spontaneous people who welcome the unplanned and unpredictable aspects of church life. They can bring the church to life with activities for everyone from cradle to grave. They have a flare for grasping the moment. They are entertainers and performers at heart. They are at their best in a crisis and are good at handling conflict resolution. They are fun loving and enjoy working with children and young people. They are better at starting new initiatives than at seeing things through. SP clergy may be particularly attracted to charismatic worship, responding to the leading of the Holy Spirit, welcoming a free-flowing form that allows for impromptu testimonials, speaking in tongues, and spontaneous singing.

The Promethean Temperament (NT) is styled 'the intellectual, competence-seeking pastor'. NT clergy are the most academically and intellectually grounded of all clergy temperaments, motivated by the search for meaning for truth and for possibilities. They are visionaries who need to excel in all they do, and they tend to push their congregations to excel as well. They enjoy the academic study and analysis of the faith, and may try to run their church as an extension of the seminary. They make great teachers, preachers, and

advocates for social justice. They look for underlying principles rather than basic applications from their study of scripture. They see the value of opposing views and strive to allow alternative visions to be heard. They are more concerned with finding truth than with engineering harmony and compromise. NT clergy need to be challenged in their ministry and to be able to move from one challenge to the next.

The Apollonian Temperament (NF) is styled 'the authenticity-seeking, relationship-oriented pastor'. NF clergy tend to be the most idealistic and romantic of all clergy temperaments, attracted to helping roles that deal with human suffering. They want to meet the needs of others and to find personal affirmation in so doing. They can be articulate and inspiring communicators, committed to influencing others by touching their hearts. They have good empathic capacity, interpersonal skills, and pastoral counselling techniques. They find themselves listening to other people's problems in the most unlikely contexts, and really caring about them. NF clergy tend to be high on inspiration, but lower on the practical down-to-earth aspects of ministry. They are able to draw the best out of people and work well as the catalyst or facilitator in the congregation as long as others are on hand to work with and to implement their vision. They are at their best when leading in people-related projects, such as starting a project for the elderly or for youth. They are most comfortable in unstructured meetings where they are good at facilitating group decision-making processes.

Recent studies that illustrate the application of temperament theory among church leaders include research among Ordained Local Ministers in the Church of England reported by Francis and Holmes (2011), Francis and Village (2012), and Francis, Robbins, and Jones (2012). These three studies all agree in reporting much higher levels of the Epimethean Temperament (SJ) among Ordained Local Ministers than among professional mobile clergy.

### **Psychological type profile of Catholic priests**

Internationally, published data on the psychological type profile of Catholic priests, and Catholic seminarians is quite scarce. In an early study among 146 Catholic seminarians in the USA, Holsworth (1984) found that his sample preferred extraversion (57%) over introversion (43%), sensing (51%) over intuition (49%), feeling (79%) over thinking (21%) and judging (60%) over perceiving (40%). The most frequent types were reported as ISFJ (16%) and ENFP (16%). In their *Atlas of Type Tables*, Macdaid, McCaulley, and Kainz (1986) assembled data on 1,298 Catholic priests. This sample preferred introversion (52%) over extraversion (48%), sensing (46%) over intuition (54%), feeling (80%) over thinking (20%), and judging (71%) over perceiving (29%). The most frequent types were reported as ISFJ (18%) and ESJF (14%).

Four observations emerge from the consistencies between these two studies. First, in both studies there are close balances in the orientations between introversion and extraversion: Catholic priesthood had not been characterised either by the inward facing spirituality of the introvert or by the outward facing spirituality of the extravert. Second, in both studies there are close balances in the perceiving process between sensing and intuition: Catholic priesthood had not been characterised either by the conserving attitude of the sensing type or by the innovative attitude of the intuitive type. Third, in both studies there are strong preferences in the judging process for feeling over thinking. This strong preference for feeling is very unusual among a group of men and is much more characteristic of women; for example in the UK population norms as reported by Kendall (1998) 70% of women report a preference for feeling compared with 35% of men. Fourth, in both studies there is a preference in the attitudes for judging over perceiving, and the preference is stronger among serving priests than among seminarians. It may be the case that the structured life of priesthood and the structured work of ministry holds the vocation of judging types more securely than the vocation of perceiving types.

Three more recent studies of Catholic priests, in the United Kingdom, the United States of America and Australia have produced a rather different picture. In the first of these studies, Craig, Duncan, and Francis (2006) reported on 79 Catholic priests in the UK. This sample preferred introversion (62%) over extraversion (38%), sensing (51%) over intuition (49%), feeling (79%) over thinking (22%), and judging (66%) over perceiving (34%). The most frequent types were reported as ISFJ (14%) and ESJF (13%). While the differences here are not great, they do at least suggest a movement away from extraversion to introversion with a consequent shift away from outward facing spirituality of social engagement toward an inward facing spirituality of personal life.

In the second of these studies, Burns, Francis, Village, and Robbins (2013) reported on 55 Catholic priests in the USA. This sample preferred introversion (67%) over extraversion (33%), sensing (64%) over intuition (36%), feeling (51%) over thinking (49%), and judging (91%) over perceiving (9%). The most frequent types were reported as ISTJ (27%) and ISFJ (18%). This study not only confirms the movement towards introversion, but also suggests a movement toward both sensing and judging. When these movements are translated into temperament theory, the strength of the Epimethean Temperament (SJ) becomes very clear at 62% dwarfing other three temperaments, with the Apollonian Temperament (NF) at 24%, the Promethean Temperament (NT) at 13% and the Dionysian (SP) at 2%.

In the third of these studies, Francis, Powell, and Robbins (2012) reported on 306 Catholic priests in Australia. This sample preferred introversion (58%) over extraversion (42%), sensing (77%) over intuition (23%), feeling (67%) over thinking (33%), and judging (84%) over perceiving (16%). The most frequent types were reported as ISFJ (25%), ISTJ (18%) and ESFJ (17%). This study also confirms the movement toward introversion, toward sensing, and toward judging. In terms of temperament theory, the Epimethean Temperament

(SJ) stands at 68%, dwarfing the other three temperaments, with the Apollonian Temperament (NF) at 18%, the Dionysian Temperament (SP) at 9% and the Promethan Temperament (NT) at 6%.

### **Research agenda**

Against this background the aim of the present study is to explore the psychological type and psychological temperament profile of Catholic priests serving in Italy.

## **Method**

### **Procedure**

In the context of programmes operated in Rome for Catholic priests on the topic of personality and spirituality, participants were invited to complete a questionnaire covering issues relevant to the programme. Participation in the programme was voluntary and responses to the questionnaire were confidential and anonymous. Full data were provided by 155 priests.

### **Instrument**

*Psychological type* was assessed by the Francis Psychological Type Scales (FPTS: Francis, 2005). This is a 40-item instrument comprising four sets of 10 forced-choice items related to each of the four components of psychological type: orientation (extraversion or introversion), perceiving process (sensing or intuition), judging process (thinking or feeling), and attitude toward the outer world (judging or perceiving). Recent studies have demonstrated that this instrument functions well in church-related contexts. For example, Francis, Craig, and Hall (2008) reported alpha coefficients of .83 for the EI scale, .76 for the SN scale, .73 for the TF scale, and .79 for the JP scale. Participants were asked for each pair of characteristics to check the 'box next to that characteristic which is closer to the real you, even if you feel both characteristics apply to you. Tick the characteristics that reflect the real you, even if other people see you differently'.

## Participants

Participants' age ranged from 24 to 76 with an average age of 46 years ( $SD = 12.16$ ); 8% of the participants were in their twenties, 29% in their thirties, 30% in their forties, 21% in their fifties, 6% in their sixties, and 7% in their seventies. Three fifths of the participants were Italians (63%) and the remaining 37% were from a number of other countries; 56% were diocesan priests, and 44% religious priests.

## Analysis

The research literature concerning the empirical investigation of psychological type has developed a highly distinctive method for analyzing, handling, and displaying statistical data in the form of 'type tables'. This convention has been adopted in the following presentation in order to integrate these new data within the established literature and to provide all the detail necessary for secondary analysis and further interpretation within the rich theoretical framework afforded by psychological type. Type tables have been designed to provide information about the sixteen discrete psychological types, about the four dichotomous preferences, about the six sets of pairs and temperaments, about the dominant types, and about the introverted and extraverted Jungian types. Commentary on this table will, however, be restricted to those aspects of the data strictly relevant to the research question.

## Results

Table 1 presents the type distribution for the 155 Catholic priests serving in Italy. These data demonstrate preferences for introversion (59%) over extraversion (41%), for sensing (81%) over intuition (19%), for feeling (60%) over thinking (40%), and for judging (92%) over perceiving (8%). In terms of dominant type preferences, the data display the following hierarchy: dominant sensing (46%), dominant feeling (25%), dominant thinking (15%) and dominant intuition (14%). In terms of the sixteen complete types, the most

frequently reported types are ISFJ (27%), ESFJ (19%), ISTJ (17%), and ESTJ (13%). In terms of psychological temperament preferences, the most frequently occurring temperament is SJ (76%), followed by NF (12%), NT (8%), and SP (5%).

### **Discussion and conclusion**

Employing psychological type theory and psychological temperament theory, this study of 155 Catholic priests in Italy was designed to build on two earlier studies among 55 Catholic priests in the USA reported by Burns, Francis, Village, and Robbins (2013), and 306 Catholic priests in Australia reported by Francis, Powell, and Robbins (2012). Temperament theory as developed by Keirsey and Bates (1978) and applied to religious leadership by Oswald and Kroeger (1988) proposes four temperaments, each of which defines a distinct ministry style.

All three recent studies among Catholic priests in the USA, Australia and Italy agree in locating the majority of Catholic priests within the Epimethean Temperament (SJ): 62% in the USA, 68% in Australia, and 76% in Italy. Oswald and Kroeger's (1988) characterisation of the Epimethean Temperament as producing 'the conserving, serving pastor' provides helpful insight into how such clergy may be shaping the Catholic parishes. Churches managed by SJ priests will not go through unnecessary change, and when changes are initiated they will be implemented by evolution rather than by revolution. Priests shaped by this temperament are unlikely to want to leave the church much different from the way in which they inherited it. SJ clergy will work hard to foster a sense of loyalty and belonging to the Church as they see it. They may have less patience with parishioners who want to see development and innovation. SJ priests may prioritise a sense of social, moral and spiritual obligation throughout their parishes. They may propose sound plans, clear procedures, and precise policies, and expect others to adhere to them. SJ priests may bring good administrative skills to ministry, but find dealing with people more problematic. SJ priests

may take pastoral ministry very seriously and want to approach pastoral ministry in a highly organised and practical way. They tend to be realists who like a common-sense approach to pastoral counselling and to problem solving. For SJ priests worship tends to be formal and predictable.

In light of this predominance of the Epimethean Temperament all the other three temperaments are relatively scarce among Catholic priests. In all three cultural contexts, it is the Apollonian Temperament (NF) that is in second place, but this temperament accounts for no more than 24% in the USA, 18% in Australia, and 12% in Italy. Oswald and Kroeger's (1988) characterisation of the Apollonian Temperament as providing 'the authenticity-seeking, relationship-orientated pastor' provides helpful insight into how such priests may offer a very different vision for ministry from that offered by the SJ priest. NF priests are more likely to be inspired by their vision for the future and by their plans and hopes for change and development. They are less likely to be constrained by (or indeed aware of) practical considerations. NF priests may be high on inspiration, but lower on the practical down-to-earth aspects of ministry.

In third and fourth place come the Promethean Temperament (NT) and the Dionysian Temperament (SP). The Promethean Temperament accounts for 13% of the priests in the USA, 8% in Italy and 6% in Australia. Oswald and Kroeger's (1988) characterisation of the Promethean Temperament as producing 'the intellectual, competence-seeking pastor' identifies one approach to ministry that may be in quite short supply within the Catholic Church. The Dionysian Temperament accounts for 9% of the priests in Australia, 5% in Italy, and 2% in the USA. Oswald and Kroeger's (1988) characterisation of the Dionysian Temperament as providing 'the action-oriented pastor' identifies a second approach to ministry that may be in quite short supply within the Catholic Church.

While temperament theory makes good use of a number of the building blocks of psychological type theory, it does overlook the part played by the two orientations (introversion and extraversion). While the two studies reported in the 1980s by Holsworth (1984) and Macdaid, McCaulley, and Kainz (1986), found respectively that 57% and 48% of their samples preferred extraversion, the three more recent studies all found lower proportions of extraverts among Catholic priests: 33% in the USA, 42% in Australia, and 41% in Italy. This current stronger preference for introversion may characterise a priesthood that is less concerned about and less comfortable in public and social life and more focused on a ministry shaped by a church-based introverted spirituality.

Taken together, the findings from these three studies conducted in the USA, Australia, and Italy, may begin to provide a fairly robust profile of the current generation of Catholic priests and generate insight into the kind of Church that they are disposed to form and equipped to lead. Here is a more monochrome priesthood, and consequently a more monochrome Church than that profiled by studies reported in the 1980s by Holsworth (1984) and Macdaid, McCaulley, and Kainz (1986). Such findings raise two interesting questions for the Catholic Church: Is this the kind of leadership that the Church has consciously planned for the twenty-first century? How has this concentration of the Epimethean Temperament among the priesthood come about? Further research among Bishops and among the faculty of Seminaries may be able to throw some light on these two questions.

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