Navigating Adversity: Strategies for Promoting Post-Traumatic Growth among Comboni Missionary Sisters in East Africa

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ABSTRACT

Comboni Missionary Sisters in East Africa's fragile contexts face cumulative adversities that challenge their psychological and spiritual well-being. However, struggling with these experiences can lead to post-traumatic growth (PTG): a constructive psychological and spiritual evolution. This study investigated the lived experiences of PTG among Sisters in Uganda and South Sudan, identifying the internal, external, and structural strategies that facilitate personal and vocational transformation. Grounded in an interpretive (hermeneutic) phenomenological design, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 purposively selected participants. Narratives were analyzed using hermeneutic thematic analysis to map growth mechanisms. Findings indicate that PTG is a deliberate developmental shift rather than an automatic outcome. Transformation is facilitated through an ecological framework consisting of five interconnected major themes: Spiritual Anchoring, Cognitive Reframing, Expressive and Embodied Processing, Relational and Cultural Solidarity, and Institutional Pathways toward a Culture of Care. Growth was evidenced by increased fortitude, deeper spiritual maturity, and reinforced missionary commitment. Ultimately, PTG in this context is an interdependent and structurally supported process.

Keywords: Post-Traumatic Growth, Comboni Missionary Sisters, East Africa Province, hermeneutic phenomenology.

INTRODUCTION

Post-traumatic growth (PTG) is not an automatic consequence of hardship; instead, it unfolds as a deliberate, self-directed process of reconstructing one's world-view. This development is nurtured through intentional psychological and social strategies where survivors move beyond mere memory to actively decode and reframe the significance of past trauma (Banyanga et al., 2020; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). This internal sense-making is heavily reinforced by emotional vulnerability and the robustness of one's social scaffolding. As Henson et al. (2021) observe, therapeutic models centred on narrative and cognitive restructuring strengthen resilience by reshaping personal experience. However, cultural and environmental nuances act as critical mediators that either facilitate or obstruct the translation of these strategies into tangible growth.

Global research consistently identifies two pillars of effective growth: structured therapeutic programs and personal meaning-making. The intersection of these two elements appears to be a reliable driver of long-term adaptive success. Post et al. (2020) examined the effectiveness of Spiritual Life Review, a semi-structured, group-based narrative exercise, within a European clinical context. While their mixed-methods approach utilized validated measures to track spiritual growth and psycho-spiritual well-being among cancer patients, the qualitative findings were particularly illuminating. Participants described a process of profound existential reshaping, documenting a transition from hardship to purpose-driven growth. This suggests that the true value of such strategies lies in psychological integration and the "decoding" of trauma through storytelling. However, while Post et al. (2020) highlight the power of spiritual-narrative interventions, their findings remain tied to a clinical, secular-geographic scope.

Building on the necessity of meaning-making, a qualitative study in Iceland by Bryngeirsdottir and Halldorsdottir (2022) explored the lived experiences of individuals navigating diverse life crises. Their phenomenological insights underscore that there is rarely a linear path to growth; rather, PTG emerges as a complex journey profoundly influenced by a person's inner self and fundamental view of life. Facilitators such as spiritual reflection and a conscious choice to live more fully were central to their findings. While the Icelandic study provides a framework for universal processes of resilience, there remains a need to examine how a specific vocational identity transforms these universal processes into a unique strategy for navigating mission-based adversity.

The role of deliberate cognitive effort was further highlighted by Cui et al. (2021) in their study of frontline nurses in China. Their findings established that deliberate rumination (the intentional process of thinking about an event to find meaning) is a significant predictor of growth. This emphasizes that growth does not occur by chance; it requires mental readiness and a drive to reflect. However, Cui et al.'s research focuses on professional psychological training and clinical experience, which may not fully account for the spiritual "calling" and congregational identity that define religious life.

Collectively, these studies (Post et al., 2020; Bryngeirsdottir & Halldorsdottir, 2022; Cui et al., 2021) demonstrate that reflection, meaning-making, and structured engagement consistently drive PTG. Yet, a clear gap remains: most global literature views these strategies through clinical or professional lenses. There is a need to explore how these processes manifest when they are embedded in a life-long religious commitment. By shifting from these global contexts to a specific missionary landscape, research can move beyond general theories of coping to investigate unique spiritual and communal strategies.

Within Sub-Saharan Africa, literature emphasizes that trauma recovery is rarely an individualistic endeavour; rather, it is a process deeply embedded in cultural heritage, social scaffolding, and spiritual ecosystems. Amowe et al. (2021) provided a critical foundation for understanding this phenomenon through their study of Catholic religious men and women who survived kidnapping in Nigeria. Using a qualitative, phenomenological framework, they uncovered the "gritty," practical strategies utilized by consecrated persons to recalibrate their lives after violent disruption. Their findings identified deep prayer, the cultivation of compassion toward perpetrators, and the seeking of meaning as central to the healing process. While Amowe et al. highlight the robustness of faith-based coping, they also pinpoint significant barriers, such as the misunderstanding of trauma within religious communities.

The role of spirituality as a survival tool is further echoed in the work of Mhaka-Mutepfa and Maundeni (2019) across Malawi, Botswana, and Zimbabwe. Their research illustrates how spiritual rituals (prayer, group worship, and a sense of connection to a Higher Power) allow individuals to reinterpret adversity as part of a divine plan. While Mhaka-Mutepfa and Maundeni focus on a child-centered perspective, their insights provide a vital link to the adult experience, suggesting that spiritual interpretations of pain are central to navigating and overcoming adversity.

Beyond individual and spiritual strategies, the organizational environment plays a pivotal role in sustaining growth. Babiker and Abdalla (2021) examined vicarious trauma among professionals assisting refugees in Khartoum, noting that while informal peer support and self-care are utilized, they often remain sporadic without formal institutional backing. Their findings suggest that for strategies to translate into long-term post-traumatic growth, they must be supported by communal rituals and structured supervision. This highlight on organizational structures shifts the focus toward how a province or institution provides the "social scaffolding" necessary for individuals to move from vicarious exhaustion toward meaningful personal and spiritual development.

At the East African level, research continues to illustrate how strategies rooted in community, identity, and structured engagement contribute to adaptation and potential growth. The link between specific coping mechanisms and psychological well-being is evident in the Ugandan healthcare sector. Kabunga et al. (2024) identified that while burnout remains a significant threat to professionals in central Uganda, adaptive strategies such as positive reframing, active coping, and social support are critical buffers. Conversely, the rare use of emotion-focused coping suggests a potential gap in practical, sustained stress-reduction strategies.

The importance of structured, identity-anchored group activities is further demonstrated by Pittaway and Dantas (2022) in their study of South Sudanese individuals. Their qualitative findings highlight how communal engagement facilitates social integration and offers a secure outlet for emotional processing. For participants, these group activities were not merely recreational; they provided a framework for restoring structure and finding meaning after the trauma of displacement. While their focus on youth resettlement provides a transitional perspective, it underscores a universal truth: that collective, identity-based practices contribute to deeper psychological shifts.

Finally, in Northern Uganda, Arebo et al. (2022) investigated the protective factors against post-traumatic stress among vulnerable populations in Lira District. Their research highlights a significant link between a lack of spiritual coping and elevated distress, suggesting that spiritual discipline is not just a personal preference but a fundamental requirement for psychological stability. Strategic planning and mutual support were found to be essential in limiting the impact of trauma and driving development.

From global analyses to local East African contexts, certain core strategies consistently drive post-traumatic growth: narrative processing, community belonging, and structured spiritual meaning-making. However, much of the existing literature remains centred on clinical populations, healthcare professionals, or youth in transition, often utilizing quantitative measures to predict growth. There remains a significant gap in understanding the inner life and lived strategies of consecrated women who face long-term, mission-related adversity.

While the broader literature identifies what leads to growth, there is a lack of depth regarding how the specific vocational identity and charism of a religious community facilitate this process. Specifically, there is a need to explore the synergy between individual spiritual discipline and the institutional "social scaffolding" provided by a religious congregation. The present research addresses these gaps by adopting a phenomenological design focusing exclusively on the lived experiences of the Comboni Missionary Sisters (CMS) in the East Africa Province. This study uncovers the unique synergy between psychological support and spiritual tradition, offering a grounded, qualitative look at how recovery is lived and growth is embodied within a missionary framework.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study utilized a qualitative, phenomenological research design anchored explicitly in the interpretive (hermeneutic) phenomenological tradition (Heidegger, 1962; Smith et al., 2009; van Manen, 2016). This framework was selected because it moves beyond descriptive phenomenology to focus on how individuals interpret their lived experiences within specific cultural, existential, and vocational contexts. In accordance with hermeneutic phenomenology, the researcher acknowledges that pre-understandings and the participant's "life-world" are structurally intertwined, making interpretation an iterative process of co-constructing meaning rather than merely reporting unmediated facts.

Location of the Study

The study was situated within the East Africa Province of the Comboni Missionary Sisters (CMS), specifically focusing on active missions in Uganda and South Sudan. These adjacent nations represent diverse and complex landscapes of adversity. While Uganda offers relative geopolitical stability accompanied by regional socio-economic challenges, South Sudan is characterized by systemic socio-political volatility, chronic humanitarian crises, and extreme environmental demands. The CMS has maintained an unbroken presence in these regions since the early twentieth century, positioning the Sisters as a unique demographic embedded within long-term, systemic stress.

Sampling Procedure and Sample Size

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to recruit 10 participants (n = 10). To satisfy the requirements of phenomenological depth, inclusion criteria required participants to be professed Comboni Missionary Sisters, to

have served a minimum of 5 consecutive years within volatile regions of Uganda or South Sudan, and to have self-identified as navigating significant mission-related adversity.

Sample adequacy was determined based on the principle of meaning saturation rather than statistical representation. Within hermeneutic phenomenology, small, highly homogenous samples are preferred to ensure rich, idiosyncratic accounts. Saturation was achieved by the eighth interview, operationalized as the point of informational redundancy, where subsequent narratives yielded no new conceptual properties or structural dimensions regarding the core strategies of post-traumatic growth, but rather confirmed the existing thematic framework.

Instruments of Measure

The primary data collection instrument was an in-depth, semi-structured interview guide designed to facilitate a reflective, conversational partnership. The guide was organized around three major axes: (a) the nature, subjective appraisal, and ecological impact of adverse vocational events; (b) the explicit cognitive, somatic, and relational actions utilized to navigate these events ; and (c) the perceived long-term transformations in personal, relational, and vocational structures. Open-ended questions were supplemented with recursive, non-directive probes to elicit thick, experiential descriptions while maintaining focus across the cohort.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed a systematic, rigorous thematic approach adapted for interpretative phenomenological frameworks, executed through five distinct stages:

1. **Holistic Immersion:** Interviews were transcribed verbatim. The researcher listened to audio recordings and read transcripts multiple times to attain a holistic sense of each participant's narrative arc.

2. **Horizontalization and Coding:** Transcripts were systematically coded line-by-line. Significant phrases, metaphors, and statements directly illuminating the experience of recovery and growth were extracted as meaning units.

3. **Clustering into Emergent Themes:** Meaning units were grouped into preliminary psychological concepts. Overlapping concepts were cross-referenced across transcripts to form stable, descriptive sub-themes.

4. **Conceptual Integration:** Sub-themes were clustered into five distinct, non-overlapping major themes that captured the essential structural meaning of post-traumatic growth within this population.

5. **Synthesis:** The final thematic framework was synthesized into an overarching structural description of the phenomenon, moving from raw narrative units to an integrated psychological model.

Methodological Rigor and Trustworthiness

To establish scientific rigor, the study implemented strategies mapping directly onto the four pillars of qualitative trustworthiness:

- **Credibility:** Member checking was conducted by returning summarized transcript findings to three participants to verify interpretive accuracy. Peer debriefing was maintained throughout analysis with a senior qualitative researcher to challenge over-interpretations.

- **Dependability:** A detailed audit trail was meticulously maintained, documenting every step of the analytic process, including raw coding notes, operational definitions of themes, and logic models tracking how raw data converted into finalized themes.

- **Confirmability:** The researcher kept a reflexive journal to explicitly document and examine personal subjectivities, shifting assumptions, and emotional reactions, thereby protecting the data from unexamined interpretive bias.

- **Transferability:** In lieu of statistical generalizability, the researcher provided rich, thick descriptions of the participants' demographic contexts, ecological stressors, and existential realities, allowing external readers to evaluate the applicability of findings to similar specialized settings.

Reflexivity Statement

As qualitative researchers operating within a specialized spiritual environment, we recognize that our personal background shapes our interpretive gaze. The primary researcher is a trained psycho-spiritual therapist with deep familiarity with religious life and Christian theology. This insider status granted a high degree of cultural and spiritual literacy, allowing participants to share intimate vocational vulnerabilities without fear of being misunderstood.

However, this proximity posed a distinct risk of interpretive bias, specifically a tendency to over-spiritualize psychological pain or to uncritically accept idealized theological clichés (e.g., assuming suffering is always easily resolved by faith). To mitigate this bias and maintain empirical equilibrium, the researcher practiced active hermeneutic bracketing. This involved continuously interrogating our assumptions, explicitly tracking our reactions in a reflexivity journal, and deliberately coding for systemic friction, institutional stigma, and instances where spiritual practices did not immediately alleviate psychological distress.

Ethical Procedures and Trauma-Sensitive Safeguards

This study received formal institutional ethics approval from the relevant institutional review boards. Prior to data collection, written informed consent was obtained from all participants, detailing their right to unconditional withdrawal at any point without vocational consequence. To ensure rigorous anonymity, all identifying markers (including specific local missions, institutional assignments, and unique demographic details) were scrubbed from the text, and participants were assigned alphanumeric codes (A1–A10) used uniformly across reporting.

Given the highly sensitive nature of chronic adversity and exposure to conflict, trauma-informed safeguards were integrated into the interview protocol. Interviews were conducted in secure, private settings with frequent, explicit check-ins regarding comfort and emotional safety. The researcher was prepared to pause or terminate interviews if a participant exhibited somatic signs of hyper-arousal or acute distress. Finally, a formal psychological referral pathway was established prior to interviewing; all participants were provided with pre-arranged contact information for independent, pro-bono professional counselling services to process any delayed emotional activation resulting from the interviews.

RESULTS

The study aimed to investigate the lived experiences of PTG among Sisters in Uganda and South Sudan, identifying the internal and external strategies that facilitate personal and vocational transformation. The study began by presenting the demographic profile of the participants followed by the findings of the study.

Demographic Profiles of Participants

The demographic data were gathered to contextualize the lived experiences of the Comboni Missionary Sisters (CMS) and to provide a backdrop for the diverse narratives of adversity and growth. In a phenomenological study, the uniqueness of each participant's history contributes to the overall understanding of the phenomenon. Therefore, the interview cohort was purposively selected to represent a wide spectrum of missionary life, ensuring that the strategies identified for fostering growth were filtered through various cultural, generational, and ministerial lenses.

The ten participants were selected based on three primary criteria: region of origin, ministerial focus, and age bracket. This intentional diversity, as illustrated in Table 1, allowed for a multi-faceted exploration of the East African missionary experience.

Table 1 Demographic Distribution of Interview Participants (n=10)

Criteria of Inclusion	Description	Number	Percentage
Region of Origin	Africa	4	40%
	Europe	4	40%
	Latin America	2	20%
Ministeriality	Pastoral Ministry	3	30%
	Teaching Ministry	3	30%
	Health Ministry	2	20%
	Formation Ministry	2	20%
Age Bracket	30 - 40	1	10%
	40 - 50	3	30%
	50 - 60	4	40%
	60 +	2	20%
	Total	10	100%

The interview cohort reflects a balanced cross-section of the Province's missionary activity. Participants were drawn from pastoral and teaching roles (30% each), as well as health and formation ministries (20% each), capturing a wide range of mission-related stressors and adaptive responses. Age distribution was equally deliberate, with a significant concentration in the 50-60 age bracket (40%), providing perspectives from sisters with substantial vocational maturity, while also including representation from younger (30-50 years) and older (60+ years) sisters.

To ensure the safety and anonymity of the participants, codes ranging from A1 to A10 are used throughout the presentation of findings. Overall, the composition of the sample reflects a deliberate effort to capture a "universal essence" of growth through varied perspectives. This diversity, encompassing different cultural backgrounds and years of religious service, ensures that the subsequent thematic insights are grounded in the complex, lived reality of the Comboni Sisters in East Africa.

Strategies to Foster Post Traumatic Growth among Comboni Missionary Sisters in East Africa Province

The thematic analysis yielded five major, interconnected themes that define the experiential patterns of post-traumatic growth among the Comboni Missionary Sisters. The findings indicate that post-traumatic growth manifests as a highly deliberate, ecological process rather than an automatic mechanical outcome.

Spiritual Anchoring: From Ritual to Radical Trust

Across the narratives, participants described an internal shift from routine religious performance to a deep, stabilizing relationship with a transcendent figure, which served as a vital tool for affective regulation during crises. Rather than eliminating distress, this spiritual anchoring provided a secure psychological container for fear. Participant A5, recounting the immediate terrors of active conflict, described how repetitive prayer acted as a grounding technique when cognitive processing was exhausted: "Simply praying the rosary allowed me to release fear and release tensions when I was too exhausted for profound theological reflection." Similarly, the physical environment of the chapel provided a safe space for somatic stabilization during panic attacks: "I could feel my heart shaking inside me... I was going to the chapel. I could just sit there with my heart almost exploding in my chest... saying 'Please Jesus, help me, heal me!'" (A4)

This vulnerability often served as the catalyst for growth; by acknowledging powerlessness, the Sisters accessed a "radical trust." As A6 articulated during a period of grave illness:

Knowing that I am powerless and that my only strength is the Lord, it gave me a lot of peace. ... God gave me a lot of courage and acceptance of my sickness as the will of God for me. Whatever He wants from me, He is free to do it. If He wants to heal me, He will. If not, I continue to be His daughter (A6).

In a similar vein, in contexts of war, epidemics, and life-threatening situations, faith provided existential reassurance particularly the sense of not being alone in the face of death. With repeated exposure, this entrustment became more difficult, but remained central to coping:

When several times there was the risk to lose one's life ... I always did the same thing: entrusting myself, my life to God, if it could be the last moment of this life. ... It became increasingly difficult to accept this continuous situation of exposure to deadly risks, but I always did the same thing (A9).

Instead of letting trauma overwhelm them, the sisters used their spiritual resources to reaffirm their vocational purpose, strengthen their relationship with God, and develop hope. This allowed suffering to become a catalyst for mission-driven growth and spiritual renewal.

Cognitive Reframing and the "Theology of the Cross"

While Theme 1 focuses on immediate emotional and physiological regulation, Theme 2 details the secondary, long-term process of cognitive re-narration. Participants explicitly utilized institutional charism and the "Theology of the Cross" as interpretive frameworks to rebuild their shattered assumptions. Adversity was systematically re-narrated not as an interruption to their vocation, but as a primary site of existential refinement. Participant A1 illustrated this cognitive shift, noting a deliberate choice to replace counterfactual questioning with meaning-seeking: "I always try to see why all this is happening... there is something greater God is showing me." Furthermore, personal suffering was reframed as an avenue for empathetic solidarity with marginalized populations: "At times I had the feeling that this was unfair, asking God why me? Why me? But then, why not me? I mean, why not me? I am also a human being and other people struggle a lot." (A8)

Expressive, Embodied, and Psychological Processing

Distinct from cognitive and spiritual meaning-making, this theme encompasses the physical, somatic, and professional mechanisms used to externalize and process traumatic energy. Growth was described as requiring a holistic integration of the physical self alongside spiritual insights. Participants utilized "expressive distancing" through third-person journaling to externalize painful memories , as well as "emotional labelling" combined with manual labour to discharge physical tension. "It was like not me, but someone else living that situation... it was a great help to write." (A8). Participant A7 found that "digging" in the garden allowed her to release pent-up energy, while A8 forced herself to move even when her "legs were heavy" with stress.

Crucially, this theme highlights professional psychological therapy as an active driver of long-term healing, enabling participants to address foundational wounds that amplified mission-related stressors. These findings suggest that genuine healing required the mind, body, and soul to work in unison.

Relational and Cultural Solidarity: The "Togetherness" Factor

This theme captures the external, interpersonal architecture that buffered individual distress and prevented isolation. In contrast to internal psychological processing, relational solidarity highlights the communal and ecological nature of resilience within this context. Younger sisters relied heavily on the "intergenerational scaffolding" of senior congregation members to sustain structural stability. Furthermore, mutual vulnerability with local communities created an interactive loop of resilience: "The community showed me a lot of respect, love, and concern. I never felt I am a burden to them... I really felt I belong to this congregation." (A6) Participant A5 recalled being challenged by the resilience of mothers in war zones who "still had some hope," which prevented her from "betraying" their trust.

To navigate difficulties, the sisters drew on personality traits such as determination, openness to learning, humility, hope, self-awareness, emotional honesty, compassion, and a willingness to seek help. It was observed that sisters who were able to embrace vulnerability, reflect on their experiences, and remain open to change were better able to navigate the aftermath of trauma. This collective "togetherness" fundamentally reshaped their identity, turning shared endurance into a revitalized sense of purpose.

Institutional Pathways: Toward a Culture of Care

The final theme explicitly conceptualizes the structural and administrative conditions that govern how trauma is integrated or suppressed within the wider congregation. Participants identified that individual and communal coping mechanisms are heavily dependent upon institutional systems. This theme isolates three distinct administrative dimensions:

Normalizing Psychological Integration. Participants identified an ongoing organizational stigma regarding professional mental healthcare, noting that sisters frequently hide psychological symptoms to avoid negative evaluations. They advocated for an explicit integration of counselling psychology with spiritual formation. Participant A2 noted a "lot of judgment" and a tendency for sisters to "pretend they are okay" to avoid being labelled.

Leadership as a Accompaniment Strategy. The narratives indicate that supervisory styles act as major environmental modulators of growth. Participants highlighted the need for organizational models that move away from authoritative surveillance toward emotionally secure accompaniment.

Redefining the Vocational Benchmark. Participants critiqued an institutional culture that equates vocational excellence with hyper-productivity and operational exhaustion. They proposed a deliberate paradigm shift that elevates emotional maturity and relational depth over functional output.

Through these five lenses, the lived experience of the Comboni Missionary Sisters reveals that while trauma is deeply personal, growth is an ecological achievement sustained by faith, community, and a courageous institutional shift toward vulnerability.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The experiential patterns observed in this study indicate that post-traumatic growth (PTG) within this population is an ecological, non-linear phenomenon shaped by the transaction between personal psychological strategies, spiritual frameworks, and institutional systems. In alignment with the transactional model of stress and coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), transformation occurs not as an automatic mechanical consequence of trauma, but as a function of how catastrophic disruptions to the lifecycle are cognitively appraised, processed, and relationally supported within a deep religious worldview.

The current findings offer an empirical elaboration of Tedeschi and Calhoun's (2004) model of post-traumatic growth, which posits that growth is predicated on the profound reconstruction of a "shattered assumptive world." Within standard Western psychological literature, religious coping is frequently classified abstractly as either positive or negative. However, the narratives of the Sisters highlight an experiential pattern of *Spiritual Anchoring* that functions as a primary attachment dynamic. Practices such as Marian devotion and the Eucharist serve as vital anchors that go beyond routine ritualism; they provide a structured framework for regulating overwhelmed affective states. This supports the findings of Landi et al. (2022) regarding the protective role of spiritual practices in fostering psychological flexibility. This study extends that concept by showing that in a missionary context, the "divine relationship" acts as a primary attachment figure that provides the emotional security necessary for participants to actively confront and process highly stressful inputs rather than resorting to experiential avoidance.

A critical finding is how the structural reconstruction of the assumptive world is mediated by specialized vocational subcultures and specific institutional schemas. Rather than engaging in general meaning-making, participants explicitly utilized the Theology of the Cross and the specific charism of Saint Daniel Comboni as their primary interpretive tools. This aligns with Eze et al. (2020) regarding the fundamental importance of meaning-making in adversity, but adds a distinct vocational layer: the Sisters do not merely find general meaning, but deliberately re-narrate their trauma as a redemptive participation in a larger spiritual mission. This theological framework allows the individual to repurpose raw, disorganized distress into a structured narrative arc, integrating personal psychological injury directly with their professional and spiritual identity.

However, it is vital to acknowledge that this process is not universally successful or linear. To avoid an idealized, over-spiritualized conclusion, the data also point to negative or absent growth trajectories that must not be minimized. Several narratives illuminated enduring patterns of institutional distress, hidden psychological fractures, and persistent avoidance strategies, where individuals felt forced to "pretend they are okay" due to fears of congregational judgment. This indicates that when spiritual frameworks are used compulsively to bypass somatic pain, or when institutional support is lacking, authentic post-traumatic growth may be delayed or obstructed, resulting instead in prolonged psychological distress or functional burnout.

Therefore, authentic transformation appears to require the activation of *Expressive, Embodied, and Psychological Processing*. The empirical utility of journaling, storytelling, and manual labor (such as "digging") as expressive mechanisms aligns with the narrative models of Henson et al. (2021). These practices facilitate a form of "narrative distancing" that enables the Sisters to externalize and process trauma without being emotionally overwhelmed by it. Furthermore, the data underscore that professional counseling and spiritual accompaniment act as active engines for growth rather than static supports. By providing a stable framework for intentional personal exploration, these interventions ensure that the transition from trauma to growth is sustained, echoing Post et al. (2020) regarding the role of structured psychological interventions in building self-awareness and emotional regulation.

Perhaps the most significant departure from individualistic Western psychological models is the revelation that growth for these Sisters is intrinsically communal. Our findings strongly corroborate models of collective resilience, indicating that within non-Western and highly communal contexts, PTG is an interdependent achievement. The *Relational and Cultural Solidarity* shared among the Sisters and the local populations functions as an interpersonal scaffold that holds the survivor's psychological structure together when individual agency is exhausted. This supports recent scholarship emphasizing the deeply collective nature of resilience in non-Western and religious contexts (Exenberger et al., 2022; Ballah, 2023).

Ultimately, this study indicates that while personal qualities like openness and hope are essential to initiate recovery (Cui et al., 2021), individual resilience strategies require a supportive, well-governed institutional climate to successfully foster long-term growth. By establishing structural *Institutional Pathways* that de-stigmatize vulnerability and actively promote clinical counseling alongside spiritual development, religious organizations can move away from performance-centric, "machine-like" operational productivity. Instead, they can transition toward sustainable organizational paradigms that cultivate a "healed human maturity," reinforcing long-term vocational vitality by fostering missionaries who are spiritually grounded, psychologically integrated, and relationally available.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that post-traumatic growth among the Comboni Missionary Sisters in East Africa is not a passive consequence of surviving trauma, but the result of a deliberate, long-term negotiation with suffering. This transformation is facilitated by a vital synthesis of four domains: Spiritual Anchoring, Cognitive Meaning-Making, Embodied Processing, and Relational Solidarity. The findings suggest that while missionary life in volatile contexts involves unavoidable hardships, growth is maximized when internal spiritual reserves are met with a "scaffolding" of communal and institutional support. Ultimately, PTG in this context represents a fundamental re-narration of the self, where the "scars" of mission are repurposed into a source of vocational endurance and a more profound, empathetic commitment to the "poorest and most abandoned."

Limitations of the Study

While this study offers deep, qualitative insights into the mechanisms of post-traumatic growth within a specialized population, several distinct limitations must be explicitly noted:

Sample Size and Composition: The cohort was restricted to 10 purposively selected participants (n = 10) from a single religious congregation. Although this small sample size conforms directly to phenomenological parameters designed to achieve rich, interpretative depth rather than statistical representation, it limits the immediate generalizability of the findings to broader secular or larger heterogeneous populations.

pecific Religious and Cultural Context: The findings are heavily embedded within the unique Roman Catholic theological tradition, historical heritage, and organizational charism of the Comboni Missionary Sisters operating within East Africa. Consequently, the specific interpretive mechanisms identified (such as the "Theology of the Cross") may not transfer directly to individuals operating within non-Christian religions, secular humanitarian organizations, or different geographical regions.

Transferability Constraints: In qualitative research, findings are not intended to be generalizable but rather transferable. Because the ecological environments of South Sudan and Uganda feature highly distinct geopolitical, historical, and conflict-related dynamics, the transferability of this precise thematic framework to less volatile or non-missionary settings remains limited.

Social Desirability Bias: Given the deeply ingrained institutional expectations regarding vocational resilience, spiritual endurance, and the historical idealization of the self-sacrificing missionary, it is possible that participant narratives were influenced by unconscious social desirability bias. Participants may have over-reported positive growth trajectories or softened expressions of ongoing psychological distress, vocational doubt, or institutional dissatisfaction to conform to perceived congregational norms.

Interpretive Subjectivity: In alignment with the hermeneutic phenomenological tradition, the analytic process is inherently co-constructive, meaning that the final thematic framework is filtered through the specific interpretive lenses, professional backgrounds, and subjectivities of the research team. Although rigorous trustworthiness strategies were deployed, alternative interpretive configurations of the same narrative texts remain entirely possible.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the lived experiences of the Sisters and the identified mechanisms of transformation, the following recommendations are proposed to foster a resilient missionary "culture of care":

1. **Trauma-Informed Institutional Leadership.** General and Provincial Leadership should transition toward a trauma-informed assistance model. This involves normalizing annual mental health "check-ins" as a standard component of missionary care and integrating mandatory psychological debriefings following critical incidents. Leadership training should prioritize "relational maturity" and discretion to dismantle the enduring stigma associated with seeking professional psychological support.

2. **Formation and Emotional Literacy.** The General Coordination Offices for Formation should implement training modules focused on emotional literacy and theological meaning-making. These modules should be integrated into both initial and ongoing formation, moving beyond abstract spirituality to include guided processing of lived experiences. This approach bridges the psychological and spiritual dimensions of the missionary calling.

3. **Facilitated Communal Solidarity.** Local communities are encouraged to establish "safe spaces" for sacred dialogue and peer support. By moving away from performance-based metrics of missionary success, communities can prioritize regular sessions where vulnerability is shared without judgment. Utilizing facilitators trained in basic psychosocial support can help maintain these as spaces of healing rather than institutional evaluation.

4. **Promotion of Holistic Individual Agency.** Individual Sisters are encouraged to adopt holistic reflective practices, such as journaling, expressive arts, and somatic grounding, to externalize distress. Recognizing that "human maturity" is a vocational prerequisite, the intentional use of professional counselling should be promoted as a valid and vital spiritual resource rather than a sign of vocational failure.

Suggestions for Further Research

While this study offers a deep phenomenological look at the East Africa Province, the following avenues for future inquiry are suggested:

Longitudinal Trajectories of Growth: Future research should employ longitudinal designs to track the developmental trajectory of growth over several decades of service. This would capture how the "essence" of transformation evolves from initial formation through senior missionary age.

Comparative Vocation Analysis: A comparative analysis between religious missionaries and lay humanitarian workers in the same regions could clarify how a specific religious "charism" or "calling" uniquely alters the psychological processing of trauma compared to professional motivations.

Operationalizing Growth Domains: The four facilitator domains identified in this study (Spiritual Anchoring, Cognitive Reframing, Expressive Coping, and Relational Solidarity) should be operationalized into a quantitative scale. This would allow researchers to test their predictive strength across larger, global missionary populations.

Institutional and Leadership Correlates: Further investigation is needed to determine how specific leadership styles within religious congregations correlate with the manifestation of post-traumatic growth. Understanding the institutional "climate" that best fosters resilience is vital for congregational health.

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