



## Wisdom from the Saints: A Postmodern Hermeneutics in Interpreting the Hagiographies of the Saints and Venerables for Mental Health Advocacy

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### ABSTRACT

The lives of saints and venerables hold meaningful insights that can guide individuals through emotional and spiritual struggles in today's world. Re-examining their stories through a postmodern lens opens new possibilities for promoting understanding, compassion, and healing in mental health advocacy. Through layered interpretation and careful selection of sources, the study uncovered meaningful insights from the lives of seventeen saints and venerables that connect deeply with present-day approaches to mental wellness. The study's findings reveal that the lives of saints and venerables offer powerful models for understanding mental health, highlighting themes of compassion, community, and resilience. The study highlights how their experiences align with contemporary values in mental health, such as empathy, personal agency, and holistic care, by examining their stories through a postmodern lens.

## INTRODUCTION

Throughout Christian history, the lives of saints and venerables have served as profound examples of faith, resilience, and devotion. These figures are not only venerated for their spiritual accomplishments but are also viewed as guides who offer insight into the human condition through their trials and triumphs (Jones, 2020). Their stories have long shaped the moral and ethical foundations of Christian communities, inspiring believers to live lives of virtue, service, and compassion (Goodich, 2024). Through their lived experiences, often marked by suffering, self-denial, and a search for meaning, they reflect key Christian values that continue to influence personal and communal spirituality today (Kuuliala et al., 2019).

Beyond their spiritual significance, the personal struggles and emotional depth found in the lives of these saints and venerables reveal experiences that closely mirror modern concerns about mental health and emotional well-being (Palginõmm, 2022; Sydoruk, 2023). Many of their stories contain elements of psychological suffering, inner conflict, and personal healing, providing comfort and guidance to those facing similar challenges today. Their lives promote empathy, hope, and the power of spiritual care—values that are at the heart of mental health advocacy (Watkins, 2015; Spencer-Hall, 2017; Head, 2018). As such, these narratives have the potential to serve as meaningful resources in promoting a compassionate and faith-integrated approach to mental health.

Despite their enduring presence in religious teaching and culture, there remains a lack of attention to how these hagiographies can inform present-day mental health advocacy. Many interpretations of the saints' lives have focused solely on their spiritual achievements, overlooking the psychological insights embedded in their experiences. This gap limits the potential use of their narratives in addressing emotional and mental challenges faced by individuals in contemporary society. There is a pressing need to re-examine these lives with new perspectives that highlight their relevance to holistic well-being, especially in the context of modern psychological and social challenges.

This study draws meaningfully from the framework provided by the Mental Health Act of the Philippines (2018), which emphasizes the importance of community-based, culturally sensitive, and holistic mental health services. In alignment with this national effort, the integration of spiritual narratives into mental health discourse provides a culturally rooted avenue to extend support, particularly in predominantly religious communities. The study supports broader advocacy goals by bridging faith-based perspectives with contemporary psychological care, revisiting these familiar stories through a mental health lens (Taja-on & Vergara, 2025).

Addressing mental health through a psychospiritual approach acknowledges that well-being is a multifaceted journey encompassing both emotional and spiritual aspects. The saints and venerables offer reflections on pain, transformation, and healing that can speak powerfully to individuals seeking support and meaning. In today's context, where mental health challenges are becoming more openly acknowledged, revisiting these narratives offers a resource that resonates deeply with people's values and beliefs. This approach encourages a more compassionate and inclusive understanding of mental wellness, grounded in both faith and empathy.

### *Objective of the Study*

This inquiry aims to revisit the stories and writings of saints and venerables through a more thoughtful and relevant lens, recognizing the need for more compassionate and culturally grounded approaches to mental health. The study aims to uncover lessons that can guide and enrich current mental health practices by exploring the lived experiences, emotional struggles, and spiritual insights of individuals. These narratives, when interpreted with sensitivity and awareness, offer perspectives that can inform advocacy efforts and support systems rooted in empathy, community, and personal healing. The study aims to bridge the gap between age-old wisdom and present-day mental health needs, ensuring that advocacy efforts address both the mind and the soul.

## METHODS

### *Research Method and Design*

This study employed a postmodern hermeneutics (Gschwandtner, 2024) approach to explore the meanings and relevance of selected hagiographies related to mental health advocacy. Postmodern hermeneutics, as a method of interpretation, allows for the reconsideration of historical texts with attention to multiple perspectives, context, and subjectivity. The study moves beyond rigid or traditional readings and seeks to uncover deeper, often overlooked, insights into the human condition as reflected in the lives of the saints and venerables. This method facilitates a more multifaceted understanding of how these figures can

inform contemporary approaches to mental health and well-being.

### *Identification of Saints and Venerables*

The selection of saints and venerables followed a systematic process using criterion sampling to ensure relevance and focus (Gill et al., 2018). A total of seventeen figures were identified based on three clear criteria: they must be officially recognized as Catholic saints or venerables, their life or legacy must be associated with themes relevant to mental health, and their hagiographies must be available for analysis. These criteria ensured that each selected figure had meaningful connections to concerns related to psychological and emotional well-being, making them suitable for hermeneutical reflection within the scope of the study.

**Table 1. The Demographic Profiles of the Saints and Venerables' Identified in the Study.**

Name and Title	Life Span	Location	Religious Community
St. Luke the Evangelist	1st century	Syria	Companion of Saint Paul
St. Dymphna	7th century	Ireland and Belgium	Layperson
Blessed Herman the Cripple	1013–1054	Holy Roman Empire	Benedictine Monk
St. Christina the Astonishing	1150–1224	Belgium	Layperson
St. Anthony of Padua	1195–1231	Portugal and Italy	Franciscan Order
St. Albert the Great	1200–1280	Germany	Dominican Order
St. John of God	1495–1550	Portugal and Spain	Order of the Brothers Hospitallers of St. John of God
St. Ignatius of Loyola	1491–1556	Spain	Society of Jesus (Jesuits)
St. Teresa of Ávila	1515–1582	Spain	Carmelite Order
St. Benedict Joseph Labre	1748–1783	France	Third Order of Saint Francis
St. Elizabeth Ann Seton	1774–1821	United States	Sisters of Charity
St. Benedict Menni	1841–1914	Italy and Spain	Order of the Brothers Hospitallers of St. John of God
Venerable Matt Talbot	1856–1925	Ireland	Third Order of Saint Francis
St. Thérèse of Lisieux	1873–1897	France	Discalced Carmelite Order
St. Edith Stein	1891–1942	Germany	Discalced Carmelite Order
Servant of God Dorothy Day	1897–1980	United States	Catholic Worker Movement
Venerable Rutilio Grande	1928–1977	El Salvador	Jesuit Priest

*Sources: Watkins, 2015; Humphries, 2017; Spencer-Hall, 2017; Warren, 2017; Head, 2018; Kuuliala et al., 2019; Ritchey, 2019; Augusté, 2020; Sydoruk, 2023; Goodich, 2024*

The identified saints and venerables were further organized to provide clarity and context to their lives and contributions. As presented in Table 1, the categorization includes the name and title of each figure, lifespan, location, and religious affiliation or community affiliation. To help trace historical patterns and development, they were arranged in chronological order based on their period of influence. This method of classification enables a clearer understanding of the progression of spiritual and social thought across time and how these might relate to evolving views on mental health and care.

### Data Analysis

The study employed a multi-level approach to analysis, ensuring a comprehensive interpretation of the data. First, text analysis (Watanabe, 2021) was conducted to understand the surface meanings and key messages found in the hagiographies. Second, context analysis (Svensson, 2021) was performed to situate these messages within the historical, social, and cultural conditions of the time. Lastly, a comparative analysis (Naik & Santikellur, 2025) enabled the researchers to draw parallels between the experiences of the saints and contemporary mental

health concerns. This layered process enabled the drawing of deeper meanings and practical implications for modern mental health advocacy.

### RESULTS

The study's results explore how the lives, writings, and enduring legacies of saints and venerables reflect complex human experiences that resonate deeply with contemporary mental health concerns. This study reinterprets traditional hagiographies not merely as idealized moral exemplars but as an insightful narrative of struggle, resilience, and transformation, employing a postmodern hermeneutic lens. The study highlights how the cultural and social contexts embedded within the lives of these holy figures can offer insight into identity formation, emotional suffering, spiritual healing, and advocacy for the marginalized, thereby constructing a bridge between historical spirituality and current mental health discourses.

Table 1 explores the cultural and social background portrayed through the writings, letters, and reflections of Saints and Venerables.

**Table 2. Contextual Summary of the Cultural and Social Contexts Reflected in the Writings, Letters, and thoughts of Saints and Venerables**

Name and Title	Cultural and Social Context
St. Luke the Evangelist	Luke's focus on inclusivity and social justice resonates with postmodern critiques of power structures and advocacy for marginalized voices. His writings can be seen as early narratives challenging societal norms and promoting a more equitable community.
St. Dymphna	Dymphna's narrative can be seen as an early testament to the importance of mental health and personal agency. In a postmodern lens, her story challenges patriarchal structures and highlights the individual's right to psychological safety and integrity.
Blessed Herman the Cripple	Herman's life challenges contemporary notions of ability and productivity. His achievements despite physical limitations question societal standards and highlight the value of diverse contributions.
St. Christina the Astonishing	Christina's story may be interpreted as one of neurodivergence or trauma response, rather than simply mystical ecstasy. Her hagiography resists binary interpretations of sanity and sanctity, challenging the Church to confront its history of spiritualizing psychological distress.
St. Anthony of Padua	Anthony's commitment to the poor and his challenge to societal injustices resonate with postmodern critiques of systemic inequalities. His life exemplifies the role of faith in advocating for social change.
St. Albert the Great	Albert's integration of scientific inquiry with spiritual belief challenges the dichotomy between science and religion. His approach aligns with postmodern interdisciplinary perspectives, valuing multiple ways of knowing.
St. John of God	John's transformation from a soldier to a caregiver underscores the potential for personal redemption and the societal value of mental health care. His life challenges modern notions of success, placing worth on compassion over conquest.
St. Ignatius of Loyola	Ignatius's focus on personal experience and reflection resonates with postmodern ideals of self-exploration and authenticity. His life illustrates the transformative power of introspection and the pursuit of meaningful existence.

St. Teresa of Ávila	Teresa's emphasis on personal spiritual experience challenges institutionalized religion, aligning with postmodern values of individualism and subjective truth. Her life illustrates the tension between personal conviction and societal expectations.
St. Benedict Joseph Labre	Labre's rejection of societal expectations and embrace of marginalization resonate with postmodern critiques of conformity. His life invites reflection on the value of alternative lifestyles and the spiritual insights found in liminality.
St. Elizabeth Ann Seton	Seton's navigation through societal expectations and personal adversity illustrates the complexities of identity and faith. Her life challenges traditional narratives, highlighting the intersection of personal conviction and societal roles.
St. Benedict Menni	Menni's initiatives challenge the marginalization of the mentally ill, promoting inclusive care models that value each person's inherent worth.
Venerable Matt Talbot	Talbot's journey reflects the complexities of addiction and recovery, challenging stigmas and highlighting the role of community and faith in personal healing.
St. Thérèse of Lisieux	Thérèse's focus on personal experience and inner transformation aligns with postmodern values of authenticity and individual meaning-making. Her life challenges grand narratives, highlighting the sacredness of ordinary life.
St. Edith Stein	Stein's life embodies the complexities of identity and belief as a Jewish convert to Catholicism who perished in Auschwitz. Her narrative challenges simplistic categorizations, highlighting the multifaceted nature of personal and spiritual identity.
Servant of God Dorothy Day	Day's life challenges traditional boundaries between secular activism and religious devotion, embodying a holistic approach to social change rooted in spiritual conviction.
Venerable Rutilio Grande	Grande's life and martyrdom underscore the intersection of faith and politics, challenging the Church to engage actively in societal transformation and to stand with the oppressed.

The results in Frame 1 of the study reveal that the cultural and social contexts embedded in the lives and reflections of saints and venerables present a rich tapestry of resistance, healing, and transformation that aligns with postmodern interpretive frameworks. Rather than viewing sanctity through idealized or mythic lenses, the study uncovers how these figures responded to marginalization, injustice, personal suffering, and systemic inequities with radical compassion, introspection, and social advocacy. Their writings and lived experiences challenge dominant narratives about normalcy, productivity, and holiness, instead offering deeply human stories

that resonate with contemporary concerns around identity, mental wellness, and spiritual authenticity. The analysis affirms the study's objective to reinterpret hagiography as a vehicle for mental health advocacy—revealing how interior struggles, societal engagement, and symbolic narratives of suffering and hope contribute to a more inclusive and psychologically resonant theology for today's faith communities.

Frame 2 highlights the relevance of the Saints' and Venerables' writings, letters, and reflections to contemporary mental health advocacy.

**Table 3. Contextual Summary of the Relevance to Mental Health Advocacy Reflected in the Writings, Letters, and Thoughts of Saints and Venerables**

Name and Title	Relevance to Mental Health Advocacy
St. Luke the Evangelist	Luke's portrayal of Jesus as a healer and his attention to the suffering of individuals provide a framework for understanding the importance of compassion and care in mental health. His emphasis on community and support aligns with contemporary approaches to mental well-being.
St. Dymphna	As the patroness of mental health, Dymphna's legacy offers solace to those battling psychological ailments. Her story encourages faith communities to recognize and support mental health issues, promoting a culture of understanding and compassion.
Blessed Herman the Cripple	Herman's story underscores the importance of recognizing and nurturing the potential in every individual, regardless of physical or mental challenges. His life advocates for inclusivity and the celebration of diverse abilities within communities.
St. Christina the Astonishing	Christina invites reflection on how religious traditions have pathologized or romanticized mental illness. Her life challenges faith communities to discern between holiness and hurt, and to offer support rather than suspicion to those who express spiritual experience in unconventional ways.
St. Anthony of Padua	Anthony's emphasis on compassion and understanding provides a model for supporting those facing mental health challenges. His teachings encourage communities to foster environments of empathy and support.

St. Albert the Great	Albert's holistic view of human nature supports the integration of psychological and spiritual care. His legacy encourages a comprehensive approach to mental health that respects both empirical
St. John of God	John's dedication to the mentally ill and destitute serves as a model for holistic care. His approach advocates for the integration of mental health services within community support systems, emphasizing dignity and respect for all.
St. Ignatius of Loyola	The Jesuit tradition of discernment and reflection offers tools for mental wellness, encouraging individuals to understand their inner motivations and challenges. Ignatius's approach supports the integration of spiritual practices in mental health care.
St. Teresa of Ávila	Teresa's teachings on contemplation and inner peace offer valuable insights into managing anxiety and stress. Her acknowledgment of spiritual desolation mirrors modern understandings of depression, providing a framework for spiritual and psychological healing.
St. Benedict Joseph Labre	Labre's experiences highlight the importance of community support for the homeless and mentally ill. His legacy encourages faith communities to extend compassion and practical assistance to those on society's fringes.
St. Elizabeth Ann Seton	Seton's resilience and dedication to education underscore the importance of supportive structures in promoting mental well-being. Her legacy encourages the development of compassionate communities that address emotional and psychological needs.
St. Benedict Menni	Menni's legacy continues in the work of the sisters Hospitaller, providing a model for faith-based mental health services that prioritize compassion and comprehensive care.
Venerable Matt Talbot	Talbot's life offers hope and a model for those battling addiction, emphasizing the importance of support systems, spiritual practices, and personal commitment in the journey toward recovery.
St. Thérèse of Lisieux	Thérèse's approach offers a gentle path to coping with psychological struggles, emphasizing self-compassion and the significance of small victories. Her teachings encourage individuals to find value and purpose in their daily experiences.
St. Edith Stein	Stein's emphasis on empathy and the intrinsic worth of every individual aligns with contemporary mental health values. Her life encourages a compassionate approach to psychological suffering, recognizing the interplay between spiritual and mental well-being.
Servant of God Dorothy Day	Day's emphasis on community and hospitality provides a framework for addressing mental health through supportive relationships and societal engagement, highlighting the role of communal care in individual well-being.
Venerable Rutilio Grande	Grande's emphasis on community and social structures aligns with contemporary understandings of mental health, recognizing the impact of systemic factors on individual well-being.

The results presented in Frame 2 reveal that the lives and legacies of saints and venerables offer perceptive insights into contemporary mental health advocacy, especially when viewed through a postmodern hermeneutic lens. The analysis affirms that many of these figures embodied deep empathy, resilience, and inclusive care that challenge faith communities to embrace psychological well-being as a core component of spiritual life. Their narratives encourage a shift from stigmatizing mental health challenges to recognizing emotional suffering as part of the human condition, worthy of compassion, pastoral attention, and communal support. These spiritual exemplars offer tools for healing that bridge faith and psychology by modeling holistic care, personal introspection, and social responsibility. The interpretation aligns with the study's objectives by demonstrating how hagiographies when read critically and contextually, can empower contemporary believers to cultivate mental wellness, foster vulnerability, and build communities rooted in empathy and understanding.

The results reveal a meaningful connection between the cultural and social contexts of the saints and venerables and their relevance to mental health advocacy today. Frame 1 highlighted how their lives challenged societal norms, questioned power structures and reflected postmodern values such as inclusivity, empathy, and authenticity. Frame 2 further emphasized how their stories offer practical and emotional support for individuals experiencing mental distress, promoting compassion, community care, and holistic healing. The synthesis of these two frames shows that the spiritual narratives of these figures not only hold historical significance but also speak directly to present-day concerns around psychological well-being. Their examples foster a deeper understanding of human experiences, revealing how faith-based traditions can serve as a source of strength and healing in contemporary mental health practices.

## DISCUSSION

The findings of this study illuminate how saints and venerables, often idealized in traditional narratives, embody profound emotional and psychological journeys that resonate with present-day mental health discourse. Their legacies challenge faith communities to move beyond romanticized piety toward a theology that validates emotional struggles and promotes inclusivity, empathy, and compassionate care. Ultimately, this reframing fosters a spiritually grounded yet psychologically attuned model for supporting mental well-being in contemporary pastoral settings.

### *Reconciling Holiness with Human Struggle*

The gathered narratives reflect how the lives of spiritually recognized individuals were deeply intertwined with emotional struggle, social marginalization, and inner turmoil. Rather than portraying an idealized perfection, these stories offer a more grounded perspective of sanctity—one marked by vulnerability, uncertainty, and perseverance. Many of these individuals navigated harsh societal conditions, mental and physical limitations, or internal battles that challenged their faith and self-worth. Interpreting their stories through a postmodern lens reveals how their responses to suffering were not mere submission but acts of personal agency, resistance to unjust systems, and a call for deeper compassion. This recognition opens space for understanding holiness not as flawlessness but as the courage to seek meaning and healing in the face of distress.

The themes drawn from these lives suggest a strong alignment with modern mental health values, empathy, community care, and the acknowledgment of psychological pain as part of the human condition. Their responses to affliction, often rooted in reflection, service, and resilience, illustrate a rich resource for mental health advocacy. These examples challenge faith communities and mental health supporters alike to adopt a more inclusive and humane view of suffering. The emphasis on healing, support, and compassion reflected in their legacies validates personal struggles and reinforces the importance of safe, understanding environments for those experiencing mental health challenges (Humphries, 2017; Jones, 2020; Carnes, 2024; Goodich, 2024).

The insights gained from this interpretation provide a valuable foundation for strengthening current mental health initiatives. Their stories invite advocates, educators, and community leaders to reframe how mental well-being is approached, shifting away from stigma and toward holistic care that embraces emotional and spiritual dimensions. Recognizing suffering as a shared human experience rather than a weakness paves the way for more effective advocacy rooted in dignity and solidarity. By drawing on these narratives, mental health efforts can foster hope and resilience, demonstrating that healing and sanctity often emerge through struggle rather than despite it (Ritchey, 2019; Cook, 2022; Johnson, 2023; Taja-on & Vergara, 2025).

### *The Saint as Mental Health Advocate: Compassion, Accompaniment, and Empathy*

The results reveal a consistent theme of compassion and empathy reflected in the lives and missions of those who served the marginalized, the mentally ill, and the spiritually wounded. Their actions demonstrate how spiritual leadership can extend beyond traditional preaching, encompassing active care, accompaniment, and social engagement. Across diverse contexts, their commitment to serving those in emotional or psychological distress is seen not as an optional expression of faith but as a central vocation. Their stories emphasize a compassionate response to human suffering, suggesting that sanctity includes not just prayer and asceticism but also deep involvement in the emotional and psychological lives of others.

A closer analysis reveals that many models of care offered resemble contemporary principles in mental health support. They established communities centered on healing, fought for the dignity of individuals with mental illness or addiction, and created inclusive spaces for those rejected by society. Others provided silent witness through their suffering, embodying empathy through personal hardship and resilience. These examples present a form of spiritual leadership that values listening, accompaniment, and an openness to vulnerability. Rather than portraying mental health as a sign of weakness or spiritual failure, these lives affirm its complexity and call for compassionate understanding within community settings (Humphries, 2017; Jones, 2020; Carnes, 2024; Goodich, 2024).

The implications of these findings underscore the significant role of faith communities in fostering compassionate mental health advocacy. Their legacies encourage the integration of pastoral care with professional mental health approaches, where empathy, spiritual support, and social inclusion are not separate from healing but are integral to it. As mental health challenges become more visible in society, these examples remind us that supporting the vulnerable is a sacred duty rooted in compassion and dignity. They invite religious leaders and communities today to build supportive spaces where no one feels alone in their suffering (Kuuliala et al., 2019; Cook, 2022; Ramos, 2022; Taja-on & Vergara, 2025).

### ***Spiritual Practices and Psychological Resilience***

The collected narratives reveal that spiritual practices were central to how individuals navigated adversity, inner conflict, and emotional suffering. These practices rooted in silence, prayer, confession, and journaling offered not just religious observance but also personal strategies for managing psychological stress. Within their historical and cultural contexts, these activities served as tools for introspection and healing, allowing individuals to remain grounded despite marginalization, illness, or personal loss. Their stories highlight the strength drawn from ritual and faith, which enabled emotional endurance and nurtured psychological resilience. In viewing these practices through a postmodern lens, it becomes evident that they served as early expressions of mental health care, where spiritual habits functioned similarly to therapeutic coping strategies used today.

These narratives present a consistent pattern: individuals engaged in spiritual routines that paralleled what is now recognized as beneficial for mental health. The rhythm of prayer and silence functioned as grounding practices, much like mindfulness and meditation. Confession and personal reflection often mirror the release and clarity found in psychological counseling or journaling. Community life provided an environment of belonging and accountability, resembling contemporary support groups or peer-based networks. These approaches were not merely symbolic acts of devotion but were also practical responses to distress. Through these stories, spiritual practices are shown to fulfill a dual role, nurturing

the soul while also providing psychological relief, regulation, and clarity in difficult moments (Humphries, 2017; Jones, 2020; Carnes, 2024).

The implications of these insights invite a broader appreciation for integrating spiritual traditions into mental health advocacy today. Drawing from these historical examples, modern mental health efforts can be enriched by incorporating spiritual practices that emphasize reflection, communal belonging, and inner peace. Recognizing the value of these long-standing routines can help bridge faith-based approaches with contemporary wellness models, encouraging communities to embrace inclusive and holistic support systems. As these spiritual habits once empowered individuals to remain resilient in the face of struggle, so too can they inspire mental health frameworks that honor both the mind and the spirit in caring for those in need (Ramos, 2022; Johnson, 2023; Taja-on & Vergara, 2025).

### ***The Role of Community in Healing***

The gathered narratives consistently point to the essential role of community as a source of healing, affirmation, and resilience. These lives reveal how spiritual communities—whether monastic orders, family networks, or social outreach groups—offered not only companionship but a structure for individuals to grow, heal, and contribute meaningfully despite mental or emotional struggles. Through these contexts, the importance of belonging and shared purpose emerges as a recurring theme. The saints and venerables demonstrated how faith communities could serve as spaces of refuge and transformation, especially for those marginalized by physical, psychological, or societal conditions. These stories, viewed through a postmodern lens, highlight the breakdown of rigid norms and the embrace of human complexity within the safety of relational spaces.

The accounts present a compelling argument for integrating communal care into modern mental health advocacy. Individuals found strength not only in private devotion but also in the supportive presence of others, mentors who guided them, companions who walked with them, and institutions that recognized their dignity. Community life provided a mirror for self-understanding and a container for emotional and spiritual growth. This form of relational healing mirrors contemporary mental health models that emphasize social connectedness, peer support, and collective responsibility. The saints' lives show that healing often occurred not in isolation but in deep connection with others, where acceptance and shared values laid the groundwork for renewal and recovery (Humphries, 2017; Jones, 2020; Carnes, 2024; Goodich, 2024).

These findings offer valuable insights for developing mental health initiatives that are relationally grounded and community-focused. Programs rooted in collective engagement, such as group therapy, faith-based outreach, or community centers, can reflect the same healing dynamics seen in these historical examples. The emphasis on belonging and purpose reinforces the idea that recovery is not solely an internal process, but one fostered through meaningful interaction with others. These insights call for advocacy that cultivates compassionate spaces where individuals feel seen, valued, and empowered to heal within the context of shared humanity (Dein, 2020; Khan & Dixon, 2020; Ramos, 2022; Johnson, 2023; Taja-on & Vergara, 2025).

### ***The Intersection of Physical, Mental, and Spiritual Pain***

The lived experiences reflected in the hagiographies offer a profound glimpse into how physical suffering often mirrored inner emotional and psychological struggles. Many individuals chronicled in these narratives endured visible illness, disability, or persecution that deeply shaped their inner lives. These physical trials were not merely bodily afflictions but served as points of reflection, self-understanding, and transformation. Interpreted through a postmodern lens, these stories resist the separation of mind, body, and spirit by revealing how suffering in one domain inevitably affects the others. In particular, their experiences show how pain can

serve both as a personal cross and as a gateway to deeper empathy and connection with others who suffer.

This intersection of physical, mental, and spiritual pain holds deep relevance for mental health advocacy today. The lives examined show that suffering in the body often mirrors emotional wounds, and addressing one without the other leaves healing incomplete. These individuals navigated experiences that resemble modern understandings of anxiety, depression, trauma, and even neurodivergence. Their resilience was often shaped not by the absence of suffering but by a sense of meaning, community support, or spiritual clarity. Their legacies challenge contemporary mental health care to acknowledge the entire human experience—where physical symptoms can reflect deeper emotional distress, and healing requires attention to both inner and outer pain (Humphries, 2017; Jones, 2020; Carnes, 2024; Goodich, 2024).

As a contribution to mental health advocacy, these insights encourage a more holistic model of care—one that honors the complexity of human suffering. Advocacy can benefit from approaches that validate both psychological distress and spiritual searching, as well as the unique role of the body in expressing and processing trauma. Faith communities, mental health practitioners, and educational institutions can draw on these examples to create safe spaces where physical limitations, emotional vulnerabilities, and spiritual longings are not viewed as separate problems but as interconnected aspects of the person. Ultimately, these narratives urge us to move beyond reductionist views of health, fostering compassionate systems that respect the fullness of human pain and the possibility of transcendence within it (Dein, 2020; Khan & Dixon, 2020; Johnson, 2023; Taja-on & Vergara, 2025).

### ***Reframing Mental Illness in Religious Contexts***

Throughout history, religious narratives have often presented extraordinary behaviors such as hearing voices, seeing visions, or choosing lives of radical poverty or silence as signs of holiness. In a contemporary lens, many of these behaviors could be interpreted as symptoms of psychological distress, neurodivergence, or trauma. These stories reveal how thin the line can be between spiritual experience and what would today be classified as mental illness. Rather than seeing these conditions as disqualifying, these lives offer powerful counter-narratives that challenge modern assumptions about what it means to be mentally unwell. They invite reflection on how faith traditions have historically embraced such individuals, not despite their differences but sometimes because of them, viewing them as conduits of divine insight or radical compassion.

The interpretation of these stories provides an opportunity to reframe how mental illness is perceived in religious spaces. Rather than pathologizing spiritual expressions that do not align with societal norms, these narratives call for a deeper understanding of the complex interplay between faith, psychology, and community. They encourage communities to become more open to the idea that mental suffering and spiritual depth can coexist. This perspective can help reduce stigma by showing that mental health struggles are not incompatible with holiness or dignity. Instead, these stories teach that vulnerability, confusion, and even breakdowns can be part of a sacred journey, offering insights into the human condition and the need for belonging and care (Humphries, 2017; Jones, 2020; Carnes, 2024; Goodich, 2024).

These insights have direct implications for mental health advocacy, especially within faith-based environments. They suggest that promoting mental health requires more than just clinical awareness; it calls for a reimagining of how communities engage with difference, vulnerability, and unconventional behavior. Faith communities can learn to create spaces where people feel safe to share their inner experiences without fear of judgment or exclusion. By drawing on these historical examples, mental health initiatives can be enriched with language and values already familiar to religious settings, making support more accessible and compassionate. In this way, reframing mental illness within religious contexts can contribute to a more

inclusive and empathetic approach to psychological well-being (Dein, 2020; Cook, 2022; Johnson, 2023; Taja-on & Vergara, 2025).

### ***Spirituality as a Language for Mental Health***

The insights drawn from the cultural and social contexts of the saints and venerables reveal that spiritual life stories often contain experiences that closely mirror the emotional and psychological challenges faced today. Many of these individuals demonstrated resilience, inner transformation, and profound personal reflection experiences that, through a modern lens, can be interpreted as responses to emotional suffering, trauma, or mental health conditions. Instead of framing these solely as religious phenomena, their stories suggest that spirituality offered a meaningful and accessible language to navigate internal struggles. Terms like surrender, discernment, and grace, which recur in their narratives, serve as emotional tools for processing pain and seeking peace, demonstrating how spiritual frameworks can coexist with and enrich mental health understanding.

These findings suggest that spirituality offers not only symbolic comfort but also a practical language for mental wellness. For many individuals, spiritual expressions such as seeking consolation in prayer, discerning life choices, or embracing small acts of surrender reflect efforts to manage anxiety, despair, or existential doubt. These narratives encourage an inclusive understanding of how people interpret and cope with suffering—especially when conventional psychological vocabulary may feel foreign or inadequate. In doing so, the lived experiences of these figures promote an integrative view that does not pit faith against mental health care but instead builds a bridge where both traditions contribute to healing and wholeness (Humphries, 2017; Jones, 2020; Carnes, 2024; Goodich, 2024).

The implications of this perspective are significant for modern mental health advocacy, especially within faith communities. Recognizing spiritual language as a legitimate mode of expressing psychological needs opens the door to more compassionate and inclusive conversations about mental well-being. It invites caregivers, religious leaders, and mental health professionals to collaborate more openly, honoring the spiritual beliefs that shape how individuals make sense of their emotions. As a result, advocacy can evolve to be more person-centered and culturally responsive, creating spaces where spiritual and psychological needs are met together and where healing is understood not only as clinical progress but also as a journey of meaning, connection, and inner peace (Spencer-Hall, 2017; Kuuliala et al., 2019; Johnson, 2023; Taja-on & Vergara, 2025).

## CONCLUSION

The study revealed that the lives and legacies of the saints and venerables offer meaningful insights into mental health advocacy when interpreted through a postmodern lens. Their stories often challenge traditional social norms and illuminate the value of inclusivity, compassion, and personal agency. The narratives of figures such as St. Dymphna, St. John of God, and St. Teresa of Ávila emphasize the importance of understanding psychological suffering, supporting holistic care, and promoting community-based mental health support. Many saints also confronted or transcended societal expectations, presenting models of resilience, alternative perspectives on sanctity and sanity, and the integration of spiritual and psychological healing. Across the examples, a shared emphasis on empathy, personal transformation, and social responsibility emerged, aligning closely with contemporary principles in mental health care.

The study presents new knowledge by highlighting how hagiographies when re-examined through the lens of postmodern interpretation, serve as powerful narratives that advocate for mental well-being. These stories reflect lived experiences of emotional suffering, spiritual resilience, and communal care that resonate deeply with present-day approaches to mental health. Rather than viewing sanctity as distant or idealized, the saints' lives demonstrate that mental and emotional struggles can coexist with spiritual growth and personal strength.

The study offers a renewed perspective on how religious traditions can inform and enrich mental health discourse by reclaiming these narratives as relevant, compassionate, and deeply human.

Furthermore, this interpretation encourages faith communities, educators, and mental health advocates to look beyond stigmatized or romanticized views of psychological experiences. It urges the integration of empathy-based care, personal agency, and community support into mental health frameworks. The saints' examples serve not only as spiritual inspiration but as real-life representations of courage in the face of psychological distress and societal exclusion. This conclusion affirms the potential of these narratives to bridge historical spirituality with contemporary needs for mental health advocacy and inclusive care.

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