TREASURE.
A COMMUNITY-BASED APPROACH TO MENTAL HEALTH AND HOLISTIC WELLBEING IN RELIGIOUS LIFE

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Sister of St. John the Baptist, Sr. Sally John is an associate professor of psychiatry at the Mahatma Gandhi Institute of Medical Sciences, Wardha, in western India. She is engaged in clinical care, teaching and community psychiatry, directing projects such as child and adolescent outreach, along with geriatric and palliative care programs.

Sr. Sally, developed a holistic approach in psychiatry by integrating spirituality and faith aspects. She has treated mental health issues of several Catholic nuns and priests.

In 2024, she founded Treasure, a sister-led mental health network for women religious. Sr. Sally coordinates a network of Catholic psychiatrists, psychologists, psychiatric nurses, social workers and tech aides to address mental health needs of nuns.

Across continents and cultures, women religious stand at the living heart of the Church's mission. In schools and hospitals, in parishes and prisons, in refugee camps and fragile communities, they embody a quiet yet powerful presence of compassion, resilience, and hope.

They accompany the vulnerable, educate the young, heal the sick, and walk with those on the margins.

Yet, beneath this generous service lies a more hidden reality.

Those who dedicate their lives to caring for others often carry unseen burdens within themselves—the emotional weight of accompaniment, the complexities of community life, the strain of leadership, and the accumulated fatigue of years of service. Stress, burnout, emotional exhaustion, and psychological distress are not uncommon

experiences. And yet, within many contexts of religious life, these realities remain unspoken, misunderstood, or silently endured.

For a long time, struggles of the mind and heart were often interpreted primarily in spiritual or moral terms. While faith remains a profound source of strength, the psychological dimension of human life has not always received equal attention. As a result, many sisters have journeyed through their difficulties without the language, support, or structures needed for healing and integration.

And yet, something is changing. Across the global Church, there is a growing recognition that care for the human person must be holistic—embracing body, mind, relationships, and spirit as an integrated whole. It is within this moment of awakening that *Treasure* was born.

***Treasure*: A Movement Emerging from Listening**

Treasure is a collaborative network of over 100 women religious across India who are trained mental health professionals, including psychiatrists, psychologists, health workers like doctors and nurses, and counsellors, representing diverse congregations. United by a shared commitment, the network works towards promoting the mental health, psycho-spiritual wellbeing, and holistic care of their fellow sisters. Rooted in both professional expertise and lived religious experience, *Treasure* seeks to foster compassionate, community-based, and sustainable approaches to care within consecrated life.



Treasure is not merely a programme; it is a movement born out of attentive listening.

It emerged from the shared experience of women religious who are mental health professionals—psychiatrists, psychologists, counsellors, educators—who, through years of clinical and pastoral engagement, encountered a recurring reality: many sisters were not only experiencing distress, but doing so within environments where such struggles were difficult to name, express, or address.

Treasure therefore began as a response—not only to suffering, but to silence, fragmentation, and the absence of integrated care.

At its heart lies a simple yet transformative conviction: every sister is a treasure—and her psychological wellbeing, community wellbeing, relational health, and spiritual life deserve attentive, structured, and compassionate care.

This vision affirms that caring for mental health is not separate from vocation, but intrinsic to its flourishing.

Reimagining Care: From Individual Struggle to Communal Responsibility

One of the most significant contributions of *Treasure* is its shift in perspective: from viewing mental health as an individual issue to recognising it as a shared, communal responsibility.

In many cases, emotional struggles in religious life do not arise from severe mental illness alone. They emerge from the ordinary yet complex realities of human living—misunderstandings, unmet expectations, loneliness, cultural differences, generational gaps, and the demands of mission.

When these experiences are not understood, they can deepen into distress and isolation. However, when communities grow in awareness and sensitivity, they become spaces where healing can begin naturally—through listening, acceptance, and mutual support.

In this sense, community itself becomes the first context of care.

This vision resonates with the Gospel image of the treasure hidden in the field. Mental wellbeing, too, is often a hidden treasure—present within individuals and communities, yet requiring attentive discovery, protection, and nurturing.

In today's global religious life—marked by intercultural communities, diverse ministries, and rapidly changing social realities—this communal dimension becomes even more critical. Differences in language, culture, formation, and expectations can sometimes create strain, but when approached with understanding, they can also become sources of enrichment, learning, and deeper communion.

Treasure therefore invites communities to become places where sisters are not only supported in their mission, but also accompanied in their humanity.

A Framework for Holistic and Sustainable Care

To translate this vision into practice, *Treasure* has developed a framework rooted in three interconnected dimensions: Information, Intervention, and Infrastructure.

Information: Forming Awareness and Reducing Stigma

Education is the foundation of transformation. Through formation programmes, workshops, webinars, and digital platforms, *Treasure* promotes mental health literacy within religious communities.

These initiatives help sisters and leaders understand emotional life, stress, trauma, relationships, and the integration of psychological wellbeing with spiritual growth. By fostering awareness, communities begin to move from fear and misunderstanding toward compassion and informed care.

Intervention: Ensuring Access to Support

While prevention is essential, some situations require professional care. *Treasure* facilitates access to counselling, psychotherapy, and psychiatric support through a network of trained professionals.

Both online and in-person pathways are made available, ensuring that even sisters in remote or underserved areas can access help. Listening circles, peer accompaniment, and structured referral systems further ensure that support is timely, appropriate, and respectful of dignity.



Infrastructure: Building Systems for the Future

Sustainable care requires more than goodwill—it requires structure. *Treasure* is developing guidelines, training modules, leadership resources, ethical frameworks, and digital learning systems that enable congregations to respond consistently and responsibly.

This includes formation programmes, leadership guidance, geriatric care resources, and structured protocols for responding to psychological distress. In doing so, mental health care becomes not an occasional response, but an embedded dimension of religious life.

Breaking the Silence, Restoring Dignity

Perhaps the most profound transformation brought by *Treasure* is the gradual breaking of silence around mental health.

For many years, emotional struggles were often hidden due to fear of stigma or misunderstanding. At times, distress was interpreted as lack of faith or insufficient commitment.

Treasure gently invites a different understanding.

Mental health challenges are not a sign of spiritual weakness. They reflect the complex reality of being human within demanding contexts of mission and community life.

By bringing psychological insight into dialogue with spiritual wisdom, *Treasure* fosters a more mature and compassionate approach—one that honours both human vulnerability and divine grace.

In this shift, vulnerability is no longer something to hide, but something to accompany with dignity and care.

A Growing Global Horizon

Although *Treasure* began in response to a particular context, its vision naturally extends beyond geographical boundaries.

The challenges it addresses—burnout, emotional fatigue, relational strain, leadership pressures—are experienced by women religious across the world.

In an increasingly interconnected Church, there is a growing opportunity to build shared learning, collaboration, and mutual support across congregations and cultures.

Treasure therefore hopes to grow as a global platform where:

- Congregations can access resources and training
- Leaders can be supported in their responsibilities
- Sisters can receive care without stigma
- Communities can become more compassionate and psychologically aware

Through digital platforms, academic collaborations, and international dialogue, *Treasure* seeks to contribute to a global culture of care within religious life.

An Invitation to Walk Together

The journey toward holistic care cannot be carried by one network alone. It calls for collective commitment across the global community of religious life.

Treasure therefore extends a gentle invitation:

To congregations, leaders, formators, and sisters across the world— to engage in this emerging conversation on mental health with openness, courage, and hope.

This engagement may take many forms:

- Integrating mental health into formation processes
- Creating spaces for dialogue within communities
- Supporting leaders in responding to members in distress
- Building partnerships with mental health professionals
- Fostering cultures of empathy, understanding, and shared responsibility

The goal is not only to respond to difficulties, but to cultivate communities where every sister feels seen, heard, and supported in her humanity and vocation.



Towards a More Integrated and Hope-Filled Future

Consecrated life continues to be a powerful witness of the Gospel in today's world. For this witness to remain vibrant and sustainable, it must be rooted in the wellbeing of those who live it.

Treasure represents a humble yet hopeful step toward this vision.

It reminds us that:

- caring for mental health is part of caring for vocation
- psychological wellbeing strengthens spiritual depth
- and community, when lived with understanding, becomes a place of healing

In the end, this is not only about mental health.

It is about how we choose to care for one another. Every sister carries within her a unique gift for the Church and the world. To care for her wellbeing is to safeguard that gift. And when religious communities across the world begin to treasure the whole person, consecrated life itself becomes an even deeper sign of hope—a sign of compassion, integration, and healing for a world that longs for all three.