

The Psychological Effect and Moral Injury of Clergy Sexual Abuse to Its Victims And Church

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ABSTRACT

This study draws from the experience of Catholic priests in the Philippines. It will be argued that their satisfaction is best understood as a religious emotion despite the challenges they face every day. Their challenges revolve around economic limitation, problems with their bishop and leaders, and relational isolation brought about. The priest-respondents asserted that they are satisfied because they are still able to fulfill their vocation as priests and have an impact on the lives of their parishioners. Priesthood satisfaction in this sense is not an individual state of the mind dependent on the environment and circumstances. Instead, priesthood satisfaction can be understood as a religious emotion that allows them to remain faithful to their vocation as Catholic priests.

Often a neglected perspective, this study focused on experiences and responses of the victims of sexual abuse and the Church. This study posed the following questions: What are the lived experiences of the participants as to the psychological effects and moral injury of clergy sexual abuse to its victims and Church? How do the participants face the challenges and demands as to the psychological effects and moral injury of clergy sexual abuse to its victims and Church? A systematic study of the current literature revealed that these participants most often experience sexual abuse and most frequently reported symptoms related to depression, anxiety, and posttraumatic stress disorder and tended to have difficulties with substance use and engagement in risky sexual behavior later in life.

Keywords: moral injury, psychological effects, sexual abuse, catholic priests, Philippines

INTRODUCTION

The church has been an environment turned into a source of comfort, where people congregate to learn values and strategies for daily living and to support them in making meaning of the human experience. From the Holy Scripture, the purpose of the church is clear like in Hebrews 10:24-25 (English Standard Bible, 2001), the people of God are encouraged to gather and stir up one another to love and good works. Hence, the church is where followers of Christ meet to praise him in song, obtain teaching, where God's will be revealed, and where His word is interpreted, (Cor.14:26). Further, it is designated to be the place where God's truth is protected (1 Tim. 3:15). Decades of research have validated the benefits of belonging to religious organizations when used according to these biblical intentions (Brown, 2020). For instance, church involvement is viewed as a social capital and is deemed a protective resource in therapeutic settings. Unfortunately, there are far too many times that acts contrary to those purposes occur. These acts range from minor disputes amongst church members to outright abusive acts by religious leaders. When the latter occurs, the church goes from being the place sought for edification and healing to an environment of devastation and significant emotional and spiritual wounding. Clergy sexual abuse is a serious church

problem with significant adverse impacts to the mental health and wellbeing of those who have been victimized. Studies indicate that when the victims receive psychosocial and moral support from professionals or competent church authorities here and abroad trained in evidence-based approaches to psychological and pastoral counseling, they report improved mental and psychological health, including decreased trauma associated symptoms. However, a wrong approach or response; and management to a clergy sexual abuse disclosure can result in traumatization and significant psychological stress, to the Clergy as the Perpetrator/Victimizer, Vulnerable Victims and Church (Onato 2019). This is at least partly due to patterns of secrecy and cover ups impacting disclosure from other victims (de Weger, 2022), as well as the unique context in which these abuses occur where harmful acts starting in, or connected in any way to the church, are often faced with ingroup behavior patterns aimed at protecting the church's integrity, which is centered on it being a beacon of morality (Harper et al., 2020).

However, in the case of religious abuse, they are features, responses to and consequences of the abuse. In some cases, the encouragement or requiring of secrecy is used to groom people for abuse (Winters et al., 2022). Victims are made to feel favored for the violations that follow. Once abuse ensues, Scripture is often misused, and religious concepts such as forgiveness are employed to instill confusion, shame, and guilt to maintain a victim's silence. This is done by both the abusers and governing bodies within the church. As a result, a powerful network is formed which, in the supposed interest of the church, revictimizes survivors by silencing and isolating them.

Thus, in response to the sexual abuse scandal involving the abuse of children in the Catholic Church, there has been a burgeoning of research looking at risk factors, grooming strategies, characteristics, impacts, policy needs, and treatment options for children abused by clergy - a global problem impacting children in countries all around the world (Dressing et al. 2021), and in various religious institutions. While there are committees commissioned to investigate these abuses have helped in our awareness of religious abuse as a systemic problem, enabled, to an extent, by patterns of clericalism and lack of accountability among those deemed as the religious elite (Keenan, 2022), this study aims to determine the lived experiences of clergy and laity participants who are in sexual victimized private rehabilitation in the Philippines in relation to psychological effects and moral injury of clergy sexual abuse to its victims and Church. Anchored on the theory of Stephens (2022) which highlights the fiduciary nature of the relationship between church elites and the laity as one of a trusted hierarchy involving emotional expectation, as well as confidentiality, trust, and reliance, this study assumes that (1) religious institutions are recognized as hierarchies of unequal power; (2) religious elite hold, at the very least, a greater power of moral persuasion and theological authority; (3) churches are unique as they are trusted hierarchies that assume good intentions, non-selfish motives, benevolence, and spiritual insights/wisdom of religious leaders; (4) trusted hierarchies are characterized by an opportunity structure that enables abuse, exploitation, and patterns of manipulation of church members by religion; and (5) therefore, clergy wrongdoing, in any form, is not exceptional but rather is a common phenomenon that should be expected due to opportunities and rationales that are afforded due to the very nature of trusted hierarchies. This study shall serve as a tool in instilling awareness on the psychological effects and moral injury of clergy sexual abuse to its victims and church. This should also serve as a guiding tool in decision-making for leaders of institutions, religious and non-religious alike, facing moral issues among and between its members.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study used the Psychological phenomenological qualitative technique to give more focus on the description of the psychological effects and Moral Injury of Clergy Sexual Abuse of the participants which will be the basis for a reflective structural analysis to portray the essence of the experience (Greening 2019). The aim is to derive the general meanings by determining what experience means for the people who have had the experience. The experiences of clergy in terms of psychological effects and moral injury of clergy sexual abuse were gathered through personal interview using validated interview guide protocol. Audio-videos during the participants' colloquial for the accuracy in the transcriptions of responses, interview questions, and letter of intent, pictures of the actual conduct of the participants and tape recorder were also utilized to ensure reliable and valid data from the participants of the study.

Participants of the Study

The participants of the study are composed of eight (8) sexual victimized in private rehabilitation for clergy in the Philippines. The first four (4) is the clergy with more than ten (10) years in church service and with their full ability in terms of leadership and of parish assignments. The next four (4) participants have more than ten (10) years of experience as laity and they underwent a lot of seminars in terms of sexual abuse. These participants are assigned to different places like Galilee, Tagaytay City holding different classification of positions from their respective places.

Ethical Consideration

The conduct of this study is in accordance with the university's established ethical guidance and standards, particularly in the context of qualitative research involving human participants. Ethical clearance was secured prior to data collection. Likewise, participants were informed of the purpose of the research, the interview process and their voluntary participation. Informed consent was secured in writing prior to each interview with assurance that participants have the right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. Moreover, all data collected through interviews were kept confidential, anonymized during transcription, and securely stored to protect participants' identities.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study presents the lived experiences of diocesan priests in the Philippines who have been affected by the psychological effects and moral injury related to clergy abuse within the Church and determine the meanings and structures of the participants' experiences with an aim to understand both the psychological burden they carry and the spiritual and relational tensions arising as a result of moral transgressions within the religious institutions. The data were collected through in-depth interviews and analyzed using phenomenological framework composed of bracketing, horizontalization, thematic clustering, and the formulation of textural and structural descriptions. Going through this process allowed the authors to filter the essence of the participants lived realities and disregard their personal biases and assumptions. This section is organized in three parts: first, textural descriptions captured *what* the participants experienced with themes circling to economic hardship, leadership challenges, and relational isolation; the second section digs into the structural descriptions which explored how these experiences were lived and made meaningful with themes such as personal crisis, internalized satisfaction, and vocational resilience; and lastly, the synthesis of meaning which articulates the essence of the phenomenon, where psychological and moral journey are shared caused by pain, perseverance, and spiritual conviction.

Theme Clustering

From significant statements, the data were clustered into themes which captured both the psychological effects and strategies employed by the participants in coping and making sense of the trauma. Six major themes emerged as follows:

Theme 1: Economic Struggles

Participants disclosed that financial constraints not only hindered their personal needs but also their pastoral mission deepened their psychological burden. While the diocese supports their living cost, participants shared that the subsidy is not enough. Several participants have explained that *they wish they could have more resources to finance the needs of their own parishes*. As one participant acclaimed that *“our stipend covers everything already pastoral needs and our own as well. But it’s sad when I cannot push through with my programs just because there’s nothing to shell out*. Here one sees that the issue at stake is no longer an economic matter. The disappointment emanates neither from the fact that the request was not granted nor from the idea that the diocesan leaders were not forthright about their decision to reject the grant (Galea, 2020).

Theme 2: Leadership-related Challenges

Church leaders often seemed abandoned as participants expressed their frustration over neglect, rigidity of hierarchy, and decisions which prioritize the reputation of the institution instead of their healing and achieving justice. Some participants conveyed that their loss of confidence on the leadership stems from a controversy on bishops receiving expensive vehicles even the misuse of donations received from national government which result to neglect of their requests for support in their parishes. Moreover, the rigid hierarchy finds it difficult for them to request administrative changes, sabbatical leave, or advanced education were declined. One priest, who oversees several schools in the diocese, has found himself in a situation that continues to frustrate him. Some respondents have said that their leaders are compelling, and they certainly deserve some attention, especially within the institution. The pattern that emerges here is that when priests do not feel being listened to by the institutional leaders, they tend to distance themselves and eventually be distrusting of them. This pattern has been observed too among some priests here who felt that church leaders were more interested in protecting the reputation of the institution in the wake of abuse scandals, (Kane, 2022).

Theme 3: Relational Concerns

A deep sense of loneliness is one of the struggles felt by diocesan priests. This stems from isolation and emotional distance from their peers. This became clear during an interview with a participant and explained that his feelings of loneliness can be due to the “separation from my previous life in the seminary where I was in the company of other seminarians”. But even if there may be regular interactions among the priests, this does not mean that they can be open to each other. Other priests interviewed have also offered stories about their personal crises surrounding sexual propriety. When asked about whether they had anyone with whom they could share these matters, they would mention a name or two from among their peers but explain further that they do not necessarily see each other often. Here the struggle becomes evident. While priests may have interactions with each other at the diocesan house, for example, they are limited by their geographies and levels of openness. Feelings of isolation are therefore reinforced with potentially long-term consequences. While celibacy has never been raised as an issue in my interviews, struggles over sexual chastity have. In Hoge’s research (2023), the author found out that pursuing “intimate relationship with a woman” was the main motivation for his respondents who resigned from the priesthood.

Theme 4: Personal Crisis

Priests described their internal struggles such as depression, self-doubt, and temptations of sexual propriety. As one participant said that I have been a parish priest for at least five years now. He interestingly opened about his medical depression to having been “sexually attracted” to a parishioner younger than him. Another participant has not acted on this attraction though. When asked if he has shared his predicaments with anyone, he explains: *“There’s the Monday gathering but priests are typically there to chat over beer. Sometimes, I think to myself that I’m willing to share my condition, but no one asks anyway.”* Other participants also offered stories about their personal crises surrounding sexual propriety. When asked about whether they had anyone with whom they could share these matters, they would mention a name or two from among their peers but explain further that they do not necessarily see each other often. Here the struggle becomes evident. While priests in this diocese may have interactions with each other at the diocesan house, for example, they are limited by their geographies and levels of openness (Borwell, 2022).

Theme 5: Satisfaction Means to Priests

Many have shared that they are still satisfied as priests. After recounting his struggles, another participant the youngest at 28, said *“I am happy...and I can really see my fulfillment as a person.”* This parallels to the generally positive morale of priests, thereby challenging stereotypes that they are burned out or depressed (Rossetti, 2022). Satisfaction is found not just as an individual passive state of the mind. A participant who has been parish priest for five years now, explains that *“I am satisfied but there’s something more that I want to do. Perhaps I have not met many of the expectations especially by the people...and I understand that they are in need.”* Satisfaction is an active effort to transcend hardship through service that for this participant his priesthood *“is a vocation. In my experience, I am satisfied with my calling. I know for a fact that I came from a poor family, but I am happier today...as I do things others do not, like praying for people.”* This resolve primarily confirms that priesthood is a vocation, which, in Catholic thought, is in terms of divine calling. Put differently, the sense of satisfaction they have as an affirmation of their priesthood, which, as Hankle (2020) shows in his study, is a persistent process that begins in one’s vocational discernment. Satisfaction among priests, in other words, is the emotional sense of assurance my informants have about their calling. And the significance of emotional satisfaction is played up or invoked despite the struggles they are faced with. As a result, they can choose to remain faithful to the priesthood. It is such significance that is sometimes overlooked in the study of how individuals marginalized within religious institutions can remain committed.

Theme 6: Priesthood Satisfaction as Religious Emotion

Satisfaction among priests is arguably never completed and always enacted despite their struggles in the diocese. Another participant who have been a priest for more than three decades now, shared that *“I am satisfied because I try to do my responsibility as a priest, serving people, doing my responsibility, doing what is expected of me as a priest...[even if] there were times when I had so many internal problems and conflicts with other people.”* Contrary to the view that satisfaction is the goal of any chosen career, the priests show that being satisfied is instead an active emotional decision tied to their identity as priests performing the vocation even though it is difficult. Put differently, these brief statements suggest that being satisfied is not simply an emotional condition that they have passively arrived at. As pointed out in the literature review, satisfaction is often characterized as a set of attitudes towards various aspects of priesthood. Such characterization renders satisfaction as an emotional condition that fluctuates depending on the elements and considerations outside the control of the priest. So, the implication of

such characterization is that modifying certain working conditions or aspects of the ministry can elevate the satisfaction of priests Sara et al. 2023).

Textural Description

With respect to the participants lived experience in psychological; effect and moral injury three (3) textural themes were generated. Theme 1 focused on the participants who had an economic problem which put them into the phenomenon, making them accept what exists as a status quo in the Philippines. However, for the priests, their financial limitation is an important consideration not simply because they have their own wants or needs also made them realize that they had to overcome because as ministers of God you will be granted spiritually since they were trusted that they could perform and get things done. Theme 2 was about the participants' leadership related as clash of emotions and diversity of opinions that include their being challenged and disappointed, nervous and happy as resulted by their second and random thoughts at knowing that they would lead their diocese as living witness of God. To be sure, not everybody has problems with leadership. But in other cases, diocesan authorities have been described as "hierarchical" or even "difficult". Meanwhile, Theme 3 centered on the participants' relational concern setting to execute the tasks and duties expected of them. The pattern that emerges here is that when priests do not feel being listened to by the institutional leaders, they tend to distance themselves and eventually be distrusting of them.

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Essence

The reality of participants' psychological effect and moral injury as shared by the collective accounts of the selected participants of priests here in the Philippines is an affirmation of a committed and devoted community of priests who can confidently confront and embrace a fact which they successfully dealt with through experience in welcoming various reactions, setting their mind right and coming face to face with challenging learners and parishioners. Although struggling in the early stages of the phenomenon, the participants were resolute and ready to stand their ground by clinging to the power of composure and conviction, perks of active collaboration, unceasing effort to learn more, and dedication and passion to

make things possible. Irrefutably, this study in which seems to be a disadvantage at one glance, can turn into a solution to a considerable extent since in the country, lack of understanding to the priests is still a rampant issue in the dioceses, provided that who have the guidepost of right attitude, display willingness to learn, relearn, and unlearn and to expand their knowledge horizons in order not to compromise the successful learning process of today's highly diverse learners' strata.

Conclusion

This psychological phenomenology study aimed to describe and understand the lived experience of participants as to psychological effect and moral injury of clergy sexual abuse to its victims and the church. Through in-depth interview and qualitative thematic analysis, the lived experiences of the participants centered on three textural themes such as economic struggles, leadership-related challenges, and relational concerns. These central themes emphasized the burdens the clergy endure while they go through pressure of institutional loyalty and pastoral care in the context of moral transgressions within their community. On the other hand, the study also revealed how priests cope with their struggles as described by the following themes: the priests' personal crises and convictions, their search for personal and professional satisfaction, and their constant pursuit for learning and self-renewal. These findings tell us that the priests deeply rooted religious commitment and service, they continuously strive to maintain their sense of vocation and satisfaction.

Practical Implications

The study offers practical implications for the Church and other religious and non-religious institutions not only to address pastoral and psychological challenges within the Church but also to fortify integrity within institutions, accountability, and organizational sustainability coming from a management perspective, as follows:

1. For Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines

- a. To institutionalize reforms and strategic governance by establishing a policy review and compliance systems that include mandatory reporting mechanisms, third-party audit of case responses, and integration of Canon Law and civil law responsibilities.
- b. To develop crisis management and risk mitigation plans including public-facing crisis communication strategy to regain trust and uphold transparency.

2. For Laity

- a. To develop a shared governance model where the laity is encouraged to be part of diocesan review board, financial councils, and pastoral planning teams.
- b. To establish a lay-led ethics committee to monitor clergy behavior with policies on whistle-blowers and restorative measures.
- c. To initiate community-based education programs on child protection, moral responsibility, and institutional ethics.

3. For Diocesan Administrators and Parish Leaders

- a. Establish a professional development program in counseling and leadership by equipping priests and pastoral workers with training in psychology, trauma-informed care, and organizational leadership. Invest in clergy resilience programs to reduce burn-out and moral fatigue.
- b. Develop HR-inspired support systems through wellness programs that cater mental health support, regular wellness assessment, and confidential counseling services.

Limitation and Future Direction

The study is confined to a specific group of clergies within a particular diocesan in the Philippines. Likewise, since the study is phenomenologically designed, it limits the generalizability of the findings across different demographic settings. Likewise, the study focused solely on the point-of-view of priests which may hide the broader systemic and survivor-centered scope of clergy sexual abuse. Given the limitations of the scope of the study, it is proposed for future researchers to expand Qualitative and Quantitative Research by including longitudinal data, cross-diocesan comparisons, and broad range of voices such as the victims, lay members, and seminary formators. And encourage interdisciplinary research by integrating organizational psychology and theology which can help design holistic interventions that address both moral injury and institutional dysfunction.

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