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Priesthood Satisfaction and the Challenges Priests Face: A Case Study of a Rural Diocese in the Philippines

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Abstract: This article draws from the experience of Catholic priests based in a rural diocese in the Philippines. It will be argued that their satisfaction as diocesan priests is best understood as a religious emotion in spite of the challenges they face on a daily basis. Their challenges revolve around economic limitation, problems with their bishop and leaders, and relational isolation brought about by social and geographic distance. In spite of these challenges, priest-respondents have 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. The nuances explored in this article inform and complement the various studies on priesthood in the West.

Keywords: priesthood satisfaction; Diocesan priests; Catholic priests; Catholicism; Catholic Church; Philippines; religious emotion

1. Introduction

A former Spanish colony, the Philippines is a predominantly Catholic society with 80% of the population professing the religion [1]. Relative to other societies, religiosity in the Philippines is high. In terms of attendance at religious services, 52.4% of Filipinos attend at least once a week. The figure

is 29.4% in the US and 7% in Germany [2]. Such religiosity keeps the Catholic clergy very busy. The archipelago is divided into several apostolic vicariates and at least sixteen archdioceses that oversee seventy-two dioceses. According to official statistics from the Vatican, the Philippines has 135 bishops, 5,993 diocesan priests, and 2,973 priests affiliated to a religious order [3].

In recent years, the leadership of the Catholic Church has been met with a series of controversies that remain fresh in the memory of the public. The Philippine Church, for example, was not spared from the sex scandals that scarred the image of Catholicism in the West. Allegations of rape and other forms of sexual abuse have been hurled at several parish priests, and cases have yet to be resolved to this day. It appears then that the public apology delivered in 2002 by the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines did not deter future offenders in the Church [4]. Recently, too, exposés came out in the media about certain church leaders who received expensive vehicles under the administration of the former Philippine president. While they could have been received for the purposes of enhancing church operations, they could have also been politically motivated to “buy their silence” in order to pacify political unrest especially in the countryside [5]. Further affecting the public credibility of the Catholic Church as an institution is its involvement in politics. A long-fought battle has been over the Reproductive Health Bill, which universalizes access to artificial contraceptives and sexuality education. The Church has strongly opposed it and has alienated significant segments of the population because of the rhetoric employed by some of its leaders [6,7]. Interestingly, despite these controversies, a survey shows that 75.4% of Filipinos (as opposed to 25% in Germany and 28.5% in the US) still place “a great deal or complete confidence in churches and religious organizations” [2].

Some of these controversies, while national in scope, first emerged as local matters in many dioceses across the country. Outside such big cities as Manila, Cebu, and Davao, dioceses and vicariates have their own respective administrative structures. Moreover, their geographies keep their issues isolated from mainstream media until they reach scandalous proportions. The parishes of many of these rural dioceses can be very far from their own regional centers and such distances speak of their levels of economic development as well. Indeed, many of these parishes are in the midst of rural poverty.

This article draws from a study conducted in 2011 and 2012 on the challenges priests face in a rural diocese in the Philippines. Their struggles, as their narratives reveal, revolve around issues that are economic, leadership-related, and relational. But in spite of all these diocesan struggles, my informants have asserted that they are still satisfied, a condition which needs to be enacted in a relational and ongoing manner.

Taking my cue from the sociology of religious emotion, I will show that the satisfaction of my informants can be understood as a religious emotion in spite of the challenges they face in the diocese. Their satisfaction lies in being able to commit their time and resources to their communities. In this sense, priesthood satisfaction is not just a passive state that is a result of environmental conditions. This proposition rectifies the assumption in the literature that priests largely view relationships as a source of satisfaction [8]. That priests have an opportunity to give is in itself also a very important source of satisfaction. This then informs why they feel frustrated with the many limitations imposed on them by the economic condition of their parishes and the lack of support they receive from their diocesan leaders.

2. Method

The article draws from a study on the problems being encountered by priests in a rural diocese in the Philippines. As the interest is in their issues and how they deal with them, the appropriate approach has been to interview them, a method employed by Kane to study how recent abuse crises affected priests in the US [9]. Typically, studies on priesthood in the West have been generally conducted using large-scale surveys, thus missing out on the important nuances concerning their perceptions and attitudes toward everyday problems in the parish [10–12]. Indeed, the interviews have generated rich narratives about their satisfaction in the ministry and the main issues they are encountering in the diocese. These qualitative data are explored in this article.

Because narratives presented below are sensitive, the anonymity of the diocese needs to be upheld.¹ It is located in a rural region that spans at least two municipalities. Landlocked, the province is mainly dependent on agricultural economy. Although unemployment in the region is below 6% according to latest figures, almost one-fifth of its families are poor. Towns are typically far from each other, with priests describing that regularly visiting all parishes on a given Sunday is simply impossible. Not all roads in these areas are cemented and a stable vehicle would be necessary to traverse them.

Around thirty priests are deployed in the diocese. Reporting to a bishop, the diocesan priests may be occupying such multiple roles as parish priest, school rector, and mission and catechetical director. For this article, eleven priests from different parishes and with varying years of service in the ministry have been interviewed. The youngest, 28 years old, has been a year in the priesthood and serves as assistant parish priest. The eldest, at 53, has been a priest for almost two decades. He is currently a parish priest but has previously served as mission rector. Some of the informants have advanced degrees in pastoral ministry but the rest have at the very least seminary education and a college degree in theology or philosophy. As will be recounted in some narratives below, the respondents are originally from the same area and have thus studied in local schools and nearby seminaries. Generally, the descriptions they have offered about their families suggest that they come from lower income dispositions. In this article names have been changed to protect their identity.

3. Priesthood Satisfaction in the Literature

Mainly confined to the Western experience, studies on the satisfaction levels of priests have been generally influential for various reasons [11–14]. Usually funded by church-affiliated organizations, these studies have been mounted to assess the general condition of religious and diocesan priests. The findings are then employed to formulate policies and programs to address their emergent needs. Ermis's [10] work on newly ordained priests, for example, has helped identify the need for bishops to mentor them more closely for they are the most vulnerable to pressure among all other clergy. Also, in the media, there is wide interest in the condition of priests mainly because of the crises that have hounded the Catholic Church. But as Greeley [15] shows using large-scale surveys, many of these commentaries are exaggerated (and that celibacy is not to be blamed for any sexual repression within the institution). Because of all these studies, the sustained attention given to Catholic priests makes it

¹ Research of this type has been met in other contexts with some levels of suspicion [11]. I can only be thankful to this diocese's bishop and priests for welcoming this project.

now possible to map trends concerning change in their views over the years. Recent studies have tried, too, to replicate some of their questionnaires in more specific contexts [10,16]. In this section, I will spell out the different major studies on Catholic priesthood and will suggest that the concept of priesthood satisfaction is not fully explored in the literature.

3.1. Large-Scale Surveys

Because the overall goal has been to assess the general condition of priests, the surveys cover several important areas (*i.e.*, satisfaction is just one them). Two major publications have been generated out of *Pulpit & Pew*, a national study on pastoral leadership in the US. In *The First Five Years of the Priesthood*, Hoge [11] explores the lives of the new priests who are perceived to be feeling more pressured than those of previous generations. Priestly ordinations, for example, have been lower and cases of resignation are believed to be higher in recent years. Studying the lives of new priests is helpful therefore in understanding their present social and emotional conditions. Drawing from mailed surveys with newly ordained priests and those who have resigned, the study covers such aspects as their lives before and during seminary, theological training, experience in the first clerical assignments, and concerns about the leadership. The survey reveals that 68% of the resigned respondents began to think about resigning after ordination. Forty two percent of them either fell in love or wanted marriage. In an ensuing publication, Hoge and Wenger [13] discuss *Pulpit & Pew's* wider project among diocesan and religious priests in the US. In addition to those mentioned above, the other factors their study has covered include attitudes about priesthood and the Church, the importance of open discussions on controversial issues, sexuality, confidence in leadership, and the state of priesthood relative to other professions and the laity. Their biggest finding lies in the diverging attitudes toward priesthood between those ordained immediately after Vatican II and those ordained in the 1980s onward. A shift towards a more conservative view of the priesthood is discernible, for example, among the more recently ordained priests, who believe that ordination makes them “essentially different from the laity” ([13], p. 54).

In many of these large-scale studies based in the US, satisfaction as a particular category of traits or personal conditions is only one of the many other dimensions explored. Satisfaction in these studies has been typically assessed in terms of the following indicators: living situation, sources of satisfaction, self-assessed levels of satisfaction, and the problems they face. The surveys show that satisfaction levels are considerably high across many indicators. In particular, it is noteworthy that the top two items receiving “very satisfied” assessments from priests are “your relationship with the laity with whom you work” and “current work in ministry” ([11], p. 23). Concerning their sources of satisfaction, the top two are “administering the sacraments and presiding over the liturgy” and “preaching the Word” ([11], p. 21). These indicate the overall satisfaction of newly ordained priests with their current roles. General happiness is very high for both diocesan and religious priests, with 94% saying they are “pretty happy” or “very happy” ([13], p. 29). Concerning the problems they face, the top two are “the way authority is exercised in the Church” and “too much work” ([13], p. 202). Suggesting that they are able to deal with these issues well, only less than a quarter have described each of these items as “a great problem to me personally”.

Based in England and Wales, Loudon and Francis carried out the Catholic Parochial Clergy Survey in the 1990s. Being large-scale like the ones in the US, the survey focused on the attitudes of priests toward various areas of their priesthood ranging from their training to their personal beliefs. As a research on the clergy's attitudes, it can be seen as a satisfaction study in itself. A significant bulk of their study focuses on professional burnout in terms of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment. But it is through the latter that the study directly asks about the priest's satisfaction levels. Ninety one percent of their respondents "gain a lot of personal satisfaction from working with people" and 71% feel "I am positively influencing other people's lives through my parish ministry" ([12], p. 217). Although only 32% would admit that they "deal very effectively with the problems of my parishioners," these indicators reflect the importance of working with people to the priests' feelings of personal accomplishment ([12], p. 217).

As in these three major projects, satisfaction as a set of indicators is a part only of Rossetti's [14] most recent landmark survey among diocesan and religious priests. As the samples are drawn only from several volunteering dioceses in the US, it will be difficult to claim representatives as the author does. Nevertheless, the findings are still instructive. In spite of the allegations that the general morale among Catholic priests is down because of the sex scandals, the results show very positive wellbeing. Across such dimensions as physical health, psychological wellness, and happiness, the priests are faring pretty well and in many cases better than the laity. Standard psychological tests, another feature making this study unique, were integrated in the survey. These standard tests make it then possible to compare priests to the general population. One area, for example, is priesthood wellness. Here, priests fared better than the general male population on depression and anxiety scales. Similar findings emerged, too, using the Satisfaction with Life Scale which showed priests faring better than other professionals in the US (and with even smaller standard deviations). The scale includes five items of self-assessment on whether: one is living close to his ideal life, his current conditions are excellent, he is satisfied with his life, obtaining what he considers the important things, and he would change anything in life. On the statement "Overall, I am happy as a priest", over 92% "agree" or "strongly agree" ([14], p. 86). When asked about whether their morale is good, almost 90% would "agree" or "strongly agree" ([14], p. 87). It is important to note that in Rossetti's discussion, the conceptual differences between happiness, satisfaction, and morale are not fully teased out.

3.2. Clarifying Satisfaction

The concept of satisfaction becomes more elaborate in studies that specifically deal with it in the lives of the clergy. Two prominent examples come to fore. Based in Wales, Turton and Francis [17] have revised the Ministerial Job Satisfaction Survey to fit the conditions and expectations of Anglican clergy (who are allowed to marry). The survey asks about their attitudes toward their traditional functions, relationships within the community, involvement in their denomination, participation in community activities, and even their wages and benefits. In their study, satisfaction is understood with regard to those aspects pertinent to the execution of one's job as a minister. LeNoir's [16] project, on the other hand, identifies elements that pertain to the priest's prevailing psychoemotional state. Its Current Priestly Sentiment Scale broadly assesses the priest-respondent's desire to stay and attitude towards the bishop or superior. Using this scale and others that deal with support-seeking, neuroticism,

and family of origin, LeNoir has identified three categories of satisfaction. The “Unambivalent Vocationally Adaptive Priest” is satisfied with his vocation without struggling with celibacy and issues of loneliness ([18], p. 238). The second, Vocationally Ambivalent Priest, desires intimate relationships and companionship but is not receiving it, which negatively affects his overall satisfaction ([18], p. 238). Interestingly, as priests under this category seek more social support, their satisfaction level goes down. One possible explanation is that unlike priests in the first category, they have fundamental dissonances with celibacy, which might trigger departure eventually (but not necessarily). Finally, an “Unambivalent Vocationally Maladaptive Priest” ([18], p. 241) is considerably detached from people that may render him unapproachable. He may just be afraid of having too many relationships or ill-equipped with social skills. Priests under this category tend to have few close friendships and find the solitary conditions of priesthood convenient. The question, of course, is whether priests in this case are fully capable of caring for their parish well.

3.3. *Limitations of the Literature*

The common denominator among all these studies is that these are large-scale surveys, which have helped in correcting public discourses or prevailing moods about priesthood. Also, in following a quantitative approach, these studies have constructed surveys using indicators with clear relevance to the notion of priesthood satisfaction. Put differently, high face validity is evident in indicators surrounding vocational satisfaction, attitudes towards their bishops or supervisors, and sources of satisfaction.

But here the limitations of these studies also emerge. First, no clear definition is offered concerning satisfaction. The closest one gets is from LeNoir who broadly defines it as “the general attitude a priest has toward his priesthood” ([18], p. 236). The surveys, as recounted above, nevertheless offer different sets of indicators or dimensions that estimate priesthood satisfaction. As a result, the second limitation is that a preconceived estimation of what constitutes ministerial satisfaction is then used to assess the condition of priests. While it would be interesting to administer standard questions in other contexts [16], they may not necessarily resonate with local cultural experiences—especially in non-Western settings.

Indeed, such a situation has surfaced in this research. The data show that satisfaction is not the most important consideration priest-respondents had in life. Throughout the interviews, discussion revolved around the different limitations or challenges they faced on the ground as parish priests or functional ministers so much that any question concerning satisfaction could only be phrased along the lines of what has kept them going as priests. Put differently, discussion about satisfaction came only after discussing their problems as priests in a rural diocese. And as will be argued later, it is a religious emotion derived from their understanding of themselves as priests. This rectifies, too, the typical view of satisfaction as presented above as a merely passive emotional condition that is determined by the environment and circumstances outside the control of the individual. These challenges are explored in the following section.

4. **Findings: Challenges in the Diocese**

The issues gleaned from the interviews broadly touch on economic, leadership-related, and relational concerns. In what follows, specific illustrations are offered, which have been gathered and

triangulated via different informants. Although triangulation raises the study's validity [19], not all of the diocese's priests have been interviewed. This means that there are angles that may have been missed which could, in the end, shed better light on the cases at hand. Nevertheless, the accounts below generally illustrate the salient issues or struggles priest-respondents are faced with and they are helpful in contextualizing how they can still consider themselves satisfied. This is a point dealt with in the next section. Exercising reflexivity here, I wish to point out, too, that the following accounts are not meant to antagonize anyone in the Catholic Church. If at all, they can offer nuances for a more grounded institutional response, as has been the case in other studies [20].

As priests assigned to a rural diocese, my informants could understandably be expected to encounter tremendous economic difficulties. In fact, to identify these economic issues and to what extent they were affecting their ministry were some of the motivations for conducting this research. After all, the priests are receiving on a monthly basis less than USD 100.00, half of the prescribed minimum wage in the region. This stipend is lower than what it used to be since the diocese has been receiving lower contributions in recent years. Parishioners in the predominantly agricultural area cannot be expected to significantly contribute any additional income either.

For the priests, their financial limitation is an important consideration not simply because they have their own wants or needs. To be sure, the diocese shoulders their shelter, food, and basic transportation costs. But some of them have expressed desire to be able to support the needs of their parents and siblings or purchase items for themselves. Also, rising health expenditures are becoming tough for some of the priests especially the older ones with chronic illness. One informant, for example, needs to undergo a heart surgery but his current insurance scheme cannot afford it. Nevertheless, the vicariate supports his ongoing medication.

But when pressed to explain why the subsidy is not enough, several informants have explained that they wish they could have more resources to finance the needs of their own parishes. Fr. Anthony, 39, explains 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." From his own experience, Fr. Robert, 35, points out that transportation costs are most significant for him. To visit his far-flung parishes he must traverse rough roads and mountains. "Especially during my first six months here," he explains, "it became clear that my expenditures were greater than my income. Much as I want to speak with my parishioners about this problem, there's really nothing much that can be done. Their economic situation is all too obvious to not see."

Many of the other priests, however, were not fully affected by their financial inadequacy. In fact, to them, that this resonates with simplicity could even be a source of spiritual depth. In asserting this point, Fr. Martin, 53, contrasts his condition to what he observes among some of his clergy peers in other areas: "We just do with what we have... Today, we see especially in the main cities some people showing off their cars and bragging about their allowances. Hopefully we would not become like them. In our diocese, we still live by our tradition, especially of poverty."

As other priests were interviewed, it became clear though that the issue of inadequacy did not square well with some of their other observations. One narrative that has recurred in several interviews is about a priest's plan to sell the community's old vehicle and ask for additional funding from the treasury in order to purchase a new one. According to this story, the bishop has discouraged the plan on the grounds that the diocese did not have sufficient funds. Barely a week later, however, the

diocesan authorities have bought a new car that would have required at least USD 13,000.00 from the treasury. One could easily sense the indignation among the priests who shared this highly controversial story. An experienced priest, who is now a school rector, expresses his disappointment that “I would visit schools regularly if I had a vehicle...and I would want to be able to visit and bring around our principals.”

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. As articulated by the respondents, the frustration lies in the consequence of the decision that could have been avoided—the seeming neglect of the hardships priests are faced with in carrying out their roles. Indeed, some priests have reasoned out that the bishop, who is new, is not from within their ranks or even the province itself.

But perhaps an understandably more difficult realization for the priests is that the turn of events was a bitter reminder of a national controversy that has greatly affected their confidence in the diocese. A year or so ago, several bishops were accused of receiving expensive vehicles and other special gifts from the previous Philippine president. The controversy is multi-layered [21]. At one level, it posed a moral dilemma for the Church since the gifts were apparently derived from the national lottery system. But at another, the gifts were perceived to buy their silence as the president then was embroiled in several controversies including allegations of cheating in the elections. Finally, the use of government funds to make these so-called donations could have been in itself a case of corruption. Sensing these issues coming to fore once again, Fr. Robert, a parish priest, exclaims that this vehicle incident “ignites our sense of justice”.

The idea of being neglected by the diocesan leaders, the bishop included, has cropped up time and again in the interviews. To be sure, not everybody has problems with the leadership. But in other cases, diocesan authorities have been described as “hierarchical” or even “difficult”. Throughout the interviews, concerns have been raised, for example, about how their other requests for administrative changes, sabbatical leave, or advanced education were declined. One priest, who is in charge of several schools in the diocese, has found himself in a situation that continues to frustrate him. Fr. Fortunato, 47, wishes to train new school directors and principals from the current roster of priests in the diocese. This, after all, is his mandate as coordinator of Catholic schools in the diocese. When he requested the bishop to “please not assign priests to mission stations where there are schools but are not interested in running them,” the bishop had to decline. To be fair, Fr. Fortunato acknowledges that the main reason may be because of the limited number of priests in the diocese. But he still feels he was not heeded at all as he was instead recommending somebody else. He then speculates, with discernible resentment in his tone, that “in their wise evaluation of things, this priest is probably not good.” This has led him to compare the present bishop to the previous who, for him, listened closely to the needs of priests, even “asking some of them to go abroad” if need be for training. Unfortunately, Fr. Fortunato is not alone in feeling distant from the diocesan leaders. In an interview with Fr. Robert, a young parish priest, he admits feeling that his issues are ignored by the proper officials. And even if they notice, his requests, he feels, are met with resistance: “Sometimes I have concerns, but even if they are small, they immediately become angry...And when we express some of our needs, things are still being decided upon without our knowledge.”

The issues priest-respondents have expressed about 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. Interestingly, this pattern has been observed too among some priests in the US who felt that church leaders were more interested in protecting the reputation of the institution in the wake of abuse scandals [9]. And the potential consequences may be serious. It is quite telling that in Hoge's survey among resigned priests, only 22% felt very satisfied with their relationship with their bishop [11].

The final important source of struggle for the diocesan priests can be considered relational. Surfaced here are issues of loneliness, which are symptomatic of the isolating conditions of their diocese. During the fieldwork, priests were noticeably comfortable with each other, even throwing banters intermittently. Opportunities for interaction are also available. Every Monday, for example, some priests come for an informal gathering at the diocesan house located in the region's capital. It is the only opportunity for the many others assigned to far areas to interact with fellow priests.

But not everyone could be there regularly. And the rest of the time the conditions in which they are embedded can be very tough. This became clear during an interview with a parish priest who was ordained in 2011. Fr. Robert explains 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. Suddenly I am now alone in the parish. Sometimes I look for people I can talk to but I only have two neighbors in the parish." So why does he not talk to them? "Of course I talk to them but I have other daily duties in the parish. So most of the time I only see my secretary. So I don't have any variation in my life in the parish."

But even if there may be regular interactions among the priests, this does not mean that they can be open to each other. A case in point is Fr. Sef, 40, who has been a parish priest for at least five years now. He interestingly opened up about his medical depression, which, according to him, is due to two factors. There are times, for example, when he compares himself to the previous priest, who, he says, was very effective in organizing the parish. He, on the other hand, does not even feel effective in delivering homily. Also, he admits to having been "sexually attracted" to a parishioner younger than he. Fr. Sef 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."²

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 in this diocese may have

² As a researcher, I found it interesting that many priests easily shared their stories with me, some with details that I may not have the legitimacy to divulge. It is this richness of information that surveys, the preferred method in studying the condition of priests for being safe and distanced, are unable to achieve [9]. The caveat, however, is that a qualitative approach can unravel highly sensitive material necessitating prudent treatment [22]. But more than anything, the fact that the priests found it easy to share with me, a stranger, their intimate stories is suggestive of the absence of spaces for dialogue on these matters within their ranks. So during the interview, I took it upon myself to offer encouragement as needed.

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. Once again, these issues have been kept private by my respondents. When a priest was asked how he addresses this, he immediately quips, “I just accept it as a personal problem.” In Hoge’s research, he found out that pursuing “intimate relationship with a woman” was the main motivation for 42% of his informants who resigned from the priesthood ([11], p. 32). Resignation, as LeNoir’s study shows, could be a positive way to deal with the dissonance [18].

But what if the person is unable to handle the matter properly because there is no one to talk to? Here Rossetti’s landmark study is helpful. Even though the vast majority of priests in the US have a high regard for celibacy, Rossetti admits that there are those for whom “the commitment to celibate living can be a particular challenge or even burden to some” ([14], p. 107). Here it is noteworthy that the diocese had to confront its own cases of sex scandals recently.³

It is highly possible that feelings of relational loneliness are more acute among those fresh from the seminary. As Clancy rightly suggests in his work on seminary formation, it is “difficult while living in a community atmosphere to simulate the actual experience of loneliness” ([23], p. 127). And among newly ordained priests, Ermis has discovered that many have encountered “serious personal crisis” involving feelings of isolation ([10], p. 84).

Certainly reinforcing such feelings is what appears to be a typical self-perception that they have not been prepared well for the needs of their rural parishes. During the interviews, informants have repeatedly suggested, for example, the need for training in counseling, spiritual formation, and community organizing to benefit their parishes. Gleaning from his study on the seminary formation of priests, Clancy draws attention to the necessity of continuing pastoral formation, which he argues is “a concern for more than intellectual formation” ([23], p. 152).

Also, they have emphasized the need for their personal rest but have, on many occasions, been discouraged by the leadership for reasons of manpower limitation. It must be noted, too, that these feelings of isolation among younger clergy may be unintentionally overlooked because of divergent expectations by the senior ones, who think that the former are not “doing as much as we did”, as one informant puts it. Rossetti observes a similar pattern among priests in the US, with the younger ones more predisposed to depression and burnout [14]. As the Catholic clergy trains its new recruits, an awareness of generational changes in Philippine society is now more pertinent, a point Cornelio has raised in his recent work on the sociology of education [24].

5. Discussion: Priesthood Satisfaction as Religious Emotion

Having discussed the salient issues they face in the diocese, the priest-respondents were then asked to explain if they could still consider themselves satisfied as priests. This was not just a question that flowed naturally from the discussion. Research shows that low satisfaction levels among priests can contribute to depression [25]. And as mentioned above, problems over relationships with fellow clergy

³ It must be emphasized, however, that to blame celibacy as the root cause of sex scandals within the Catholic Church is unfounded. Greeley shows that sexual abuses by the clergy are statistically speaking, an anomaly [15].

and the leadership can have an impact on how one carries out his ministry [9]. Although resignation from priesthood remains uncommon in this diocese, it was not clear whether it had to do with being satisfied with their current conditions.⁴

In this section, I will first spell out what they mean when they say they are satisfied. As will be shown below, being satisfied is not the goal of their vocation whose conditions they have more or less anticipated. In the ensuing discussion, I will then suggest that their nuances concerning priesthood satisfaction can best be understood as a religious emotion in spite of the troubles they are facing.

5.1. What Satisfaction Means to Priests

Interestingly, in spite of the issues they are faced with, many have shared that they are still satisfied as priests. After recounting his struggles, Fr. Roy, the youngest at 28, tells me “I am happy...and I can really see my fulfillment as a person.” At first, such statement appears to parallel findings about the generally positive morale of priests, thereby challenging stereotypes that they are burned out or depressed [14]. The way they describe their satisfaction suggests, however, that there is more to it; it is not just an individually passive state of the mind. This became clear as priest-respondents immediately followed up with a qualification. At 31, Fr. Buddy, who has been a 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.” Validating Fr. Buddy’s statement is Fr. Lirio, 38, who explains that “when I think of fulfillment, I am reminded of the activities I do for people like saying the Mass and praying for them. Without these, my life would probably be boring.”

That more can be done is a common theme that qualifies how they feel about their satisfaction - and it is in relation to other people. In other words, satisfaction, from the point of view of the priests, is seen in how it is enacted in an on-going and relational manner. And such satisfaction allows them to transcend (but without denying) the issues that affect them on a daily basis. Indeed, Fr. Lirio, a mission rector, explains that 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.” To a great extent, this resolve confirms that priesthood is in itself a vocation, which, in Catholic thought, is in terms of divine calling. Put differently, the sense of satisfaction they have is an affirmation of their priesthood, which, as Hankle shows in his study, is a persistent process that begins in one’s vocational discernment [27].

Their satisfaction as priests is deeply embedded in the relationships they are part of. At one level, they find satisfaction in being able to pursue healthy relationships with their leaders, peers, and parishioners. Fr. Anthony, a parish priest, shares that “when you see people are happy, you are also happy.” And time and again, my informants, especially the young ones, have recounted their stories when they were still in the seminary. This is the reason why many of them value the interactions they have with each other as diocesan priests. Conversely, as shown above, the strained relationship with the bishop and other leaders has engendered considerable levels of resentment among several informants who have talked about similar experiences of rejection or neglect. In this light, LeNoir’s

⁴ Here one is reminded of a very reflexive biographical account offered by Giannone about Frank, a priest who resigned for feeling “pushed around” and disillusioned by the conflicts in his diocese ([26], p. 26).

finding that priests who are comfortable with their vocation tend to handle loneliness well must not be taken to mean that seeking social support is no longer important [18]. My informants demonstrate that while they are satisfied with their priesthood, they also value their relationships. Strained relationships do affect them and it is to their benefit if healthier and more open relationships are fostered among them.

At another level though, their satisfaction appears to be more anchored on what priests are able to achieve with their relationships especially in the parish. Here, satisfaction is not simply based on the social support they receive from the community. While that is important as Zickar and colleagues show, satisfaction may in fact lie more prominently in the opportunities that priests have to make an impact on their communities [8]. As Fr. Lirio's account above shows, the satisfaction of diocesan priests is an ongoing process of carrying out the ministry in spite of glaring limitations. It is not just about receiving from their parish. In other words, it is through these relationships that satisfaction is enacted. It is mainly about giving time to their communities. Naturally, my informants are very satisfied in administering the sacraments and celebrating the Eucharist. Fr. Jordan, a mission rector, shares that he is "very eager to celebrate Mass, even four or five times on a given Sunday. I find fulfillment in doing it." To administer the sacraments, after all, is what gives priesthood its uniqueness. Interestingly, the opportunity to administer sacraments is the top source of satisfaction for priests in the US [11].

Most of the time, though, priest-respondents have also expressed a desire to do "more". Fr. Sef, who considers himself satisfied in spite of his medical condition, suggests that he aspires to do more of "organizing, training, and offering recollection seminars...because I want to be involved in people's lives". Another example is Fr. Robert, a newly ordained parish priest. He shares that he is "very excited to do a lot of things, especially organizing Basic Ecclesiastical Communities". He is quick to admit though that "most of the time though, I do it alone. Lay leaders think that you can give them whatever they ask of you but it is also important to let them know that we cannot do all these things at the same time."

Indeed, my informants find satisfaction in being able to fulfill their duties in their communities. This certainly parallels the findings of Loudon and Francis among Catholic priests in Wales and England [12]. They have found that the opportunity to work with other people and having an impact on them are significant sources of their satisfaction. Satisfaction, in other words, can only make sense in view of its ongoing enactment for people. Indeed, as discussed in the previous section, many of them are frustrated by events that limit their participation in the lives of their parishioners. Their reported physical illnesses and the vehicle incident are reminiscent here.

5.2. Priesthood Satisfaction as Religious Emotion

Because it is an ongoing process, being satisfied is arguably never completed and always enacted in spite of their struggles in the diocese. Fr. Fortunato, who has been a priest for more than three decades now, tells me 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 if it is difficult”, as Fr. Lirio puts it.

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 the 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 [25]. While the practical implications of this approach are certainly welcome especially given the isolated conditions of my informants, it needs to be emphasized here that satisfaction is not just a passive emotional condition. It is also an active emotional state, derived from a self-understanding that their priesthood is a vocation or calling [28]. When Fr. Buddy, 31, was asked what keeps him from simply quitting, he explains “I have given my life and commitment to priesthood. This is the life I have already entered.” Indeed, this finding concerning the significance of priesthood as an identity parallels Hankle’s in his study of the discernment process priests had to undergo before entering the seminary. He argues that unlike what vocational theory suggests, “a man becoming a Catholic priest is not necessarily determining first and foremost what he will ‘do’ but rather what he is becoming” ([27], p. 216).

Here I draw from Riis and Woodhead’s important work on emotions elicited in the context of religion [29]. Indeed, emotions become religious if they are first and foremost in relation to God or a divine transcendent [30]. Riis and Woodhead, however, note that far from being an isolated individual experience, religious emotions or feelings are developed by a person in relation to a set of emotions that a religious community and its symbols espouse [29]. In this light, the struggles encountered by the diocesan priests have brought about or even reinforced precisely an emotion that is consistent with their vocation – satisfaction (or being satisfied) about their calling.

Priesthood satisfaction, 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 in spite of the struggles they are faced with. As a result, they can choose to remain faithful to the priesthood. Interestingly, it is such significance that is sometimes overlooked in the study of how individuals marginalized within religious institutions can remain committed. Dillon’s landmark work on Catholic identity, for example, focuses mainly on the theological engagements of such progressive groups as gay Catholics and advocates of women ordination [31].

Arguably, the struggles recounted above could have engendered deep resentments or even resignations, but they have not. To be clear, the notion of priesthood satisfaction does not deny other emotions they are feeling due to their diocese’s issues. They are undeniably affected by the events they shared. But priesthood satisfaction becomes an overriding religious emotion. As Fr. Jordan, an assistant mission rector, explains, “I am satisfied...because I am doing my best to be faithful to my calling as a priest. At the same time, I am also doing my best to live with the other priests in the diocese. Sometimes we have our problems together and I have my own, too...”

As pointed out above, priesthood satisfaction for my informants is an ongoing process in spite of their diocese’s struggles. At one level, such process is about an individual’s continuous deliberate affirmation of his calling as a priest. The absence of such emotional affirmation would have meant the

loss of the meaningfulness of a priest's sacramental calling. Nuñez points out that some of the main factors for the massive resignation of priests in Barcelona in the 1970s is that many felt that they were simply administering routine sacraments and that the institutional leadership was no longer in touch with the conditions especially of the working class [32]. But at another level, priesthood satisfaction needs to be enacted. It is not simply an ultimate emotional state. Indeed, Corrigan rightly points out that emotions are not just internal feelings; religion is able to express emotions in linguistic and bodily forms [33]. Similarly, in his work on Muslim identity, Marranci calls attention to the power of emotions to compel individuals to assert their religious identity [34]. What needs to be emphasized here then is how priesthood satisfaction is enacted by my informants. As one of the seniors in the diocese, Fr. Fortunato, tells me, "God knows we have no money. No money, no money. For me, that is already a responsorial psalm. I do not believe God would abandon us. So even if our superiors know that there's no money, we will work."

6. Conclusions

This article has been concerned with priesthood satisfaction and the challenges priests face in the diocese. The nuances here are derived from the experience of diocesan priests whose parishes are in a rural area in the Philippines. Three emergent themes constitute their struggles in the diocese. On a daily basis, they encounter economic limitations, problems with their bishops and leaders, and the imminence of isolation brought about by physical and social distance. In the latter half, I have shown that my informants can maintain their satisfaction as priests not because of their environmental conditions. They are faced with struggles on a daily basis and they are certainly affected by them. However, they have asserted their satisfaction insofar as their calling is concerned. So although they receive social support from their communities, the most important consideration is that they are able to give their time and resources to their parishioners. This is why they find satisfaction in administering the sacraments and equipping their communities—and they wish to do more. Some of them, indeed, have expressed desire to be trained in additional skills such as counseling and organizing. Priesthood satisfaction, in this sense, is a religious emotion enacted in a relational and ongoing manner.

Drawn from qualitative interviews, these are findings that complement the existing literature on priesthood satisfaction. If a survey method were employed, for example, the study would have failed to grasp the depth of priesthood satisfaction for my informants. This limitation is what Rossetti has understandably stumbled upon in trying to explain the high priestly morale his survey reveals. He then draws instead from his personal experience as priest: "But when you ask a priest about his own morale and happiness as a priest, I believe that he digs down deeper. While being very conscious of the current difficulties and pains, a priest thinks about deeper things when he assesses his own morale" ([14], p. 91). While I do not deny the credibility of such a statement, its claim would have garnered better support through narratives from the ground. Exactly what, for example, constitutes "deeper things"? In a way, this article can be seen as an attempt to address this question in the context of diocesan priests.

I end this article by reflecting on the wider implications of its findings. On one hand, the narratives show that problems of national scale that hound the Catholic Church in the Philippines and arguably elsewhere start small. In other words, they all begin to take shape at the level of local dioceses far from the prying eyes of the media and also the central control of archdioceses. Such distance makes it

possible for these issues to carry on until they become highly uncontrollable. In a way, therefore, the stories recounted above, while laying the basis for my argument concerning satisfaction as religious emotion, can also serve to inform how they ought to be addressed. Indeed, Kane has shown that an approach to resolve crisis within the Church without regard for the thoughts and sentiments of local priests can alienate them in the end [9]. The narratives they have offered above articulate some of their aspirations for continuous training, opportunities for interacting with each other, and a more open line of communication with the leadership.

On the other hand, the research also raises an important question concerning the sustainability of priesthood satisfaction as religious emotion. For the time being, my informants have expressed their commitment to their calling precisely because they are satisfied with their very priesthood. This allows them to transcend their everyday struggles. But how far can this go? Certainly, crisis concerning sexual abuse and tensions with the leadership are most of the time ruptures. As Hoge, Rossetti, and Greeley have rightly argued in different occasions, these problems must not be interpreted as defining the entire Catholic Church [11,14,15]. Nevertheless, questions concerning generational change with implications on the sustainability of the clergy in the Philippines (and elsewhere) must now be entertained, especially that younger priests are receiving their ordination. This has been the project of Hoge, for example, who shows how changes concerning understanding of church structure and governance is changing across generations [13]. A project of this kind has not been done in the Philippines. But as suggested above, there can be generational differences in terms of pastoral formation and their personal expectations of themselves, their peers, parish, and the institution they serve.

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