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## CLERGY SEXUAL MISCONDUCT: THROUGH THE LENS OF THE LOST SHEPHERDS

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### Abstract

This qualitative research study deals with the experiences of priests who have committed sexual misconduct. Most studies on the reasons of clergy sexual abuse were based on archival data, specifically, statistical analyses of psychological test results, from treatment centres where priest-perpetrators were sent for rehabilitation. Due to the social stigma and fear of lawsuits, qualitative data are few and often come from accounts of the victim. Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), the research explored the question: What are the reasons that led priests to be involved in sexual misconduct? Four themes emerged: a) Experience of loneliness, b) Unresolved issues in the past, c) Failure to maintain boundaries and, d) Lack of balance in the priestly life. This research probed the world of the priests as they shared their own experiences so that others could enter and understand the circumstances that led them to engage in abuse. Results of this study will be helpful in developing prevention strategies and appropriate rehabilitation programs on the issue of clergy sexual abuse.

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### **An Actual Case<sup>1</sup>**

Imagine a 55 year-old priest with a joyful disposition, adored by parishioners and confreres, a former president of a Catholic college for many years, with a doctorate degree in Moral Theology from a distinguished university abroad, and given a title of “Msgr.” because of his credentials that would make him a prospective candidate to be a bishop in his Diocese. This same priest became the subject of headlines in a national newspaper when he was caught by the police in an entrapment operation while he was riding his sport utility vehicle on the way to a motel with a 13-year-old girl. Upon initial investigation, this was his third meeting with this teenager who claims of being paid by this priest for sexual services.<sup>2</sup>

### **Background of the Study**

Clergy sexual offenders have mostly been found to publicly project exceptional qualities. Stories of victims revealed that the abusers were prominent public figures who appeared initially to the victims to be “ideal” priests, who showed them the care and support they needed. The Murphy report, initiated by the Diocese of Dublin in Ireland, investigated samples of clergy offenders who had remarkable personalities that led them to easily abuse the vulnerable persons.<sup>3</sup> A documentary about clergy abuse in the Philippines covered by Al Jazeera TV network in February of this year divulged a man’s revelation how a well-known priest from his diocese groomed him before abusing him and other acolytes who were also in their early teens back then.<sup>4</sup> When they first met the priest, the man said the priest had been very generous, warm, and caring like a loving father until it came to a point that the priest started abusing them.

As a Good Shepherd Sister, having ministered to women-survivors of sexual abuse for many years, I have started to look into the realities of the perpetrators, particularly the clergy perpetrators. I felt

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<sup>1</sup>The names of the clients given in this paper are not their real names.

<sup>2</sup> A. Balagtas, Cop: “Priest had Booked Minor Twice” (2017), <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/918974/cop-priest-had-booked-minor-twice>

<sup>3</sup>F.D. Murphy, H. Buckley & L. Joyce, “The Ferns Report,” (2005), Retrieved on August 20, 2017 from: [https://archive.org/stream/243711-2-complete-ferns-report-so-ireland/243711-2-complete-ferns-report-so-ireland\\_djvu.txt](https://archive.org/stream/243711-2-complete-ferns-report-so-ireland/243711-2-complete-ferns-report-so-ireland_djvu.txt).

<sup>4</sup>Al Jazeera (Producer), “Sexual Misconduct in the Philippines’ Catholic Church: Sins of the Father,” 101 East [Video file], February 16, 2017, Retrieved from [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CP6XU\\_Hymbo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CP6XU_Hymbo)

disturbed, trying to fathom why the so-called “representatives of God,” with all their studies and formation, could possibly commit such horrendous acts. In my moments of silence and prayerful conversations with God, I could not help but ask, “What could have gone wrong along the way?” “Where they really a wolf in a sheep’s clothing even before they joined the seminary or did something happen along the way that transformed them into an abuser?”

Several reasons for clerical sexual abuse were explored by research articles mostly in the Western context, particularly in Ireland, Australia, and the US. One of the reasons was that the screening in the seminaries was too lax that they failed to see the candidate for priesthood as having some personality disorders. Another reason posed is an issue of childhood sexual abuse that was not addressed early on. These children can become adult perpetrators victimizing others if their childhood issues have not been healed. Ministry burnout has also been found to be an apparent reason for clergy misconduct. A former priest in the US who had committed sexual crimes confessed in an article for the *National Catholic Reporter* that he was too overworked, had persistent feelings of exhaustion and that gratifying his sexual needs through abusing young boys was some type of a reward for himself. He was feeling depleted physically, psychologically and spiritually.<sup>5</sup>

The reasons can be so vast that it can also be due to the hierarchical culture of the church that views men on the pedestal leading to the macho culture prevalent within the church allowing sexual liaisons to be seen as mere “growing pains,” that can be outgrown.<sup>6</sup> Sipe, et al. observed a clerical double life proliferating inside the catholic institution.<sup>7</sup> Media and society has also patronized sexual freedom that it has seeped in the confines of the church influencing the lifestyle of religious men and women who have supposedly vowed poverty, chastity and obedience. Hence, priests have become easy preys and may eventually succumb to worldly allurements including temptations of the flesh.

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<sup>5</sup>B. Roewe, “‘Uncommon Conversation’ on Sex Abuse Falls Silent,” *National Catholic Reporter* online, Retrieved September 28, 2017, from: <https://www.ncronline.org/news/accountability/uncommon-conversation-sex-abuse-falls-silent>

<sup>6</sup>A.W.R. Sipe, M. Benkert, T. Doyle, “A Study of the Influence of Pathological Narcissism on the Clerical Sub-culture of the Roman Catholic Church and its Influence on the Formation of Clerical and Lay Spirituality,” 2013, Retrieved from: <http://www.awrsipe.com/reports/2013/Spirituality%20and%20the%20Culture%20of%20Narcissism%20-%20Complete%20article%20-%20208-30-2013.pdf>

<sup>7</sup>Sipe, et al., “A Study of the Influence of Pathological Narcissism...”

With the reasons of clerical sexual abuse aforementioned in the Western context, here in the Philippines, there appears to be a silent disposition among the Catholic faithful amidst the countless controversies of clergy abuse that would occasionally catch media attention but would later just vanish into thin air. The culture of silence that was the scenario in the Western Catholic church more than two decades ago, happens to be where the Philippine church is at this time. Before lawsuits against the clergy perpetrators had started sprouting and becoming a burden to the Western Catholic church, alleged reports of abuses had been covered up by church authorities, transferring the abusive priests to other jurisdictions where they would again cause victimization. Filipino journalist Aries C. Rufo, in his book *Altar of Secrets*, revealed these realities happening in the Philippine Catholic Church.<sup>8</sup> If the issues of clerical abuse remain to be in the secret realms of the church hierarchy, would the Philippine Catholic church suffer the same fate of their Western counterpart that some dioceses practically went bankrupt, paying moral damages and facing legal charges of victims that surfaced many years that followed? I dread to face that day. Hence, it is in this context that I have become even more challenged to explore the issue of sexual misconduct of the clergy as a research study.

## **The Research Study**

### **Research Design**

Due to the complex and delicate nature of the phenomenon of clerical sexual abuse, the researcher deemed that a qualitative study is most appropriate. Most of the Western quantitative studies done on this topic focused primarily on archival data of priests in institutions. By using a qualitative approach, the researcher tried to explore whether the results of previous quantitative studies were consistent with the responses of the individual testimonies of the priests. Specifically, an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) of the reasons why priests are led to commit sexual misconduct was used as research method. This approach tried to figure out how meanings are constructed by the participants within both their personal and their social world.<sup>9</sup> Little has been known from the perspectives and experiences of the priests themselves who were

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<sup>8</sup>A. Rufo, *Altar of Secrets: Sex, Politics, and Money in the Philippine Catholic Church*, Manila: Journalism for Nation Building Foundation, 2013.

<sup>9</sup> P. Shinebourne, "The Theoretical Underpinnings of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Existential Analysis," *Journal of the the Society for Existential Analysis* 22, 1 (2011).

involved in sexual misconduct. Utilizing IPA for this study, the researcher examined not only a small aspect of clergy sexual abuse, but also tried to scrutinize the individual experiences of the priests involved in sexual misconduct by looking closely into their reasons for sex offending so as to acquire a deeper understanding of the complex issues interweaving this controversial reality.

### **The Participants**

Considering the comprehensive context of the study and the crucial issue of sexual misconduct in the Church these days, out of the five priest-perpetrators of sexual misconduct which the researcher planned to interview, only three priests agreed to be part of the study. They were purposively chosen. They are all Filipino priests who have been at least one year ordained. The priest-respondents who have participated in the study have been at least fifteen years ordained. Two are religious priests (Fr Nate and Fr Dario) and one is a diocesan priest (Fr Gab). They were all undergoing therapy for the first time in a treatment centre for priests. They were recruited towards the end of their first month of treatment.

### **The Results**

The study explored the experiences of priests who committed sexual boundary violations. Amidst the very rich experiences of the respondents which were analysed through Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), the researcher was led to look into the responses of priests in relation to the research question: What are the reasons that led priests to be involved in sexual misconduct? The following four themes emerged from the experiences of all the priest-respondents in the study: 1) Experience of loneliness: "There were times that I feel lonely, unaffirmed and misunderstood," 2) Unresolved issues in the past: "I was a victim of that man... I think, there is no justice that happened." 3) Failure to maintain boundaries: "I am unaware na (that) I crossed boundaries" and, 4) Lack of balance in the priestly life, setting aside their spiritual discipline: "I need to do everything..." "My prayer life was set aside." "Unti unti na pala, hindi ko na-realize na kinakain na pala ako sa kadiliman (*I did not realize that I was already eaten up by darkness*)... overwork ako, lack of spirituality (*I was overworked, lack of spirituality*)."

#### **First Theme: Experience of Loneliness**

The priests' experience of loneliness preceding the event of their sexual boundary violations was the first emerging theme. Priests, living in a celibate life, are expected to confront the challenges of

being single but the priests in this study revealed great difficulty in having to face this reality of a solitary life.

“I find myself at the end of the day exhausted. Many times I feel tired, spent and empty. There were times that I feel lonely, unaffirmed and misunderstood. There is that feeling in me that I want people to understand me deeply and to love me for who I am and not just the priest assigned to them for a certain period of time,” Fr Gab honestly expressed his sentiments.

There were two sub-themes that emerged from the priests’ experience of loneliness that led them to commit sexual boundary violations. First, is their need for supportive relationships and second, having childhood needs that were unmet.

The participants expressed a need for supportive relationships. Based on their stories, they felt lonely and isolated and there is an intense longing for deep social connection.

Fr Nate, a religious priest, felt that the experience of not being connected with the new community, after the abrupt change of members, made him feel sad. As a result, feeling a lack of openness and connection in the community. (“Eto na one time, parang ano na.. di na ako connected sa community (*It started one time, it seems like I was no longer connected with my community*). “I think parang nauga ako or napwersa ako na hindi ko naman happy even though the superior said are you happy, because of obedience sabi ko lang, Oo masaya ako happy ako..parang di ko gusto na maramdaman nila na di ako masaya...para ma feel nila na okay ako even I’m not okay. (*I think, I was shaken or forced, even if I was not happy, though the superior said are you happy, but because of obedience I just answered, Yes, I am happy...it seems that I don’t like them to feel that I am not happy...so that they would feel that I am okay even if I’m not okay*).”

Furthermore, feeling tired and lonely because of a lack of significant people to relate with at a level that could fulfil his need for connectedness, Fr Nate was led to seek gratification in unhealthy ways. He isolated himself and sought for unhealthy coping mechanisms that eventually led him to commit sexual misconduct. (“Being tired, lonely...I was tempted to watch pornography, do masturbation, drinking), ..nagstart na nanood ako ng bold....pag pagod na pagod ako ayaw ko nang lumabas ito na yung aking...behavioral mechanism ko sa sobrang pagod wala na akong ginagawa kundi I do masturbation sa panunood ko, babae lalaki ganyan...nakakapanuod din ako ng lalaki sa lalaki, (*I began watching bold things, when I felt very tired I did not want to go out...this was my*

*behavioural mechanism—I resorted to masturbation through what I watched, women with men, also men with men). “na overuse sa panonood ko, nakapasok ako doon sa situation... (I got used watching, I was led to the situation).”*

Furthermore, unmet childhood needs exacerbated the priests' solitary feelings. Experiences of rejection, abandonment and abuse within the family and significant persons were triggered by their experience of loneliness and isolation. The priests also shared that the lack of care and affirmation from their parents made them feel empty as they were growing up.

Fr Dario shared, “I was...tracing it back, my identity and relationship of intimacy... I can identify because of that love, longing for a father figure...gusto ko din magkaroon ng closeness sa same sex... (*I also wish to have closeness with the same sex*).” He recognized how his experiences while growing up especially with his father affected his sense of identity and sexuality. “As a little boy, I cannot remember my father embraced me... the father figure was absent and affected my growth process... His absence in my life affected my early sense of identity, intimacy and authority.” Furthermore, he recounted memories of his past, particularly of his father's infidelity and irresponsibility that he associated with his wounded self due to the feeling of being rejected, which led to his low self-esteem and his compulsions. In his experience of loneliness and rejection in his religious community, he was greatly affected because of these early childhood experiences which may have easily led to commit sexual boundary violations with a young seminarian.

### **Second Theme: Unresolved Issues in the Past**

Traumatic experiences of abuse that were left unresolved and suppressed sexuality issues emerged as the second reason for the priests involved in sexual misconduct.

“I was a victim of that man... I think there is no justice that happened... I have no idea of his intention along the way. He victimized me with force...covered my mouth and whisper don't shout or else I have something to do with your life...,” recounted Fr Nate as he realized how he became the person he hated when he was an adolescent boy. “I have not totally embraced, accepted and forgiven myself as a victim of homosexual act in the Boys' home. I hated that person but now I became a victimizer myself...which really destroy my dignity, integrity and credibility being a person and a consecrated person, a priest...,” he sadly shared.

Fr Dario was a parentified child who assumed the role of his father who was irresponsible and a womanizer. The following excerpts expressed Fr Dario's sentiments: "I saw my father having a relationship with our *yaya*... so during the time I was so confused, sad... I saw my mother quarrelling with him and at that very early stage, I was already confronting my identity issues and authority and also my sexuality...imagine seeing your father having... relationship," "...even my sexuality.. was affected ...It echoes always in my low self-esteem, compulsions.... manifestations of my wounded self..."

Furthermore, all the priests shared their experience of a foreclosed establishing of healthy intimate relationships with women early in life. Their feelings were suppressed since they wanted to become priests. They felt they were not able to relate with women in a profound way. Fr Gab related to this concern during his high school years in the seminary, "My mother and other relatives don't want me to have a girlfriend because girls will take me away from my vocation to the priesthood. When I became a priest, I experienced a certain sense of freedom from my family, relatives and seminary formation that is why I started to entertain the advances of some women..."

Both Frs Dario and Nate committed sexual boundary violations towards boys yet, they claimed to have previous attractions towards women. Fr Dario admitted having attractions and relationships with women. He had even doubts of joining the priesthood had he pursued a close relationship. "*Ako kasi yung aking high school ano, sa (place withheld) sila nag ano ng job. Siguro kung may closeness din kami noon, may proximity, siguro I don't know if I would pursue priesthood (Because when I was in high school, they went to [place withheld] for a job. Perhaps, if we were physically close, there was proximity, perhaps I don't know if I would pursue priesthood).*

Fr Nate painfully admitted his sexual misconduct, yet deep in his heart he was certain of his sexuality. "Bawat area kung nasaan ako..feeling ko, I fell in love with girls. Pero na suppress man ang aking love because... already in my mind that I want to become a priest... (*Whatever place I went, my feeling, I fell in love with girls. But my love was suppressed because...already in my mind that I want to become a priest.*)"

The two priests in the study who have victimized males did not admit that they are homosexually oriented. As what other studies revealed considering the prevalence of male victims that being

homosexual led them to abuse,<sup>10</sup> this study does not overtly attest to these speculations. The priests even attested having had attractions and relationships with women prior to entering the priesthood. Yet, they believe that their relationships ended prematurely because of their desire to be priests. In the stories of the priest-respondents, they all shared suppressed relationships of intimacy with women in their developmental years prior to the priesthood. They were led to believe that relationships with women would lead them away from their priestly vocation. Exploration of their sexuality may have been arrested because of this unfounded belief.

### **Third Theme: Failure to Maintain Boundaries**

The third theme revealed the failure of the priests to maintain personal and ministerial boundaries and a lack of awareness in the issue of transference or counter transference since the priests were all in a helping relationship with their victims. The persons they were supposed to help were persons in distress who were in need of guidance but unaware of their own issues, the priests were led to act on them violating the boundaries that they were supposed to protect and uphold. The following excerpts attest to the helping relationship the priests had on the persons they were led to abuse:

Fr Dario was tasked to assist a seminarian who was having vocation crisis. He shared, “May isang seminarista na pinalabas siya ng isang formator and then I was tasked to mentor him na bumalik (*There was one seminarian who was sent out by a formator and then I was tasked to mentor him to return...*).”

One of Fr Nate’s parishioners, asked him to help a boy who have problematic parents. Fr. Nate related, “May isang coordinator doon, inoffer niya sa akin itong boy na ito, wala daw mama hiwalay, ang papa nasa kulungan so parang tulungan ko daw (*There is this coordinator who asked me to help this boy whose mother is separated from the father who is in prison*).”

For Fr Gab, he was trying to reach out to his girl-acolyte. He shared, “I was... asking... personal things... its not my intention really to pry on... trying to understand her, because I observed that she was this... shy, distant person whenever... she is in the parish and so I said

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<sup>10</sup>J. Wolf, ed., *Gay Priests*, New York: Harper Collins, 1989; G.J.M. van de Aardweg, “Abuse by Priests, Homosexuality, Humanae vitae, and a Crisis of Masculinity in the Church,” *The Linacre Quarterly* 78, 3 (2011) 274-293, doi: 10.1179/00243631180388829; K. Terry, “Child Sexual Abuse within the Catholic Church: A Review of Global Perspectives,” *International Journal of Comparative and Applied Criminal Justice* 39 (2015) 139-154. 10.1080/01924036.2015.1012703.

to myself... Why is she like that? Or where is she coming from? And so I asked her, and she told me about her situation, that her parents are separated, living with their own lives, her father has his own family now and she was somehow longing for a father..."

The following testimonies revealed how the priests were led into committing sexual misconduct while they were in the helping relationship:

Fr Gab related, "I kissed her on the cheek and... then it was just... I don't know spur of the moment... it was for me it was affectionate... but because of you know they viewed it differently (cleared his throat) so.... it didn't end well for me."

"For me, it was an instant-joke action of mine, that took not a minute... unconsciously I was already crossing boundaries. I already committed a grievous offense," Fr Dario, shared.

"Di ako conscious na may unti unti na....., nakapasok ako doon sa situation. Pero sa first time na nangyari yun touching touching.... wala man siya... hanggang sa may nangyari na sa amin... (*I was not conscious that gradually...I got caught in the situation. But the first time it happened, there was touching...it was nothing more...until something happened to us*)," Fr Nate, recounted.

The experiences of the priests showed how necessary is the awareness of establishing boundaries in relating with others, especially with the people they serve. Frs Dario and Nate claimed that they were not conscious of the effect of their actions. The accounts of the priests revealed that consciousness of their act was only realized later.

Unaware of the need to deal with their feelings, the priests were led to act on them violating the boundaries that they were supposed to protect and uphold. This may be the effect of the lack of open and honest discussion on issues of sexuality among priests and religious.<sup>11</sup> As a result, a priest, who has not been given proper guidance on how to deal with his own emotions, sexual attractions and other behaviours, is in danger of committing sexual boundary violations. The priests in the study realized that there were already issues on transference and counter transference that they failed to address. Maintaining boundaries in personal and ministerial relationship is essential to priests whose primary vocation is to help

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<sup>11</sup> T.G. Plante, *Bless Me Father for I Have Sinned: Perspectives on Sexual Abuse Committed by Roman Catholic Priests*, Westport, Connecticut: Praeger Publishers, 1999, 9, 13, 16.

others. Since this issue was not handled well, the lives of the persons that the priests were expected to safeguard, have consequently been damaged, or in the extreme, destroyed.<sup>12</sup>

#### **Fourth Theme: Lack of Balance in the Priestly Life, Setting aside their Spiritual Discipline**

The final theme gleaned from the study is a compounded issue of the experience of priests being overworked and setting aside their spiritual practices. The priests took for granted their need to maintain balance in their spiritual discipline and ministerial life. They lost sight of the priority of prayer over their work.

Frs Dario, Nate and Gab were overburdened with their tasks in the ministry and community. They had focused more on fulfilling the demands of their priestly function and forgotten the need for self-care and spiritual nourishment.

“Lahat ako naman ang gagawa ng mga ito... mag establish ng seminary, mag recruit. First two years ako ang formator and then binigyan kami ng parish kasi kailangan merong chance na parish at the same time yung ano ng seminary. (*I do everything, lately, to establish the seminary, to recruit. For the first two years, I was formator and then I was given the parish because there should be a chance for the parish at the same time in the seminary*). So, parish priest, administrator, vocation promoter, formator and everything...,” Fr Dario shared. He seemed overwhelmed by the many tasks he was burdened with.

Fr Gab also recounted that he was deeply involved in the constructions in the parish. He further shared, “I also take care of... the people, like I visit houses, I visit the sick... I took care, of my priest companion in the parish.” Notably, Fr Gab was not only burdened with parish functions but also felt the responsibility to take care of his priest-companion.

Fr Nate was on the same predicament. He related, “I enjoyed and felt contented in any activities in the parish... many demands... I was superior local, parish priest, procurator... and adviser teacher... It was very heavy for me... that I look... like a superman, pretending always expert and good all the time...” At first, he felt fulfilled with his tasks

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<sup>12</sup>T.G. Plante, ed., *Sin Against the Innocents: Sexual Abuse by Priests and the Role of the Catholic Church*, Westport, Connecticut: Praeger Publishers, Greenwood Publishing Group, 2004; D. Garland & C. Argueta, *How Clergy Sexual Misconduct Happens: A Qualitative Study of First-Hand Accounts*, Social Work & Christianity, 2010; G. Robinson, *For Christ's Sake, End Sexual Abuse in the Catholic Church For Good*, Australia: Garratt Publishing, 2013; Sipe et al., “A Study of the Influence of Pathological Narcissism...”

but later felt the bulk of the work having a toll on his priesthood. He also expressed that because he was overworked he lacked time for personal and community prayer, he felt lost, no longer giving value to his religious identity. “Unti unti na pala hindi ko na realize na kinakain na pala ako sa kadiliman na sobra ang loneliness, overwork ako, lack of spirituality kasi hindi ko na din feel magdasal (*I did not realize that I was already eaten up by darkness, was overworked, lack of spirituality because I did not feel like praying*).”

Fr Dario and Fr Gab, although not verbally expressed, while narrating the incidents prior to their sexual misconduct, related the reality of being too focused on tasks to taking for granted their spiritual nourishment. Priesthood is considered a vocation that relies on the providence of God from the beginning of their “call”. Hence, prayer is essential in the life and ministry of the priests. However, due to the demands of their mission, Fr Dario and his priest-companions did not have regular prayer time. He admitted not having time even for personal prayer.

The priests in this study admitted having lost the discipline of creating balance in their priestly ministry particularly in maintaining time for their spiritual life. This lack of spiritual nourishment led them to feel overwhelmed in their tasks leading them to commit sexual boundary violations. It was too late when the priests realized the consequences of taking for granted the priority of prayer in their daily life. Stories of priests who were led astray, experienced burn-out or have left the priesthood, revealed that they had set aside their spiritual discipline.<sup>13</sup> It was only after being involved with sexual boundary violations that the priests realized the necessity of prayer being as important as their tasks in the ministry. Because of their misconduct, they have come to understand more profoundly that prayer is not another work to comply with but a deepening of relationship with the God who called them to the priesthood.

“Feeling all the pains... is not an easy task... in naming and accepting them, is a grace experience,” (Fr Dario personal account, 3:12-13) “...this is it Lord... Let me accept this one... it was not God’s will... even... in the narrowness and negative experiences we have... the great faith is there... it must be redeemed... God is the redeeming factor...” (Fr Dario, interview, 10:43-50).

“Even if I have messed it up and did not live up to my identity as a priest, he still loves me for who I am. In fact, despite... my own

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<sup>13</sup>G. Manuel, *Living Celibacy: Healthy Pathways for Priests*, Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 2012; J. Sanford, *Ministry Burnout*, New York: Paulist Press, 1982.

brokenness, he even loves me more” (Fr Gab, personal account, 8:23-25).

“I was weak and lived with many shortcomings, but God always was there to bring me out of all my problems.” (Fr Nate, personal account, 14; 4-5).

Amidst all those experiences that brought the priests great distress, they have journeyed into the depths of themselves and came to the acceptance of their own woundedness and vulnerabilities. As they recognized their need for God’s healing and forgiveness, Frs Dario, Gab and Nate have also come to appreciate more meaningfully the gift of their priestly vocation despite their being led astray.

### **Conclusion**

The primary aim of this study is to explore the reasons why priests are led to engage in sexual misconduct. The experience of loneliness in the life of priests that led them to long for deep relationships because of the lack of support from their fellow priests and superiors have pushed them to get involved with those they were supposed to help. Hence, this shows the importance of a solid and healthy support system among priests in the ministry. Unresolved issues in the past, particularly experiences of abuse, abandonment and rejection contribute to the circumstances of sexual boundary violations. This attests to the findings of other studies, particularly that of the psychodynamic theories on clergy sexual abuse offenders. Failure to maintain boundaries and difficulties in emotion-regulation exacerbated by too much work as they focused more on their “doing” were mitigating factors that led them to violate their priestly commitment. This is why professional and ministerial updating and self-care are important tools for priests to maintain a healthy sense of self and preserve their vocation. The only flickering light that was supposed to be the core of their priestly vocation and could have saved them from further self-destruction might have been their spiritual life. However, even the spiritual practices of the priests were disregarded leading to an experience of great pain and humiliation, that led to sexual misconduct. Since priesthood is believed to be a call, a Divinely-inspired vocation, in order for priests to remain faithful to their commitment, their spiritual life ever needs to be the anchor of their daily living. The results of this study revealed the crucial reality in the life of priests of their need to maintain a balance of prayer and work, as well as social support, to prevent them from being involved in sexual misconduct.

Despite the seemingly devastating experiences of priests who have been involved in sexual boundary violations, yet, with the hopeful responses of the priests after their misconduct, there is still hope that they will have great chances for healing and renewal. By putting into place contemporary, wholistic treatment programs and more practical and evidence-based prevention mechanisms, this crucial issue of clergy sexual misconduct in the Roman Catholic Church will hopefully be addressed. As Pope Francis has started to make urgent calls for the renewal of the clergy and consecrated life, hopefully, necessary interventions will be decisively carried out by the Philippine Catholic Church hierarchy. Certainly, if tangible and consistent changes begin to happen, the hard reality of the Roman Catholic Church in the West, wherein countless victims of clergy sexual abuse made a public outcry for justice, will never happen in this country.

As the researcher of this study and being a religious whose mission of reconciliation moves me to cater with compassion persons wounded by sin, it is my fervent desire that the integrity of priests in the Catholic Church will be restored and victims of clergy sexual misconduct will not only decrease but those who have already been violated will eventually attain healing and claim restorative justice. Hence, with this humble contribution of my research on the disheartening reality of clergy sexual misconduct, it is my hope that the findings of this study will serve as a shimmer of light not only to illumine the readers to understand and offer compassion for both victims and perpetrators but also to bring forth life-giving opportunities towards a genuine transformation of the Roman Catholic Church.