

Creative Response through Self-Transcendence: Logotherapeutic Perspective of the Emotional and Spiritual Wellbeing of the Parish Priests in the Covid-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

The covid-19 pandemic exposed itself as a challenging scenario for the parish priests in India due to its embarrassing consequences on personal and pastoral lives. Creative response through self-transcendence could be a therapeutic meaning-making approach for priests to overcome their emotional and spiritual misfortunes. Self-transcendence could mean going beyond oneself in search of higher meaning—realizing a creative pastoral ministry, experiencing noble values of priestly existence, and bravely facing inescapable suffering. The article is a brief analysis of the psychospiritual issues of the parish priests during the pandemic in light of the psychological approach of Frankl and the spiritual insights of Nouwen (The Return of the Prodigal Son and The Wounded Healer).

Keywords: Covid-19 pandemic, Parish priests, Self-transcendence, Psychospiritual wellbeing, attitudinal modifications

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic, the global humanitarian crisis, has presented the question of survival among millions worldwide. In recent years of human history, no one has witnessed such a drastic shift in human

life's daily momentum as caused by the launching of the Covid-19 pandemic, with no exceptions for continents, nations, religious traditions, or any other social strata. The pandemic demanded closing nonessential businesses, canceling gatherings, and encouraging people to shelter in place at home, all attempting to break every possible chain of transmission (Greger, 2020). As one of the world's most populated countries, India had the highest risk of preventing coronavirus transmission, especially among the working-class people. In a way, preventive measures in the country had caused chaos, making ordinary human life miserable due to administrative incompetency and deficit medical professionalism in handling an unprecedented threat of the Covid-19 pandemic. The public felt a lot of stress due to separation from their loved ones, loss of freedom, and the feeling of helplessness (Parayil, 2020). All the established institutions had gone through the severe impact of the pandemic, and the Catholic Church in India was not an exception. The general norm that evolved amid the pandemic's muddles regarding human survival was not survival of the fittest but the survival of the quickest (Parayil, 2022). It was an anomaly to remain stagnant in a world quickly adapting to the alternative ways of the new world order.

This article aims at a retrospective reading of the emotional and spiritual life of parish priests who had to confront pastoral demands and personal predicaments in a pandemic scenario. Undoubtedly, facing a constant threat of contagion, concerns about the disease and related issues, uncertainties about the future, and [the death cases in the parishes have aggravated the parish priests'] situational distress (Hooda, Sharma, & Yadava, 2021). In a way, the external adversities of the pandemic turned out to be a triggering event, potentially causing emotional and spiritual exhaustion in parish priests. Therefore, the study hypothesizes that the unprecedented shift brought out by the Covid-19 pandemic had a significant effect on the psycho spiritual wellbeing of the parish priests in the Catholic Church in India. The contextual study on the psycho spiritual wellness of the pastors of the Church amid the complexities of a pandemic has its contemporary significance since there exists a significant correlation between psycho spiritual flourishing and pastoral efficacy rates. In the Indian context, for many priests in the parishes, the absence of the in-person congregation raised personal, pastoral, liturgical, and theological questions without the time for sufficient and solid reflections (Gill, 2020).

Nouwen beautifully displays the fruitful victimhood of a priest when he is destined to live existential wounds of the contemporary life—an old legend in the Talmud may suggest to us the pertaining meaning in the creative pastoral ministry. The Messiah is sitting among the poor, binding his wounds one at a time, waiting for the moment when he will be needed (Nouwen, 1979). Therefore, the Covid-19 pandemic had been an ample opportunity for the parish priests to transcend the anxiety symptoms of their existential wounds through creative and responsible pastoral responses to the worries of their flock. In the pandemic circumstances, the pastors have recognized that meaning-making is what seems sensible more than the physical, sociological, and financial contentment of priestly life. In this regard, Logotherapeutic perceptions of Frankl is an efficacious therapeutic method in broadening parish priests' visual field to perceive deep-down possibilities of meaning-making (Frankl, 1963). An essential advantage of logotherapy in psychospiritual integration is its possibility to integrate the psychological and spiritual aspects to answer distressing situations (Boileau, 2021).

Mental Health and Pastoral Ministry

The Covid-19 pandemic exposed the issue of the mental wellness of [the parish priests] chronic as they suffer from alienation, separation, and loneliness in personal and professional life (Hooda, Sharma, & Yadava, 2021). Therefore, serious attention to the mental wellness of the priests was the need of the time when they had been possibly affected by the psychological and spiritual misfortunes. Mental health and emotional maturity are the contributing variables of a flourished and contented priestly life. The strongest predictor of priestly happiness is the priest's sense of inner peace. There is a positive correlation between one's spiritual life and one's mental wellbeing (Rosetti, 2011). Retrospective analysis of priestly life in a pandemic would provide sufficient insights to tackle future concerns over the similar fatality.

In a pandemic, rumination would be possibly another psychological condition intruding priestly life in the face of existential vacuum, and boredom in ministerial life. Brooding in this way is associated with maladaptive cognitive processing that can lead to negative affect, depression, and suicidal ideation (Russo-Netzer, Schulenberg, & Batthyany, 2016). Apathy (loss of interest in the ministry), boredom episodes ('Sunday neuroses,' Frankl, 1963) in some cases, the burn-out syndrome, and anxieties might lead a minister to brood over

the negative impacts of the pandemic and thus allowing himself to deteriorate emotionally and spiritually. As rumination is a destructive behavioural and attitudinal problem, the priest has to bring about an attitudinal modification by activating his will to meaning.

Pertinent Questions in a Crisis

The Covid-19 pandemic crisis might raise existential invalidations in the priest's mind since the sources of his meaningful life appear as arrested. Therefore, some relevant existential questions the article tries to answer are: How are parish priests expected to be connected in ministry during a pandemic? How could a parish priest function at times of social restrictions in the future in the Indian context? What initiatives should a parish priest take to find a meaningful life in a crisis?

The Covid-19 pandemic scenario could be described as one of the flimsy circumstances when the vulnerability of the parish priests is exposed to the Church society. The parish priests might feel unimportant and unneeded in an unsympathetic pandemic where their services are not sought or restricted due to the social distancing policies (Cervo, 2020). Hence, their life purpose was questioned by the Covid-19 pandemic due to heavy restrictions on public gatherings in churches, forced isolation to be in the parish house, and the absence of the parish community for the Eucharistic celebrations. Here the related question is: how does a diocesan priest pursue the meaning or purpose in life and ministry during a toxic atmosphere just like the pandemic in future especially when there exist heavy restrictions on assembling in the parishes or forced isolations? (Kundukulam, 2021).

The Necessity of Healing in the Crisis. Whatever is the crisis in priestly life, it calls for profound and holistic healing of the person emotionally and spiritually. Priests need to master the necessary psychospiritual skills and bring attitudinal modifications to their personal and pastoral existence. The areas where remedial steps are required are meaninglessness and consequent frustrations, loneliness and identity crisis, apathy and boredom episodes, vocational dissatisfaction, pastoral anxieties, lack of emotional and spiritual fulfilments. Therefore, pastoral care of priests is an essential spiritual service, and it involves therapeutic conversations, crisis intervention, pragmatic counselling, and spiritual companionship. Research has shown that having purpose and meaning in life increases overall wellbeing and general satisfaction,

improves mental and physical health, enhances resilience, builds self-esteem and decreases the chances of depression (Valladares, 2015).

Healing through Embracing the Crisis. The possible psychological and spiritual imbalances in the personal and professional life of the parish priests brought by the pandemic are similar to what Frankl (1963) described as a ‘shock’ in the lives of the inmates of the concentration camps. The shocking experience of being locked in the Auschwitz camp is the dreadful realisation of their painful and unescapable fate (Frankl, 1963). Similarly, the clergy possibly were shocked by the awful impact of the pandemic because the Covid-19 pandemic along with its lockdowns, quarantines, social distancing, contamination of the disease and tragic death cases, and problems with giving a decent farewell to the deceased parishioners. Many of us lived a ‘delusion of reprieve’ that we would soon be liberated from the clutches of the pandemic and return to everyday life. As it did not happen as we expected, the parish priest had to acknowledge the realities of the crisis and take a leadership role.

Acknowledging a crisis is seen as the self-detachment capability of human beings towards the challenges arising from within and surrounding environment. It can be identified as the inner movement of the Prodigal son of Nouwen (1992) in *The Return of the Prodigal Son* to acknowledge and embrace the impinging absurdities of his life. Good News Bible version shows the inner movement of the Prodigal with a beautiful phrase, “At last, he came to his senses” (Lk 15: 17a). The Prodigal son in Nouwen’s story could detach himself from the anxiety symptoms arising from his inner self and surrounding wretched conditions in the distant land (Nouwen, 1992). Therefore, self-detachment competence is the sign of a determined priestly mind to march his life against an impending fate of the Covid-19 pandemic. Therefore, embracing a pandemic crisis is a pronounced decision-making event in the life of a parish priest.

Healing Through Meaning-Making. Logotherapy is a reasonable substantial psycho-philosophical theory with an effective therapeutic intervention to stimulate the potential meaning of priestly existence at times of redundancy in a pandemic. Regarding the psychospiritual healing process, Frankl holds that when man’s search for meaning is frustrated or thwarted, it leads to spiritual distress, though not the same as a mental disease (Costello, 2015). What is unique in meaning-making process is: perspective change is fundamental to reorienting

clients from egotistic concerns of pleasure and success to the meaning-mind set of being responsible for the wellbeing of others and its resulting deep satisfaction (Russo-Netzer, Schulenberg, & Batthyany, 2016). Attitudinal modification of the individual by conscious attempts is essential in the meaning-making process. Hence, logotherapy is a highly insightful philosophy and a result-oriented therapeutic method for a priest in idleness to rediscover the values such as intentionality of his vocation, the responsibility of life, power of self-transcendence, and courageous suffering. The meaning-making therapy equips a priest to differentiate between himself and his anxiety-provoking symptoms of ministry in a pandemic scenario. The therapy further advances a priest to make a positive reappraisal of his life, thus perceiving the positive aspects of the adverse events surrounding his committed life. The meaning-making is possible through the following ways.

Realisation of Contextual Meaning and Pastoral Responsibility. The discovery of contextual meaning in one's life could be regarded as one of the specialities of the logotherapeutic method in healing emotional and spiritual issues. Frankl suggests that the contextual nature of meaning implies that one cannot point out the specific meaning for another (Frankl, 2014). Each must see the meaning of their context. Vatican II urged, "priests should be adapted to the circumstances of time and space so that priestly ministry will always answer the pastoral requirements of the particular area" (Vatican II, 1966). The contextual meaning is not something an abstract, transcendent concept. The parish priest is incardinated to a particular geographical place and destined to live with a specific group of people. He is not a mendicant moving from place to place (Rosetti, 2009). Therefore, his meaning of life is also contextual. Context sensitivity makes priesthood respond to the real needs and expectations of the people and the cultural and social situation (Selvam & Karunaraj, 2010). The sensitivity of priests to the pandemic environment and the needs in which they live and administer their pastoral duties turns out to be a source of their meaning in priestly life.

Frankl maintains that asking questions on the meaningfulness of one's life makes him more responsible towards himself, others, and life (Frankl, 1975). Therefore, in his existential vacuum (noögenic neurosis, Barnes, 2000), the priest had to dare to hope in the face of hopelessness, detach from the fate of the distressing situation, retain the defiant power of his inner spirit, and consider honestly the

meaning in living a priestly life. The above-mentioned psychospiritual developments would happen when he becomes a responsible pastor amid factual life circumstances. The essence of his priestly existence could be seen in the responsibility towards personal and pastoral life (Frankl, 1958). Thus, the spiritual core of a [priest] is recognized as capable of taking a stand toward negative and painful external circumstances and its psychological character structure. Such recognition conveys to a renewed awareness of self-worth and human dignity (Kimble & Ellor, 2009). Pastoral responsibility in crises induces a sense of specialness, the essential element of the priesthood. In the place of existential meaninglessness and faith crisis, a new meaning and deeper faith begin to grow (Goergen, 1992).

Realisation of Priestly Dignity and Spiritual Dimension. The profound meaning in the ministerial life can be again traced in Nouwen's story (1992). The younger son discerned the intact indelible mark of his sonship and dignity. There is a meaningful association between the realisation of the deepest self by the prodigal son and the rediscovery of meaning by a parish priest in the face of a hostile pandemic. The grace of indelible mark of the ministerial priesthood and the grace of the dignity of the sonship is ontologically related (Nouwen, 1992). The meaning is inherent in every priest's inner being. The realisation would become the source of self-worth, confidence in one's abilities to respond proactively to the demands of the concrete circumstances of one's life. With existential aloneness and apparent meaninglessness, priests who recognize their worth and strengths can use this knowledge to bounce back and carry on from an event that has caused hardship (Russo-Netzer, Schulenberg, & Batthyany, 2016). The realisation of priestly dignity for a priest is a compelling spiritual quotient that would assist him in being resilient in life.

The story of Nouwen further explores that the young man was dispossessed of everything except for one thing, his sword. When embracing his father after returning home, the only remaining sign of his dignity is the short sword hanging from his hips- a badge of nobility. The sword is the symbol of grace in him which he still has not abandoned even in the face of the tragic moments of his life. Even amid his debasement, he had clung to the truth that he still was the son of his father. Otherwise, he would have sold his so valuable sword, the symbol of his sonship. The sword is there to show that, although he came back speaking as a beggar and an outcast, he had not forgotten

that he still was the son of his father. This remembered and valued sonship finally persuaded him to turn back (Nouwen, 1992).

The hanging sword at the side tells us of the invisible noetic or spiritual dimension, the grace of the sonship, of the young man, which prompted him convincingly to return to life. For Frankl human person cannot be reduced simply to a mere collection of drives or urges, but it is his spiritual dimension, the invisible grace, that becomes an impetus for him to strive for meaning in his life. The invisible grace makes him free to transcend the boundaries and constraints of the most difficult situations of life which prove unchangeable yet rich in meaning and fulfilment (Kimble & Ellor, 2009). It is true about a priestly life undergoing difficult desolation and neurotic moments. Rosetti (2009) speaks to us that any moment of crisis in priestly life is an opportunity to embrace the graces to come from the disasters of life. God has the uncanny (Frankl, 1963) ability to transform the greatest of disasters into moments of grace. Therefore, our task is not to let the moments of disasters pass without gleaning the grace has in store for us. We ought to pursue this purification of the priestly life vigorously (Rosetti, 2009). The realisation of the inherent spiritual dimension, or the permeating grace, would serve as a strong push for a priest to search for resilience and endurance through meaning-making at the moments of devastating crisis. The spiritual quotient is a powerful reservoir. In the noetic or spiritual dimension background, Frankl depicts the human person possessing a different form of being. Therefore, the apprehension about the meaning of priestly life is more spiritual distress, which may have very little connection with one's psychic disease (Frankl, 1958). The spiritual pain in the process of pursuing the meaning of life in a pandemic can be diagnosed in light of the logotherapeutic ideals of freedom and responsibility.

The Virtues of Freedom and Responsibility. A priest was not free from the biological, sociological or psychological conditions of the pandemic. Still, it takes self-determination to take a stand using the reservoir of the spiritual dimension by being free and responsible in the frightful circumstances. A human person is free to choose his destiny at moments of existential struggles and is responsible for his choice in making his life worth living (Frankl, 2014). When a situation does not provide a sense of satisfaction, emotional and spiritual nourishment, they should not expect someone to provide the meaning. Instead, the

priest is responsible by being aware of life predicaments, feelings, destiny, and suffering at the moment of struggles (Onah, 2000).

The Virtues of Self-detachment and Self-transcendence. The virtues of self-detachment and self-transcendence would become an effective tool for a priest in an existential crisis to get mastery over overwhelming circumstances of a pandemic when the churches were closed and priestly ministry had been restricted. By the capacity for self-detachment, man is capable of detaching oneself not from a situation and self, and choose an attitude toward themselves. They take a stand toward their somatic and psychic conditions and determinants (Frankl, 2014). Self-transcendence would be another capacity available for a priest in their conscience to prove humanness and strength of the spirit in the face of trivial circumstances. By this capacity, a priest could go beyond self to encounter something or someone searching and accomplishing priestly life's meaning. Thus, the virtue of self-transcendence becomes the essence of priestly existence. Only through self-transcendence can one find meaning in love and unavoidable suffering. The more one reaches out to others in love, or, a meaning to fulfil, the more human they become (Onah, 2000). Therefore, when a priest uses the virtues of self-detachment and self-transcendence, they prove the witnessing quality of life in a pandemic time when ordinary people are perplexed in their lives. Thus, the qualities of these two virtues would become instrumental in determining the essence of his priestly existence in the frightful situations of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The Will to a Meaningful Priestly Life

The insight of the logotherapeutic ideal of the will to meaning and the Nouwen concept of choice for life will effectively resolve the questions of meaninglessness and noögenic neurosis of a priestly life during the Covid-19 pandemic. Figuratively, the prodigal son stands for the priest destined to leave his home to a distant land of the pandemic, where he suffered from emotional and spiritual starvation and was deprived of a flourishing life. The priest wanted to return to his home: the home is regarded as a state of his emotional and spiritual wellness. The priest also confronted a spiritual struggle like the prodigal son had in the distant land. He struggled to decide and choose. In logotherapy, this inherent struggle for meaning has been taken as an indispensable element. Frankl calls this inherent spiritual struggle in human beings as noö-dynamics in logotherapy (Costello, 2015). It is a spiritual struggling and striving. A priest's will to meaning enables him to be a

self-creator of his ministerial life. The will to meaning would ignite a sense of coherence, self-efficacy, competence, and growth mindset in the personal and pastoral life.

The Meaning-Making Process in a Pandemic

Pastoral charity is the entire theatre for a diocesan priest to live out his spirituality. Emotional and spiritual nourishment of priests happen through their pastoral engagements in gathering and building up the Christian community, by the proclamation of the Word, the celebration of the liturgy, mission and service (Greshake, 1982; Rosetti, 2009; Manalel, 2006). Priests transcend themselves to a flourishing life experience through pastoral ministry. Priests achieve the meaning and purpose of their life through discerning, committing to, and pursuing over searching goals in their pastoral fields. In a traumatic situations, a priest would rack up a sense of meaning only by broadening the horizons of pastoral life. Keeping a realistic picture of the limitations and possibilities of their pastoral ministry, priests are challenged to broaden their visual field by using creative and attractive ways of reaching out to the people and doing pastoral ministry. The centre nerve of logotherapy, ‘He who has a why to live for can bear almost any how’ (Frankl, 2014) celebrates itself as a motivational factor for a parish priest in retaining purposefulness of his pastoral life. Frankl (1963) urges, “there is nothing in the world that would so effectively help one to survive even the worst conditions as the knowledge that there is a meaning in one’s life.” The broader a person’s horizon, the greater the opportunities for freedom. Realising the will’s freedom suggests a priest be responsible for his life. A priest becomes a dynamic presence to the realities of his life, and his conscience will undergo dynamic changes as his horizon or world of meaning expands (Lauder, 1978). Expansion of horizon in the midst of apparent meaninglessness of a pandemic life happens mainly in three ways: by creative engagements, loving experience of noble values, and bravely embracing inescapable suffering.

A Creative Pastoral Ministry. A creative pastoral ministry is a curative way of finding the existential meaning of life for a minister in his pastoral setting. The unique key to healing in logotherapy is to activate clients’ spiritual will to meaning in a creative way that suits clients’ unique predicaments, personal history, and personality (Russo-Netzer, Schulenberg, & Batthyany, 2016). By taking a spiritual attitude towards the somatic, sociological, and psychological conditions of life,

a priest can self-distance and self-transcend himself from the drastic situations of a pandemic life by exerting the creative possibilities of his freedom derived from his noölogical dimension of the self. In this way, he becomes a master of his self and his circumstances (Costello, 2015). St. Peter exhorts the priests in this regard, “I exhort the elders among you to tend the flock of God that is in your charge, exercising the oversight, not under compulsion but willingly as God would have you do it ... be examples to the flock” (1 Pet 5:2–4). Through creative interventions as “specialists in other people’s pain, they recognise how this dynamic of loss can be part of their psychological and spiritual growth. In this way, priests learn again and again in their pastoral ministry that a crisis is not abandonment by God but an avenue for God’s intervention” (Goergen, 1992). By being creative in ministry, a priest actualises his capacity for self-transcendence simply by creating something new or contributing something positive to this world. It does not require always grand gestures to do or experience all these things. The self-transcendence of a priestly life takes shape in the everyday ministerial life (Perrin, 2021).

Exploration of Contextual Needs. The pandemic crisis demands priest’s creativity to his pastoral work by realising a contextual call which can transfigure priestly life with profound meaning. At this exploration of the particular call in the factual case, priestly life and ministry transcend the mere cultic practices of the ministerial priesthood. Creative interventions in the pastoral domain enhance a priestly life’s status from mere functionary to missionary. Frankl exhorts, “everywhere man is confronted with fate, with the chance of achieving something through his suffering” (Frankl, 1963). Thus, the creative pastoral ministry provides ample opportunity for a priest to witness the way he accepts his fate and sufferings, the way he takes up his cross in front of others who undergo similar outward fatality. Through witness, the priest can reach people’s hearts. His spiritual authority as a man of God, his charismatic aura, and his dynamism as a religious and spiritual person have a persuasive, infectious effect. The messenger himself become the message here: a genuine encouragement (Augustin, 2010; Dey & Parayil, 2020). Creative pastoral ministry is a healing for the loneliness and boredom experiences of the parish priests. In a pandemic, the parish priest becomes a Good Samaritan through creative interventions (Lk 10:25–37).

Pastoral Solidarity in Pain. The spirituality of a parish priest persuades him to move out of his comfort zone to have a deeper engagement in the burning issues of his time. This movement from hostility to hospitality ameliorates him to reach out creatively to the many we meet on our way (Nouwen, 1975). Pastoral solidarity in priestly ministry is the need of the pandemic time. In Hebraic history, we encounter several incidents where the prophets criticise the clergy of the times. For instance, in the book of Ezekiel, we find the prophet turning against the shepherds, who also include the priests. The shepherds did not feed the sheep, meaning that they did not take care of the sick, the weak, the strayed, whereas they lived extravagantly at the cost of the poor (Ezek 34:1–10). We ought to learn from history and face the present and future crises proactively to renovate the Church's mission (Kundukulam, 2021). Thus, pastoral solidarity in the pains of his flock provides the parish priest courage to bear the terrible how of his existence. The parish priest can also fruitfully become a teacher of logotherapy to those who find difficulty in searching for meaning in their lives. Similarly, the Covid-19 pandemic environment calls for the compassionate intervention of the shepherds of the flock through their pastoral charity because there are a good number of despairing human beings who find no sense in living due to various reasons such as, to mention a few, grieving due to the loss of the loved ones, psychological imbalances, burnout experiences, financial struggles, and apathy in life.

Creative Response to Existential Loneliness. Priestly life in the Covid-19 pandemic was when they underwent such a weird death experience of loneliness in their personal and professional lives. Studies have revealed a significant correlation between loneliness and the spiritual dryness in priestly life due to lack of social network, lack of intimate relations, and the inability of the person to be alone. With the predicaments of loneliness, the person might indulge in sexual fantasies if he is not conscious enough to handle his loneliness fruitfully. It might also lead him to immature affectivity and abuse alcohol or chemicals which are not uncommon nowadays in priestly life (Baumann, Frick, Jacobs, & Büssing, 2019). Since loneliness is a testing time of their longing for intimacy and transcendence, the priests must be trained to respond creatively to their loneliness. Loneliness becomes fruitful when it is used for a creative spiritual life in the sense that “the priest should find the courage to enter into the desert of his loneliness and to change it by gentle and resistant efforts to a garden of solitude. A perspective shift in loneliness will help a priest gradually

convert from anxious reaction to loving response (Therukaattil, 2009). The Lord speaks to his minister's heart in silence (Job 4:12–16; Ps 107:28–30; 1 Kings 19:12). A creative spirituality transforming loneliness into a fruitful solitude motivates a priest to be hospitable to those who need his voluntary and compassionate interventions. Exploration to the life of the other is the most excellent antidote to loneliness (Nouwen, 1979). In living the solitude, the priest can ask himself some thoughtful questions accompanying his priestly being. The exercise would enlighten him to be a free and responsible person at times of an external fatality of the Covid-19 pandemic. The pertinent questions are:

- Am I really a happy person?
- Should I be unhappy when the people are taken away from me?
- Am I actually alone?
- How can I respond creatively to my loneliness?
- Is my ministry redundant?
- How can I make others' life happy by my meaningful interventions?
- What are my positive strengths and weaknesses?
- How can I creatively foster a quality relationship with God and others?

Experiential Values of Priestly Existence. We have seen above that meaningful priestly life can be accomplished in adversities through creative and concrete explorations into something or someone. But there are times when a priest cannot initiate innovative interventions in life. The desert experience of the pandemic might cause a priest to subside the eternal values for which he lives. He might have doubted his faith, lost his hope, disregarded the beauty of his call, and might have felt prayer time as something extraordinarily dull and fruitless. Being in an unfriendly land of the pandemic along with wild temptations and fantasies, the priest is expected to be responsible and committed to the sacred values of the ministerial priesthood. He is to contemplate The Good, the Truth, and the Beauty against the perils of tragic triads of life, pain, guilt, and death. The spiritual intelligence of faith, hope, and love becomes an impetus to pursue meaning in his priestly existence. The spiritual quotient contributes to the awareness, integration, and adaptive application of the non-material transcendent aspects of one's existence for a greater sense of meaning and wholeness. We are not human beings having a spiritual experience, but we are spiritual beings having a human experience (Maniampra, 2020). Finding meaning

through experiencing the triad of faith, hope, and love transforms a parish priest resilient and persistent in harsh conditions.

Experiential Value of the Divine Goodness. Frankl has openly shared how the therapeutic power of faith and trust in an ultimate reality transform person under unimaginable suffering into a hopeful and meaningful life. The inmates in the concentration camps used to attend their religious gatherings with enthusiasm because it had a relieving and healing effect on their bodies and minds. By this everyday exercise, the camps' inmates could retain their life of spiritual freedom amidst the terrible surroundings (Frankl, 1963). Focusing on the existential distress in prayer, a priest promotes flexibility, resilience, hope, and the power of endurance to break ingrained patterns of behaviour that sap his energy (Maniampra, 2020). The experiential value of prayer helps him be open to the guidance of the Spirit of God in a pandemic. The prayer experience of the priest can induce hope and confidence in others in their distress (Mk 4:35–41). As ambassadors of God, the priest's intercession for his people is also a necessary part of his pastoral charity. Real faith and love experience with God helps a priest neither ignores the threatening aspects of life nor avoids them. What he can do is face them as they are, without despairing over them (Countryman, 1999; Parayil, 2020). The integrity of priestly life comes when he spends his quality time in the loving presence of the Lord.

Experiential Value of Hope. Hope is an additional sign of the person's will to live and an inner strength against his life's certain desperate circumstances. Frankl affirms that the inmates of the concentration camp could survive the horrific circumstances in the camps by retaining their inner strength by hoping for a future goal. Hopefulness has a psychotherapeutic effect on each one because they could find a reason on their way to look forward in life (Frankl, 2011). Under the struggles for survival human person can live meaningfully by looking into a future goal. Faith and trust in an ultimate reality can only induce unquenchable hopefulness within us. Priests are to be the heralds of hope who announces the Gospel of hope in the face of restlessness in the world. "Always be ready to make your defence to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you" (1 Pet 2:15). Hopefulness provides a sense of connectedness for priests to transcend the predicaments of the pandemic and enables them to see things through a hopeful lens.

Experiential Value of Priestly Solidarity. Priestly solidarity is a motivational factor that instils the feeling of meaningfulness in the lives of parish priests in the face of a pandemic circumstance. A priest can understand another priest's problem clearly. Priestly solidarity is a kind of fruitful spiritual coexistence. The faith and hope of my friend priest can have a profound influence on my faith and hope. Being together in priestly communion in the face of uncertainties of a pandemic can be a source of healing for a priest in a strong sense of the shared humanity by listening to the thoughts, hopes, prayers and insights of others, and getting the courage to speak out one's fears and beliefs, emotions and desires. This communion naturally brings in them a sense of security and self-esteem. Priests often find they are re-energized and refocused after gatherings with brother priests (Rosetti, 2009). The following proposals are productive in fostering pastoral solidarity.

- During the pandemic, priests from the neighbouring parishes can have a community life with meals together. They can share their parish experiences and personal anxieties related to the pandemic situation in their koinonia.
- Instead of celebrating the Eucharist privately, the priests can have a joint Eucharistic celebration, which would be an effective occasion to conscientize their priestly vocation and commitment to their people's concrete pain and sufferings.
- A community life is an ample opportunity for priests to have an intellectual sharing about the modern trends in theology and psychology, which would help them be informative and heal their maladaptive thoughts, behavioural patterns, and the intruding loneliness.

The Meaning of Suffering in Priestly Life. The Covid-19 pandemic turned out to be a triggering event of existential suffering for the parish priests, of course, due to its sociological and psychological constraints. The destiny of the inescapable suffering of a priest in an anxiety generating circumstance has been determined by the stand he takes towards his predicaments. In the face of unavoidable sufferings, Frankl (1963) proposes the attitudinal value: "Whenever one is confronted with an inescapable, unavoidable situation, whenever one has to face a fate which cannot be changed, like an incurable disease, just then one is given the last chance to actualise the highest value, the meaning of suffering, the attitude in which we take our suffering upon ourselves.

Suffering is the most fertile soil for meaning fulfilment (Onah, 2000). Thus, the mystery of the meaning of suffering is ontologically superior to the meaning of work and love. It is on this stuff the saints are made of. In such fatal situations, a priest may, or may not, live up to his responsibility by the answer he gives. If he courageously accepts his suffering as part of life, he turns a personal tragedy into a human triumph (Frankl, 2014). Thus, suffering ceases to be suffering when a priest discovers meaning in the experience. When a priest can discipline himself patiently in the turmoil of suffering, his brave suffering becomes a sign of God's presence and love with perseverance, bringing hope to the pandemic victims.

Grace of the Eucharistic Celebration. The predicaments of a pandemic—desolations, loneliness, boredom, loss of interest, spiritual dryness, and all sorts of crises of the ordinary people—turn out to be the subject matter of a meaningful celebration of the Eucharist. Rosetti (2011) writes that a survey among the catholic priests revealed that meaningful celebration of the Eucharist is one of the significant factors contributing to priestly happiness. The Eucharist is the source of the spiritual energy and the centre nerve of meaning and joy for intensifying the priest's inner self to be hopeful towards the future and be responsible in the devastating conditions of his ministry. In the Eucharistic celebration, the existential frustration of a priest transforms into the victimhood of Christ (Sheen, 1970). The priest identifies himself with Christ and the ailments of the pandemic when he says, "This is my Body" and "This is my Blood." The suffering servanthood dimension of the ministerial priesthood becomes internalised when he celebrates the Eucharist amid the intense and excruciating silence of the pandemic. He feels the pain and isolation in his humanity, but he experiences profound consolation and hope in spirit. Thus, the celebration of the Eucharist turns out to be the reservoir of meaning in suffering.

A Radical Witness of Integrity. Meaningful suffering is a call to a life of integrity. The Covid-19 pandemic is an excruciating atmosphere that demands a lot from the priestly life by way of witness: to become a man of integrity. Integrity is possible when the priest accepts his weakness in emotional and spiritual life and seeks help to heal the wounds of his mind and conscience, especially with the help of a matured spiritual father. Therefore, the pandemic time is when a parish priest needs psychological and spiritual accompaniment. Courageous suffering by

being faithful to his vocation in itself is a sign of priestly integrity. The integrity of priestly life is a powerful witness, a sign of hope to those who struggle emotionally and spiritually in a pandemic. It becomes the experiential base for radiant, even contagious, confidence in facing the most resistant problems in human experience and helping others do so (Kennedy, 2021).

Loving Embrace of the Cross. The Cross stands for the existential suffering of a priest in the pandemic. No one is better just because he suffered. Suffering matters depending on how he suffered. When a priest embraces his cross of existential suffering, he transfigures himself to be a victim after the model of Christ. Victimhood means a deep consciousness that we feel the guilt and sin of the world as if it were our own, and by constant union with Christ, seek to reconcile all humanity to him. It is a term of humiliation, tribulations, and trials of a hostile circumstance (Sheen, 1970). The priest is a victim who embraces a pandemic hopefully by contemplating on the saying of his master, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me” (Lk 16:23). The brave embracing of the cross of a pandemic by a parish priest has its attitudinal value just as the inmates in the concentration camps. They embraced their frightful fate, courageously enduring all horrible conditions of camp life with delight. They were worthy of their sufferings. Yet they did not survive the camp and had a dignified death (Frankl, 1963).

Logotherapeutic Interventions and the Meaning-Making Process

Logotherapeutic interventions in the lives of parish priests were worthwhile in expanding the horizon of his priestly ministry amid the Covid-19 pandemic, where he suffers from redundancy and apathy in ministry. The proclaimed goal of these interventions was to broaden the visual scope of a priest to dredge up and actualize the meaning potentials in their lives (Frankl, 1963). The intervention is focused on mainly three ways of meaning enhancement. The first step is the ‘Exploration,’ the priest would explore his current pastoral situations where he showed some trace of self-transcendence. Here they were encouraged to express selfless interest in a worthy cause or personal responsibility to do what is right or matters in their ministry. The second step, ‘Insight,’ involved helping the priests gain insight into the noble, spiritual side different from their culturally conditioned egotistic and worldly thinking. Lastly, ‘Implementation’ included awakening the clients’ willingness to implement their insights,

realising that the world is full of potential for meaning and goodness in rampant suffering, violence, and death (Russo-Netzer, Schulenberg, & Batthyany, 2016). Paradoxical Intention, De-reflection, and Socratic Dialogue are instrumental in generating the logotherapeutic virtues of self-detachment, self-transcendence, and attitude modification in effects, respectively.

The Technique of Paradoxical Intention. Paradoxical Intention is a logotherapeutic technique using the human person's innate capacity for self-distancing from an impending anxiety stimulus. The rationale behind paradoxical intention is that most problems are more emotional than logical. Clients become involved in a cycle with fears evoking symptoms, increasing the fears. By encouraging clients to do or wish for the thing they fear most, clients might change the attitude toward the symptom (Erford, 2015). Paradoxical Intention helps the client master the intruding anxiety symptoms and get relaxed through the mental exercise. To tell a priest who is continuously anxious about having no pastoral ministry or worried about getting contaminated by the coronavirus, imagine what might happen if he becomes jobless one day and recognise that he becomes lonely in his house. Imagine he actually becoming lonely and feeling the satisfaction; this might take the pressure off the anxiety symptom (van Deurzen, 1997).

The Technique of De-reflection. The technique of De-reflection is a method of intervention based on a conversational approach. The therapist disputes false ideas of the client and suggests different ways of thinking about the client's unique predicament. The De-reflection method encourages the client to shift the focus of attention from a distressing stimulus toward meaning through self-transcendence. The following scale was designed to provide a reliable measure of self-transcendence in priestly ministry by scoring the following statements.

- I assume full responsibility for my priestly life and my behaviour.
- I consider it a privilege and joy to suffer for my parish community.
- I take good care of myself to take good care of those under my care.
- I care about my parishioners' wellbeing, even when they are unrelated to me.
- My purpose in life is to serve others, even when it demands personal sacrifice.
- I do my priestly responsibility to create a better parish community.

- I experience deep satisfaction from serving God or my parish community.
- I feel spiritually connected with God and others.
- My faith or hope extends beyond my external situations.
- I am willing to take risks and accept challenging responsibilities in my priestly ministry.

Priests are asked to rate how each statement is characteristic of them on a five-point rating scale, ranging from “Not at All” to “A Great Extent.” This scale can be used for meaning therapy to monitor their progress in pursuing self-transcendence (Russo-Netzer, Schulenberg & Batthyany, 2016).

The Technique of Socratic Dialogue. Socratic dialogue is a technique of questioning the fundamental aspects of one’s suffering and helping the client see suffering from a different perspective. Socratic dialogue could help them make choices: either remain in the situation, and continue to suffer, or search for and discover meaning that would bring an end to their suffering (Guttmann, 1996). Viktor Frankl’s self-discovery discourse will help extract the unconscious spiritual condition of the priest. The priest must be examined through the typical Socratic style of questioning. They have to face questions about the essence of priestly ministry and whether they can differentiate the essence from the accidentals. They have to identify the fundamental values of the ministry, and learn to fix the priority of values in the proper order. If this spiritual examination is not done right, there is every possibility for the priest to feel that the ministry is redundant. The priest has to examine, either by themselves or by a spiritual guide, these questions:

- How am I constituted within my soul?
- Have I got control over my emotions and feelings?
- Are the natural urges adequately directed towards the attainment of true happiness?
- Have I attained deep and inseparable communion with Jesus?
- Have I got clarity about the values in my life as a priest?
- Will Jesus be happy about the way I am representing him in the parish?
- Is my Bishop happy about my ministry in the parish?
- Are my people happy about my service to them?

The Socratic questioning would challenge the destructive attitudes of the client towards his concrete suffering, which results in the attitude modification of the person (Frankl, 2014). These questions, if rightly examined and answers found in the light of the Spirit of God, the Covid-19 pandemic would be seen by the priest as an occasion for spiritual empowerment.

Conclusion

The Covid-19 pandemic crisis served as a potential platform for parish priests to dredge up life's contextual and unique meaning for flourishing their lives. Once a pandemic thwart the sources of meaning in priestly life, the creative attempts to embrace the pandemic crisis and its constraints by the clergy would bring resilience and persistence in spiritual distress. Logotherapy as a meaning-centred therapeutic method has been an effective practical aid for creative response through self-transcendence for priests who undergo struggles in their pastoral life. Nouwen explored that a compassionate priest would look at the miseries of evil and pain around him not as disturbing interruptions of his life span, but rather opportunities for conversion of himself and his fellow human beings (Nouwen, 1979). In the horrible circumstances of the pandemic, when a priest puts his wounded self in service of the faithful in all the conceivable ways, he can metamorphose his wounds as the genesis of healing for others. It is only through self-transcendence that man can go beyond himself to find meaning in love and unavoidable suffering. The more man reaches out to others in love, the more human he becomes (Onah, 2000). The wounded healer imagery of the parish priest is explored in the words of St. Paul, "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself taking the form of a slave...he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross" (Phil 2:5–8).

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