

MISSION IN THE LIGHT OF FAITH, HOPE, AND LOVE IN THE LIVES OF THE CATHOLIC LAY MINISTERS IN THE NEW NORMAL

ANDRON C. LAGARDE,
ALVIN J. SUMAMPONG;
REV. FR. GUN REAL L. OMEGA, DCS;
REV. FR. MICHAEL PATAN, DCS;
LIA CHUA, Dev.Ed.D; PhD
St. Paul University Surigao

Abstract

This research paper examined the mission in light of faith, hope, and love in the lives of the catholic lay ministers in the new normal. Since the study is qualitative, it followed Giorgi's (2003) Descriptive Phenomenological Approach in describing the phenomenon from the lived experiences of the informants. Methods used included collecting recorded interviews and analysis of the gathered data. Analyses of the data revealed 102 psychological meaning units, which developed 26 concepts, from which 16 categories were formed that resulted in 4 themes and were merged to formulate one main global theme. The findings and conclusions of the study revealed that the lay ministers embodied faith, hope, and love in carrying out their mission amidst the pandemic and were considered strong virtues. The outcomes of this study may aid lay ministers in cultivating a sense of awareness as they deepen their faith, hope, and love for God, the church, and their ministry. This study also offers information to the priests in charge who commissioned the lay ministers in their respective mission and to readers to understand the informants' experiences.

Keywords: Theological, Catholic Lay Ministers, Phenomenological Approach, Philippines.

Introduction

The nature of the church is missionary (Outler, 1995). Everyone, not just those who believe they have been chosen and given more time than the others, is invited to dedicate their lives to serving God (Socias, 2007). The benefit of being Christian missionaries is that they have the opportunity to uphold their beliefs ethically. The freedom to carry out a mission for love and faith serves as the rationale for Christian service (Russel, 1995). The clergy, religious, and lay pastors are the missionaries of the Christian Church, and everyone is called to serve as a missionary for God and His people (De Clety, 1967). In a sense, members of Church groups are also regarded as missionaries from a Christian perspective; they are the lay ministers and appointed ministers, such as priests and religious.

Unquestionably, the church is currently experiencing a serious crisis that could cause a significant proportion of members' spiritual health to decline. Religion is very important in the daily routines of people in a nation like the Philippines, and in particular, one of its cities in Mindanao, Surigao City, where the majority of the population is Roman Catholic. However, because of the

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COVID-19 pandemic, the government's lockdown policies, banning of social gatherings, and strict observance of social distancing given the health protocols, religious activities such as face-to-face Church masses, recollections, conventions, and team-buildings were banned online to ensure public safety. This put a strain on many people, including the lay ministers of the church, hampering their spirituality and missionary zeal in this time of crisis. It could also give them the reason to compromise their roles and neglect their responsibilities. Thus, in the context of this study, this query is considered: Are the lay ministers of San Nicolas De Tolentino Cathedral living up to their zeal as missionaries of the church?

Pastoral works and other spiritual services are integral to spiritual care as they give people stability and meaning (Puchalski, 2006). St. Augustine, in particular, enumerated the role of faith, hope, and love as the stability to spiritual service and self-dedication to God. But with all the government health protocols, how could the lay ministers live out their missionary zeal? The importance of Faith, Hope, and love in the lives of the chosen Roman Catholic Lay Ministers of the San Nicolas de Tolentino Cathedral of the Diocese of Surigao as they carry out their vocation even in the face of the COVID-19 crisis was thus the aimed of the researchers' investigation.

Faith, hope, and love are the necessary graces for Christian virtues. Faith is reliance upon God. Hope is the state of composure in trusting God, seeing the grace behind every difficulty. The final part is Christian love, which is considered the highest of the virtues. It encompasses all Christian virtues as it implies selflessness. The central problem of this study revolved around the phenomena involving mission in the light of faith, hope, and love in the lives of the Roman Catholic lay ministers of San Nicolas de Tolentino Cathedral of the Diocese of Surigao, including the challenges they faced while in service, particularly on the continuous threat of the Covid-19 pandemic affecting their missionary zeal. Furthermore, this study offered an extensive review of the life experiences and dedication of Lay Ministers.

Methodology

The study utilized Giorgi's (2003) Descriptive Phenomenological Approach to describe the lived experiences of the lay ministers of San Nicolas de Tolentino Cathedral of the Diocese of Surigao on their mission in the light of faith, hope, and love. The basic concepts from Husserl, Spielberg, and Merleau-Ponty's four criteria of description, reduction, essence, and intentionality.

The informants were the five (5) ministers of San Nicolas de Tolentino Cathedral of the Diocese of Surigao. They were chosen based on the predetermined criteria using a purposive selection technique, which were: (1) elected as the president of the specific church organization; (2) served the church as a lay minister for a period of two to four years; and (3) had sufficient experience as a member of the central church of the Diocese of Surigao. The research informants' names were substituted with code names to hide their identities. The interview guide contains the grand tour question and specific interview questions that pertain to the lived experiences of the informants in their ministry. Data gathered from the informants were analyzed following Giorgi's (2003) descriptive phenomenology-reading the descriptions to get a sense of the complete statement from the informants, determining parts and establishing meaning units, transforming units into psychological expression, determination of structure.

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Lived Experiences of the Informants

The data analysis from the informants involved the four key steps of Giorgi's (2003) Phenomenological Research Methodology. The researcher read all the transcriptions of the informants several times to get immersed into the informants' feelings. The significant meaning units taken from the interview transcripts identified the research phenomenon. The psychological meaning units were used to form concepts, which were then put into categories and eventually turned into themes. Results were written into detailed and in-depth accounts of the informants' lived experiences.

From the interview transcripts, 102 significant meaning units were extracted, which evolved into the development of 102 psychological meaning units reflecting the lived experiences of the informants. From these psychological meaning units, 26 concepts were drawn.

Table 4.

Themes Based on the Categories Constructed from the Informants' Lived Experiences

REFERENCE NUMBERS	CATEGORIES	THEMES
C1, C6	Lay Ministers were equipped with faith despite the threat of the pandemic.	Faithful in matters of fulfilling their duties
A7, A12, A13, A15, A16, A33, A37, C4, C7, D5	Lay Ministers were strongly devoted to their roles as extraordinary church ministers.	As extraordinary Church ministers, Lay Ministers were faithful in fulfilling their duties.
A8, A9, A22, A35, C4, C7, D5	Lay Ministers showed dependency on God in their missionary life.	
A17, A18, A32, E1, D13	Lay Ministers were dedicated to their responsibilities as extraordinary ministers of the church.	
A3, A28, A37, C5, D11	Lay Ministers recognized hope in their missionary works through different means.	Hopeful no matter the circumstances
A1, A34, B4, B9, B17, B18, E13	Lay Ministers knew the necessity of Christian virtues in their missionary life.	As extraordinary Church ministers, Lay Ministers were hopeful no matter the circumstances in their missionary life.
A2, A6	Lay Ministers were determined to pursue their mission amidst the pandemic.	
A36, B1	Lay Ministers were challenged to continue their mission even in the face of the pandemic.	
A14, A19, A30	Lay Ministers acknowledged love in their missionary endeavors.	Passion/love that moved them to serve
A22, B3, C1, C10, D10, E4, E5, E15, E16	Lay Ministers were sensitive to the welfare of the people affected by the pandemic.	As extraordinary ministers of the Church, Lay Ministers had a deep passion/love that moved them to serve.
A10, A11, A21, A26, A27, C11	Lay Ministers saw the pandemic as an opportunity to show love to others.	
A20, A24, A25, A29, A35	Lay Ministers integrated Christian virtues into their mission.	
A23, C3, C8, C9, C13, E2, E3	Lay Ministers embodied the strong will to serve.	Lights and Darkness
B10, B11, D9, E6, E7	Lay Ministers were resourceful in carrying out their mission amidst the pandemic.	
A4, A5, A30, A31, B2, B3	Lay Ministers knew the causes that hindered them from doing their missionary work.	
C12, D3, D4, D6, D7, D8, E14	Lay Ministers were disheartened due to restrictions on Church activities.	As extraordinary ministers of the Church, Lay Ministers accepted the reality of possible lights and darkness in their missionary life.

Faithful in matters of fulfilling their duties. As extraordinary Church ministers, Lay Ministers were faithful in fulfilling their duties, and being faithful affected lay ministers positively. This is because "faithfulness requires us to submit our ways to God, and He is in control of our lives"

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(Socia, 2007). In other words, faithfulness is the quality of being loyal and reliable. This begets truthfulness to one's role and responsibilities, particularly the lay ministers. As previously concluded, lay ministers were committed and willing to do their responsibilities at hand. The lay ministers of the church need to go and to reach their goal, that is, to serve faithfully without having any reserved feelings or doubts. Lay ministers are also considered leaders of the church. For ministers to be effective in their mission, they need to reach out and connect with people (Haring, 2005). All strong leaders are aware of this reality and respond to it almost automatically. Here are some of the excerpts from the informants' translated transcripts to support these claims.

"As a lay minister, I am an instrument of God, a channel, so that His grace will flow towards those who need His grace" (A33).

"That is why, as missionaries, we should always make ourselves available to God as instruments for His love to His people" (A14).

Moreover, lay ministers who engaged in missionary work equipped with faith would be more likely to become committed to one's responsibilities and others. As St. Augustine said, faith and works should go hand-in-hand (Outler, 1955). This implies that one must be faithful to sustain the passion of engaging in mission. The effect of this is becoming more progressive and resourceful all the more.

Hopeful no matter the circumstances. Lay Ministers were hopeful no matter the circumstances in their missionary life. Lay ministers consistently highlighted the Christian value of hope. ~ extraordinary ministers of the church, lay ministers developed the virtue of being hopeful, the 56 total trust in God's providence and guidance as part of their missionary life. Hence, it brought them to the disposition of making sound judgment in handling stressful and strenuous circumstances. As St. Thomas Aquinas stated- that hope can bring us joy and peace amid turmoil and give us courage, strength, and boldness instead of fear. (Kaczor, 2020).

"That is why every time I am tempted to stay at home, I usually get disappointed at myself, then reflect in the life of St. Augustine and St. Monica, that nothing is impossible" (A6).

"The mission and vision of CWL is worship, faith, hope and love in God are the virtues that encourage us to go on" (B4).

In mission areas, demands come from all directions (Pold, 2002). This presents massive challenges that could drain and weaken any missionary. This is because having multiple tasks under difficult situations could somehow compete with priorities and their work. But being equipped with the virtue of hope made the lay minister more optimistic when faced with tough trials. Following are excerpts from the informants' translated transcripts to support these claims.

"In our Church organization, the CWL, being amid the pandemic is a big challenge" (B1).

"One of the challenges that the pandemic gave me is the positive result on spiritual growth as a CWL president and as a lay minister of the Church" (B18).

"My hope in my life as a lay minister is to remain active even if the pandemic ends" (E8).

Passion/Love that moved them to serve. Lay Ministers had deep passion/love that moved them to serve. They had consistently stated their eagerness to serve God's people, especially when the Corona Virus pandemic came out and took innocent lives. According to St. Thomas Aquinas, the best way to show your love to God is to take on a role at the church and set yourself on a mission

to evangelize and help people (Outler, 1955). Some of the excerpts from the informants' translated transcripts to support these claims are as follows:

"Regarding the pandemic, it is an opportunity for all of us to show our love by doing our mission" (A10).

"Our mission is to show our love and by helping our brothers and sisters who are affected by the pandemic" (A11).

Being an extraordinary minister is indeed an act of displaying love in the face of adversity. Lay ministers became more passionate about what they did when they received support and care from their fellow lay ministers in their respective Church organizations. Care is also a sign of love towards fellow brothers and sisters. This demonstrates unconditional love in a gentle, kind, and friendly manner. Inevitably, this inspires, encourages, and gives hope to those served.

"I witnessed people participating fully with us in every Church activity despite the pandemic" (E11).

"For they, too, wanted to see the hope in their hardships in their current life" (E12).

Apart from being encouraged to continue their missionary works due to the degree of love received from their fellow lay ministers, showing care could also give tranquillity and peace among people where it can calm the troubling thoughts of Catholics who are inside their houses trying to secure themselves along with their family due to the danger of the pandemic (Garcia, 2002). The lay ministers also stated that just visiting people in their houses, communicating with them online, or giving them a simple "how are you" could enlighten and ease them.

"Since my members and I cannot initiate any activities because of the banning of face-to-face Church activities, all I could do was update or visit the members' home" (8).

"Truth is, I love to go out and see people even if it is lockdown to check their situations, especially to my members" (10).

Accepts the reality of possible lights and darkness. Lay Ministers accepted the reality of possible lights and darkness in their missionary life. Lay ministers found missionary life rewarding in their perspective to reach, touch other people's lives, and fulfill their duties as ministers of the Catholic Church. They also encountered problems and setbacks along the way. Being a missionary comes with problems and sacrifices, and these sacrifices affect the outcome of the goals and duties (Garcia, 2020). When the president or leader of a Church organization decided with their members to have an activity that could revitalize people's zeal in the church, the plan was not carried out due to unprecedented circumstances. Such a situation affected the goal's outcome and disheartened those who instituted the church-related activities.

"Well, I believe it is true to all that we are all easily tempted just to stay put in our home, especially due to the danger that the pandemic brings" (A5).

"But having that thought can only give us excuses that will make us hesitant toward helping others" (A31).

In the context of the pandemic, where public face-to-face activities, including Church activities, were banned, people's spirits, high-spirited characters, and Catholic spirituality generally deteriorated. Consequently, lay ministers of the church sacrificed much for good, including their health, to dedicate themselves to what was best for God's people. A few excerpts from the informants' translated transcripts to support these claims are as follows:

“With the problems of people outside, we can always find a way to help even in the simplest way” (C12).

They are “faithful in matters of fulfilling their allotted duties,” “hopeful no matter the circumstances,” “passion/love that interests them to serve,” and “accept the reality of possible lights and darkness.” The 1st, 2nd, and 3rd themes were the results of how faith, hope, and love work when they are integrated into the ministry of the lay ministers as they carry out their duties and responsibilities. The 4th theme, however, resulted from the lay minister's reluctance due to fear of the Covid-19 pandemic. However, they were fully aware that fear kept holding them back, but that awareness made them grip strongly on those Christian virtues.

De Clety (1967) assured us that weaknesses are like loud sirens that alert people psychologically of what they need to overcome. The lay ministers did exactly that and looked at fear from another angle, where it could further boost their morale in holding their faith, hope, and love for God, for the church, and in doing their responsibilities. Thus, the Christian virtues of faith, hope, and love kept them strong and dedicated in their missionary works amidst difficult challenges. Judging from the themes, they could be configured to the Christian virtues of faith, hope, and love.

The diagram's arrows demonstrate how the emergent themes are connected in that they are all influenced by and linked to one another. The harmony of these themes evolved into that lay ministers were equipped with faith, hope, and love, which were integrated into their missionary work in the church. Hence, it led to the formulation of the global theme, which concluded the relevance of the Christian virtues of faith, hope, and love being the highest virtues Christians should integrate with their lives as they participate in the church's mission. The global theme is “faith, hope, and love are strong values for lay ministers.” The global theme shows how significant the Christian virtues are and that St. Augustine, St. Thomas and the teachings of the church claim to be important as well. In addition, the global theme did not only show solid attachment of the lay ministers to the mentioned Christian virtues as strong values, but it also exposed their maturity in handling the responsibilities when faced with challenges.

Erich Fromm (1934) wrote about Human Dilemma, saying— mature persons are capable of self-realization; they develop a strong sense of awareness, a sense of knowledge between right and wrong, and the ability to reason, survive and attempt to solve any problem. They develop a sense of responsibility and dedication to their task. And in a way, by clinging further to the Christian virtues that helped them a lot for the continuity of their mission, lay ministers were also looking for opportunities to make themselves better because they wanted to be the best they could be.

Based on the qualitative data analysis, 26 concepts were formulated from the meaning units, and the concepts were categorized into 16. And from those categories, four themes were extracted, namely:

1. Faithful in matters of fulfilling their duties.
2. Hopeful no matter the circumstances.
3. Passion/love that moved them to serve.
4. Accepts the reality of possible lights and darkness.

Drawing from the concepts, the researcher determined three areas of strengths and practices where they integrated faith, hope, and love in their mission as extraordinary ministers of the

church. Likewise, being part of the Church organizations during the pandemic, lay ministers realized the need to improve themselves in terms of the lapses and doubts they committed, representations of the “shadows” in the performance of their responsibilities. They became even more effective and dedicated in their mission, embodying the Christian virtues of faith, hope, and love.

Conclusion

The research's findings gave lay ministers new perspectives on how their involvement in missions relates to their lives of faith, hope, and love. With these findings, the conclusions were drawn:

First, it is concluded that the lay ministers who were active in the church during the pandemic had positive and negative experiences while doing their responsibilities. They had negative experiences in the sense that they encountered lapses and doubts due to fear of the Corona Virus pandemic. Lay ministers also experienced discouragement from banning face-to-face Church activities, given the health protocols to avoid being infected by the Corona Virus. Such a phenomenon, at some points, affected the lay minister's involvement in the church's mission.

Secondly, lay ministers became mature in coping with the lapses they experienced in ministry. They also gained positive outlooks in serving, managing, and contingency planning while influencing their fellow lay ministers in the church to do the same.

Thirdly, lay ministers in their mission field were embodied with faith, hope, and love for God, while they had nothing and were troubled by unprecedented circumstances, such as the Covid-19 pandemic. Those experiences inspired them to change, develop and indulge in experiences that would help them become more productive and mature people, all for God and the church. St. Augustine believed Christian missionaries should display the fruit of the Spirit; faith, hope, and love, which can aid them and tamper the occurrence of evil (Outler, 1995). While no Christian missionary possesses a perfect quality, by embodying faith, hope, and love, they would continually grow, no matter the difficult endeavors they have in life as lay ministers. However, because they were exposed to and engaged in the mission, they developed positive Christian attributes that would pave the way for their future involvement in the church's mission. In their respective Church organizations, they became more determined to do their duties and responsibilities amidst the Corona Virus pandemic.

Implications

Based on the findings and conclusions, this study illuminated new insights into the phenomenon of mission in the light of faith, hope, and love in the lives of the selected lay ministers of San Nicolas de Tolentino Cathedral of the Diocese of Surigao. These are the implications emancipated from the concepts and results gathered.

1. This study would encourage people and other lay ministers to apply or embody faith, hope, and love more sincerely in their lives and their respective Church organizations.
2. This study would provide information to the priests in charge who commissioned the lay ministers in their respective mission.

3. The people who would like to engage in mission just as the current lay ministers are doing would be aware that the problems they encounter would contribute to deepening their relationships with God and the Church.
4. This study would help everyone understand the experiences of the informants. In addition, it would also give readers a collective experience that would benefit them in the future.
5. This study would provide suggestions to future lay ministers, from the experiences of the current lay ministers, on how to handle unprecedented circumstances, such the Covid-19, banning of face-to-face Church activities, and the safety of their fellow members. The latter is tasked with providing solutions for its mission's continuity.
6. Lay ministers must continually collaborate and cooperate to attain the common goal of carrying out their mission with faith, hope, and love, as they perform the task delegated to them by their respective Church organizations.

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