

Spiritual Formation: Challenges and Coping Mechanisms of Senior High Seminararians in the New Normal Education

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Abstract

The education sector is one of the highly affected by the COVID- 19 pandemic. In the Philippines, various measures have been initiated to implement social isolation strategies, and online teaching is followed with rapid curriculum transformation. This study was conducted at a Seminary School in the Philippines to assess the spiritual formation activities, challenges and coping mechanisms based on the lived experiences of Senior High Seminararians. The study is a qualitative design using descriptive phenomenology as methodology. Data were gathered using a researcher-made interview schedule and questionnaire for the focus group discussion (FGD). Ten senior High School seminararians were chosen through purposive sampling. The result shows that most seminararians attended the Mass and praying novena and holy rosary as part of their spiritual formation activities. However, they spent their time playing online mobile games and are addicted to social media, leading them to lack focus and motivation. Seminararians resort to prayer, self-disciplining through avoidance or limitation in using gadgets and social media, and effective and proper to cope with these challenges. It is recommended that the seminary conduct capacity building on how to combat challenges seminararians face and provide a venue for open discussion and feedback so they may have the chance to voice their sentiments and concerns.

Keywords: *Challenges, Coping Mechanisms, New normal education, phenomenology*

Article History:

Received: February 25, 2023

Accepted: April 1, 2023

Revised: March 26, 2023

Published online: April 8, 2023

Suggested Citation:

Ocbena, K.V., Eballa, J., Ocbena, L.V. & Victoriano, M.G. (2023). Spiritual Formation: Challenges and Coping Mechanisms of Senior High Seminararians in the New Normal Education. *International Review of Social Sciences Research*, 3 (1), 20-37. <https://doi.org/10.53378/352983>

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** This paper is a finalist in the International Research Competition 2022 Category 1 – High School.*



1. Introduction

Spiritual formation is the core of the seminary formation program because it gives meaning and it animates the acting of seminarians (Keating, 2007). It stresses the importance of communal and personal prayers, sacramental and para-liturgical celebrations and devotions, and other activities that could deepen the personal commitment of seminarians to the person and mission of Jesus Christ (Howker, 2005). Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, spiritual formation activities are hampered. The shift from face-to-face modalities to remote modalities in institutions has impacted these activities. Priest formators have had to switch from traditional in-seminary settings to various forms of distance formation and develop methods to stay in touch with seminarians. For seminarians, the lack of structured in-seminary formation settings may have required more self-regulation and self-motivation towards spiritual growth. Priest formators initiated varied spiritual activities via Facebook live and other online platforms just to reach out to the seminarians and the public. However, there is always an unavoidable circumstance that arises for different reasons in which sometimes only a few seminarians are joining and participating in this kind of online spiritual activity.

While there were numerous studies worldwide on the challenges of the new normal education in public (Bawa'aneh, 2021; Oliveira et al., 2020; Spencer et al., 2023; Maree, 2022; San Luis & Villafranca, 2022) and private (Morona, 2020; Pattnaik et al., 2023; Ullah et al., 2022; Cuéllar et al., 2021; Aregbeshola & Folayan, 2022; Ancheta & Ancheta, 2020) educational institutions, and different levels of education (Reginaldo & Ching, 2021; Banayo & Barleta, 2021), there were only few studies on the seminary schools (van Dijk-Groeneboer, 2020; Roberts, 2019; Boka, 2021; Lowe, 2010; Gin et al., 2019; Mawerenga & Knoetze, 2022; Mualla Selçuk et al., 2021; Friedman et al., 2020; Schiefelbein-Guerrero, 2022; Mualla Selçuk et al., 2021). Majority of the studies conducted during the pandemic pertain to the quality of teaching and learning (Petrla et al., 2022; Detyrna et al., 2023; Spiker et al., 2023; Aliazas et al., 2021; Billoso et al., 2023; Ancheta & Ancheta, 2022; Sarmiento & Callo, 2022), student engagement and performance (Tulaskar & Turunen, 2022; Quigley et al., 2022; Johnson et al., 2021; Kurt et al., 2022; Dembereldorj, 2021; Secreto & Tabo, 2023) and the challenges faced in online learning (Öçal et al., 2021; Moraleja & Pereja, 2022; Fatani, 2020; Selco & Habbak, 2021). Of the few studies conducted related to seminary

education worldwide, they identified common challenges on online learning as any other academic institutions experienced such as quality of online education experience, student participation, qualifications of the instructor, assessment and evaluation, and infrastructure (Mualla Selçuk et al., 2021). While there were studies on the spiritual formation initiated by Catholic Schools, Churches and other religious sectors during the pandemic (Friedman et al., 2020; Schiefelbein-Guerrero, 2022; Kim & Suh, 2021; Poci, 2022), none of these are focused on seminary schools. Moreover, there were no studies conducted on both the online learning experience and religious formation of seminary schools during the pandemic in the Philippines.

According to van Dijk-Groeneboer (2020), the landscape of religious education has completely changed because of the pandemic. The spiritual formation in online theological education calls for sustained attention on multi-faceted nature of spiritual formation and engagement with theological traditions (van der Knijff, 2021). This present phenomenon needs to be given attention as spiritual formation plays a vital role in the life of seminarians. Understanding the plight and challenges of these seminarians can be a source of actions and plans that will help them cope with their endeavors. Studies on the experiences of the spiritual formation of seminarians in the new normal need to be explored, hence, this study determined and understood the spiritual formation activities, challenges encountered, and coping mechanisms of Senior High Seminarians in the New Normal Education in one Seminary School in the Philippines.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Spiritual Formation and the Pandemic

Whether within or outside the institutionalized religion framework, spiritual development refers to a process of increased depth of awareness, connection to the transcendent, and search for ultimate meaning as well as engagement in spiritual practices (Russo-Netzer, 2017). Spirituality is regarded as a significant and universal aspect of human experience (de Jager Meezenbroek, 2012). Still, relatively little attention has been paid to established lifespan theories and models for studying spiritual development as integral to human normative development. Throughout history and across cultures and traditions, spirituality has played an essential role in individuals' lives and the overall human

experience. Spiritual growth differs from other developmental processes, such as the physical, cognitive, or emotional domains. Spiritual development often involves a purposeful and active act of choice.

Coping has been characterized by Lazarus and Folkman (1986) as a procedure of continually changing one's intellectual and demeanor endeavors to oversee specific outer or inner challenges that are assessed as burdening or surpassing the individual's assets. Coping methodologies are viewed as those endeavors, both conduct, and mental, that a person utilizes to suppress, diminish, limit, and endure distressing occasions. Correspondingly, Lazarus and Folkman (1986) also defined eight comprehensive coping strategies that people may use in traumatic circumstances. These eight coping approaches are additionally categorized into emotion-focused and problem-focused coping techniques. Whereas emotion-focused coping techniques concentrate on positive self-criticism, unrealistic reasoning, minding your own business, separation, and a decrease in anxiety, problem-focused coping strategies involve seeking social help. On the contrary, endeavors focused on exchanging emotional reactions to stressful situations are termed emotion-focused coping approaches (Robotham, 2008). These endeavors aim to limit the stressor's negative impacts; in this way, the person feels much improved, yet the issue is not resolved. Accordingly, emotion-focused coping techniques are planned for lessening the effect of the alleged stressor if the stressor cannot be changed or maintained at a strategic distance or if a person sees the cause of stress as very intimidating, unalterable, and overwhelming (Holland, 2001).

Coping has been viewed as a stabilization viewpoint that could help a person in psychosocial adjustment throughout stressful occasions. Coping strategies utilized more than once by learners to minimize levels of stress include productive time management, social help, constructive reassessment, and commitment to comfortable interests. Tolerating responsibility and self-blame are also coping strategies helpful in the first year of tertiary education in medical school. The pattern shifted to challenging, intellectual, and strategic problem-solving in the later years (Fereshteh Ahmadi et al., 2018). Similarly, to overcome, reduce or permit stress and disagreement, it is imperative that the individual consciously puts in enormous efforts to solve personal and relational challenges (Carver & Connor-Smith, 2010). The efficacy of the coping endeavor is contingent on the type of stress, the person involved, and the situations at hand. Reactions to coping are partially managed by one's

disposition and the social setting, especially the inherent features of the stressful atmosphere. Thus, learners with an engagement coping approach can change the circumstances, bringing about an increasingly versatile result, thereby reporting fewer symptoms of depression.

2.2. Theoretical framework

This study is anchored on the following theoretical perspective.

Constructivist Worldview. The theoretical perspective of this study focused on the constructivist worldview that recognizes reality as a product of human intelligence interacting with experience in the real world (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). In the social constructivist worldview, individuals seek an understanding of the world in which they live and work. They develop subjective meanings of their experiences – meanings directed toward particular objects or things. Human beings construct meanings as they engage with the world they are interpreting. Researchers seek to understand the context or setting of the participants through visiting this context and gathering information personally (Creswell, 2014). Using this worldview, it is expected that the information gathered from the participants will pave the way to a better understanding of the challenges and the coping mechanism of the students under study.

Interpretivist perspective. The research study utilized the interpretivist phenomenological approach in its methodology (Hadziliias, 2011). In this approach, it is essential for the researcher as a social actor to appreciate the differences between people (Hadillias, 2011). Interpretivism is a theoretical perspective that human beings construct reality and knowledge socially. The primary endeavor of the interpretivist is to understand the subjective world of human experience. It tries to understand the viewpoint of the subject being observed rather than the observer's viewpoint. Emphasis is placed on understanding the individual and their interpretation of the world around them (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The interpretivist approach is supported by some other theories that can best explain and understand the purpose of the study. In this study, students have their own experiences that can be understood based on the meanings ascribed from the stories they tell.

Transformative Learning Theory. Mezirow's (2000) transformative learning theory provides an understanding of the nature of adult learning. It serves as the foundation upon which to build a whole-person approach to adult learning that includes spirituality. Defining

spirituality as the quest for life-meaning and self-awareness for a higher purpose demonstrated through efforts to achieve the common good for all, offers a working definition by which to establish learning goals. Creating learning strategies that touch the human spirit allows educators more significant opportunities for transformative learning.

Coping Theory. The coping theory of Lazarus and Folkman (1986) identifies the process of coping as a critical mediator of stressful person-environment relations and their immediate and long-range outcomes. Coping is the cognitive and behavioral efforts to master, reduce, or tolerate behavioral and psychological demands that people employ to master, let, reduce, or minimize stressful events. Their method was obvious; they had distinguished between the two general coping strategies: problem-solving strategies are efforts to do something active to alleviate stressful circumstances, whereas emotion-focused coping strategies involve efforts to regulate the emotional consequences of stressful or potentially stressful events. Coping has two significant functions: dealing with the problem causing distress (problem-focused coping) and regulating emotion (emotion-focused coping).

Figure 1

Schematic Diagram of the study

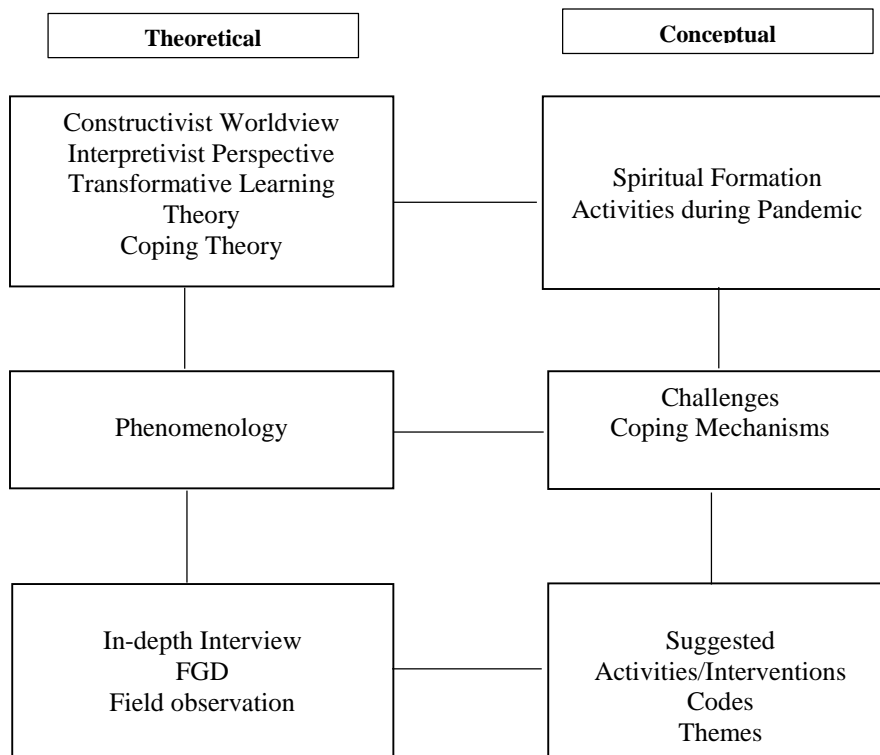


Figure 1 shows the schematic diagram of the study. This includes the theoretical framework that dwells on time-tested theories that embody the findings of numerous investigations on how phenomena occur and the conceptual framework in which the research problem is explored.

3. Methodology

The study is a qualitative design using descriptive phenomenology to answer the research questions on challenges and coping mechanisms of Senior High Seminararians in the new normal education. Its main feature is to give meaningful and more profound explanations of social activities. Creswell (2014) stated that qualitative research was intended to explore more importantly on, social phenomena by immersing into the situations. This study understands and explores the lived experiences of the participants.

The participants of the study were identified using a purposive sampling method based on the following criteria: (a) currently enrolled in the Seminary during academic year 2021-2022; (b) Senior High level; c) willing to participate in the study as confirmed by their signatures in the Informed Consent Forms (ICFs). The study used the semi-structured interview protocol as a tool in gathering data. The participants were informed of the date, time and the purpose of the study through ICF, which was signed by the participants signifying their willingness to participate. Each participant had an assigned pseudonym to hide their identity and for confidentiality purposes.

The content data analysis was used in analyzing transcript data from interviews. Creswell (2014) says that analysis and interpretation must be closely linked to the research design chosen. Content analysis is the intellectual process of categorizing qualitative textual data into clusters of similar entities, or conceptual categories (Given, 2008). It makes sense of the unstructured content of messages like text, images, symbols or audio data trying to determine textual meaning (Mayring, 2000). The data gathered from the participants through interviews and focus group discussion was arranged and transcribed before the coding process. The coding process was then followed to categorize the data and to make themes for easy analysis. This was followed by data display. Data display is an organized, compressed assembly of information that allows drawing of conclusion and action. Comparing for some similarities and differences for the researcher to draw a conclusion. Data interpretation was

the last step in the process of analysis where the results was interpreted to generate the possible actions out from the experiences of the participants. Computer data analysis was utilized also with the use of NVivo12.

Ethics and the safety of informants have a very special emphasis in any research work. Accordingly, maximum care was used to ensure anonymity and safety of participants. Participants in this study was informed through an informed consent of the anonymity of their identity, about the goals of the study and that they could skip questions or stop at any time.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1. Spiritual formation activities involvement of senior high seminarians in the new normal education

Praying and attending to daily Masses online. All Filipinos have had to tweak their daily routines due to the COVID-19 pandemic causing everything from schools to offices to churches to be affected by lockdowns all over the country. And as a country with a majority of Roman Catholics, the Philippines' religious practices have been affected, too, as people can no longer attend church in person quickly. Fortunately, the Catholic Church has allowed followers to attend Mass online while maintaining social distancing. The Seminary and several churches and parishes in the Philippines have been live streaming the Holy Mass through social media platforms such as Facebook and YouTube. Most seminarians attended the Mass and prayed novena and holy rosary as part of their spiritual formation activities. As one participant states, "*Attending the mass and the liturgy of the hours and the rosary.*" This shows that the seminarians are still offering and attending Eucharistic celebrations despite the pandemic. Another participant mentioned, "*I always attend the mass and pray the rosary.*" This means that aside from developing the spiritual growth of seminarians, it strengthened the family ties through this kind of activity in the new normal. As another participant shared that "*Sometimes I attend the online mass, but, in our house, we always have the daily rosary, and I attend the Sunday mass to serve.*" Another participant also stated, "*Daily masses and rosary and the novena with my family and I also attend and serve the mass during Sunday in our parish.*" This means parents/guardians also play an essential role in put seminarians on track towards their spiritual formation outside the seminary.

Limited or no face-to-face activities. Section II of the Seminary handbook states that spiritual formation activities and programs include prayers, sacraments, para-liturgical celebrations, spiritual reading, recollections and retreats, and spiritual direction. These activities were hampered because of the pandemic, which resulted to limited or no face-to-face activities for the seminarians. As one participant uttered, *"Due to the call of the times, it has dwindled a bit, it lessens my time to pray and maintain my spiritual life, being unable to be confined in the walls of the seminary contributes to the loss of continuity in prayer. Such as (morning prayer and the rosary)."* This has been a season of struggle and challenges. One participant shared, *"In my personal experience, it is tough to observe spiritual formation, but I make sure to attend Sunday masses."* Yet, this is also the time of resilience and faithfulness among seminarians. A participant stated, *"I participate even though there are challenges at home."* They responded with diligence, creativity, and grace to persevere amid incredibly challenging circumstances and take the necessary measures to keep one another safe with grace, adaptability, love of neighbor, and faith in God. Another participant shared, *"It's very hard in today's situation, but my will to pray never stops and makes me deeper in terms of praying, especially because of the pandemic."* This shows that even though seminarians are inside their homes, they instill in their minds that spiritual formation will never end as long as they are a seminarian and human beings with faith and trust in God. This conforms with Solomon Salve's (2020) statement, *"Despite the lingering uncertainty, COVID-19 silently offers an opportunity to reflect on the spiritual impact it has on the world and in communities. In this broad sense, the spiritual impact is currently not unequivocally positive; however, is it convincing to note that humanity, as a whole, can take a spiritual leap forward."*

4.2. The challenges encountered in their spiritual formation activities.

Spiritual formation activities shifted online, and seminarians' way of life and spiritual development changed so radically in response to the global public health crisis. The study has come up with the theme of Social media and mobile games addiction since most participants shared that this is the most challenging activity, they encounter in their spiritual formation activity in the new normal.

Social media and mobile games addiction. The result shows that seminarians spend their time playing online mobile games and are tempted to use their gadgets or mobile

phones since they have no other activities to do inside their houses after attending their classes online. Since they play mobile games, sometimes they forget to attend or hear the Mass online. As one participant stated that “*Social media and the gadgets because sometimes, I am more focused on my gadgets than praying.*” Another was that they were challenged by the fact that social media platforms are now very in demand among students and young people as it serves as an agent of communication and entertainment. This is also one way they can divert their boredom and be exhausted from academics and personal life demands. Another participant stated, “*Temptation of online games and an internet connection, but sometimes I make sure to pray.*” Whenever they attend mass or prayer activities, they sometimes divert their focus to checking their social media and talking with the people around them. As one participant reiterated that “*I am tempted to open cellphones or people who are talking to me.*” This shows that gadgets and social media also cause seminarians to be less focused and lack the motivation to participate in the formation activity.

Less focus and less motivation. This shows the seminarians' feelings towards the challenges they encountered. Results revealed that seminarians were less focused and unmotivated because most of the spiritual formation activities they attend are done online. With this, they found it less interactive. As one participant states that “*I sometimes lose some focus.*” They also feel bored and exhausted because they are confined to the corners of their houses with less interaction with their peers, and they have no other activities to do except for attending online classes. “*Spiritual dryness because we can't change the fact that the feeling to attend the mass, the rosary, the benediction, and other forms of praying celebrated in person is different from experiencing it in person.*” Further, another participant shared that “*There are distractions that are sometimes enjoyed but then I realize that I became ignorant in praying it very sad as well because instead your focus is on keep on praying but then later your attention is on a certain thing that you shouldn't pay attention at that moment.*” This means that seminarians faced many challenges and problems that hindered or affected their participation in the formation activities. These challenges have caused them to fail to attend these formation activities or get less focused or unmotivated to participate.

4.3. Coping mechanisms of the students on the challenges encountered

Prayer. The seminarians revealed that to cope with the challenges they encountered in participating in spiritual formation activities, they resort to prayer and ask for guidance

from God. As one participant stated that *"I always pray and always have a mindset that you are a seminarian, a person who is closer to God."* For them, prayer is a powerful tool to combat boredom, get motivated, and get involved in different spiritual formation activities, whether online or face to face. Another participant shared, *"Never forget that you are loved like the priest once told me. If you know you're, being you can do everything especially when you put your faith and trust in God"*.

Avoidance of gadgets/Minimizes using gadgets. Another coping mechanism, according to seminarians, is their personal desire to avoid using gadgets such as mobile phones. As one participant stated that *"Trying my best to stay awake and trying to avoid my gadgets and to be active as well."* Further, another participant shared, *"Our gadgets are being confiscated by our mom while attending the mass and the holy rosary, which makes us more focused on praying."* This means using mobile devices takes much of their time rather than contemplating, hearing the Mass, and attending online spiritual activities.

Proper time management. The respondents also revealed that proper and effective time management could help them cope with these challenges. A participant said, *"I will focus on things and manage my time well."* They revealed that if one can manage time properly and effectively, giving proper time for every activity, they can also manage to participate actively in spiritual formation activities. *"Time management because sometimes I lose track of time."* They also revealed that giving limitations or avoiding social media can also help them participate actively and religiously in spiritual formation activities. Another participant stated, *"I put some time and made alarms to constantly pray, reminding me that I am still a seminarian during the pandemic."* With the advent of technology and the popularity of social media, most seminarians devote too much time to using their social media. To address the challenges, seminarian extends the effort to cope and lessen these problems or challenges that affect their participation in spiritual formation activities.

5. Conclusion

The findings of the study showed that there were limited spiritual formation activities offered and participated by seminarians. Given the distance learning and health crisis, seminarians could still join in some formation activities. Some of these were the usual activities at home, like praying the holy rosary and novena and attending Mass. With the new

technology and advent of social media, seminarians could participate in holy Mass online. Given the scenario that seminarians, especially minors, are not allowed to go out and attend mass gatherings in church, seminary, or public places, they were still confronted with other challenges and factors that hampered their participation in spiritual formation activities. Aside from their academics, various factors contributed to their participation, which greatly affected their focus and motivation to participate and involvement in the said formation activities. Although seminarians were confronted with the challenges, they also find ways to cope with them and still participated in these activities. Seminarians exerted effort to combat those challenges that have affected their willingness and motivation to participate and be involved in the activities

6. Acknowledgment

This paper is an academic requirement, hence, the main author is indebted to numerous people for their support: Rev. Fr. Berman D. Ibanez Sth-L M.A., Rev. Fr. John Dave J. Eballa, Dr. Maria Aurora Victoriano, Engr. Melvin Ocbeña, Dr. Lodecy Ocbeña, Shaney Kate Ocbeña, and Keiser Vin Ocbeña.

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