

**THE INTEGRATED ACCOMPANIMENT MODEL (IAM): AN  
EMERGENT FRAMEWORK FOR PROFESSIONAL  
DEVELOPMENT IN FILIPINO PRIESTLY PASTORAL CARE**

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DOI: 10.46609/IJSSER.2026.v11i05.006 URL: <https://doi.org/10.46609/IJSSER.2026.v11i05.006>

Received: 18 April 2026 / Accepted: 16 May 2026 / Published: 24 May 2026

**ABSTRACT**

*This study explored the lived experiences of Filipino diocesan priests in providing pastoral care, with the aim of developing an emergent framework for their professional development. Grounded in a qualitative descriptive phenomenological design, the research captured the essence of pastoral ministry as experienced by priests actively serving in a Roman Catholic diocese in Bulacan, Philippines. Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews with purposively selected participants who met specific inclusion criteria. Using Giorgi's phenomenological method, the study identified core structures related to the nature of pastoral care, essential competencies, and contextual challenges encountered in ministry.*

*Findings of this study revealed that pastoral care among Filipino priests is deeply relational, integrative, and contextually embedded, characterized by presence, listening, accompaniment, and spiritual guidance. Key competencies included empathic listening, discernment, cultural sensitivity, and holistic care that bridges psychological and spiritual dimensions. However, priests also face significant challenges such as role overload, limited formal training in counseling, emotional strain, and structural constraints within parish settings. From these lived experiences, the study proposes the Integrated Accompaniment Model (IAM), an emergent framework that highlights the dynamic interplay of personal formation, pastoral competencies, and contextual realities. The findings offer important implications for seminary formation, ongoing clergy development, and the integration of psycho-spiritual approaches in pastoral care, contributing to both ecclesiastical practice and the broader field of counseling and pastoral psychology.*

**Keywords:** Lived Experiences, Integrated Accompaniment Model (IAM), Pastoral Care, Phenomenology, Psychospiritual Integration

## **1. Introduction**

The role of the clergy has long been synonymous with the provision of “pastoral care” – a unique mode of being-with others that spans the emotional, social, and spiritual dimensions of the human condition (Zimoha, 2023). While historically understood through theological mandates contemporary discourse has increasingly framed this work through the lens of secular psychological and social work (Lootens, 2022). In doing so, pastoral care is often reduced to a set of functional competencies or a secondary form of mental health intervention. However, for the priest, pastoral care is not merely a professional task or a clinical application; it is a profound engagement with the ‘lifeworld’ of the parishioner during moments of grief, crisis, and transmutation (Jibiliza, 2021).

Despite the ubiquity of this role, the essential psychological structure of providing pastoral care remains largely unexamined. Current literature frequently evaluates the ‘adequacy’ of a priest’s skills or the ‘effectiveness’ of their interventions (Johnson & Lee, 2020), yet these external metrics often bypass the subjective experience of the priest themselves. We know how many hours they spend in counseling and the types of crises they encounter (Smith et al., 2019). But we do not yet understand the nature of the experience of being the one who carries this spiritual and psychological weight in a modern, secularizing society. To bridge this gap, this study moves away from evaluative or explanatory frameworks and adopts Amedeo Giorgi’s descriptive phenomenological method. The aim is not to measure the priest’s competencies against secular standards, but to describe the phenomenon as it manifests in their consciousness. By seeking the ‘essences’ of these pastoral encounters, this research intends to uncover the fundamental meaning of what it is to provide care at the intersection of the sacred and psychological.

Understanding this experience from the ‘inside out’ is critical. Before addressing gaps in training or development institutional policies first it has to arrive at a clear, faithful description of the phenomenon itself. This paper, therefore, asks: What is the lived experience of providing pastoral care for priests in contemporary ministry?

This study aims to explore and articulate the lived experiences of Filipino diocesan priests in providing pastoral care. By capturing the essential structure and themes that emerge from in-depth interviews and personal narratives, this study seeks to answer the following practice-based questions to inform professional development:

1. What is the lived experience of Filipino priests in providing pastoral care?
2. What practical competencies are essential and currently employed by Filipino priests in their pastoral care ministry?

3. What situational factors and difficulties do Filipino priests encounter, and how do they navigate these challenges in their pastoral care ministry?
4. What is the essential psychological structure of the lived experience of providing pastoral care among Filipino priests in contemporary ministry, and how does this revealed structure?

## **2. Methodology**

*Research Design.* The researcher used qualitative research to seek a holistic understanding of meaning. More specifically, the study utilized a phenomenological approach to capture the experiences and meaning-making processes from the participants' perspectives, illuminating how diocesan priests made sense of their experiences in pastoral care (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Describing the lived experiences, or essence, contributed to a deeper understanding of the perceptions, emotions, and behaviors of this population (Moustakas, 1994).

Phenomenologists sought to understand the distinctive characteristics of human behavior and first-person experience (Hays & Singh, 2023). Grounded in an existentialist research paradigm, the study aimed to understand how priests made meaning of their experiences in pastoral care, with descriptive phenomenology providing an appropriate framework to address the research questions (Prosek & Gibson, 2021).

*Participants and Sampling.* The participants for this descriptive phenomenological study were gathered using purposeful sampling, focusing specifically on diocesan priests serving in a Roman Catholic diocese in Bulacan, Philippines. The criteria for inclusion were stringent: participants were required to be diocesan clergy, have a minimum of five (5) years of experience in the priesthood, and fall within the age range of 30 to 75 years old. Conversely, the criteria for exclusion included priests belonging to religious orders, those with less than five years of experience, and those outside the specified age range, as their unique contexts could potentially skew the findings away from the typical diocesan experience. This rigorous selection process resulted in a small, homogenous sample size, typically consisting of eight to ten participants, which was sufficient to achieve data saturation in phenomenological research. Finally, to ensure the highest level of confidentiality and anonymity, all participants were asked to select pseudonyms to be used throughout the research process and in the final dissertation.

*Measures.* The data for this descriptive phenomenological study were gathered using a suite of qualitative instruments designed to deeply explore the priests' lived experiences. Initially, a semi structured questionnaire was administered to collect essential demographic and background information from the participants. This included personal details such as age, educational

attainment, number of years in the priesthood, and other pertinent facts that provided context for their ministerial experience.

**Table 1. Demographic Profile of the Participants (N=10)**

<i>Pseudonym</i>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Years of Experience in the priesthood</b>
<i>(P1) Fr. Angel</i>	53	26
<i>(P2) Fr. Dennis</i>	60	35
<i>(P3) Fr. Jay</i>	53	25
<i>(P4) Fr. Mar</i>	60	32
<i>(P5) Fr. Mike</i>	46	13
<i>(P6) Fr. Niño</i>	63	33
<i>(P7) Fr. Pros</i>	40	10
<i>(P8) Fr. Rico</i>	63	38
<i>(P9) Fr. Vic</i>	52	25
	65	37

The main data collection instrument consisted of in-depth individual interviews. The researcher conducted these interviews either face-to-face or online, based on the participants' preference, to allow for maximum comfort and candidness. The interview protocol was guided by the research questions and aimed to elicit rich narratives about the nature of their pastoral care ministry and their specific lived experiences as priests offering this service.

*Procedures.* The participants who agreed to take part in the study underwent a one-on-one interview conducted by the researcher. Each interview lasted approximately 40 to 60 minutes and was carried out either in person or through an online platform, depending on the participant's preference and availability. The interview focused on exploring the participants' lived experiences in ministry, particularly regarding their pastoral encounters, formation and preparation, personal well-being, and ministerial responsibilities. Semi-structured interview questions were utilized to encourage participants to freely describe and reflect on their experiences while allowing the researcher to probe for deeper insights relevant to the study's objectives. All interview sessions were properly documented through digital audio recordings, with the participants' consent, and supplemented by the researcher's field notes to ensure accuracy and completeness of the gathered data.

*Data Analysis.* The primary analytical procedure followed Giorgi's four-step method, designed to move from the participants' raw, everyday language to a formal description of the essential structure (the essence) of the experience. The **first step** involved reading the whole protocol, where the researcher read and re-read the complete transcription of each interview and discussion to gain a comprehensive sense of the whole and practiced phenomenological bracketing (setting aside preconceptions). The **second step** required the researcher to systematically delineate the text into smaller, coherent segments known as meaning units or psychological meaning units, which were identified based on shifts in meaning relevant to the research questions.

The **third**, and most critical step, involved the transformation of meaning units into phenomenological expressions. In this process, the participants' "first-person accounts" were translated into the more abstract and formal "language of psychological science," with the original meaning preserved but reformulated to reflect the specific content of the phenomenon. For example, "I felt exhausted after three home visits" was transformed into "Sense of emotional depletion resultant from high frequency of direct community engagement." The **final step** involved synthesizing and deriving the structural description or essence, where the transformed meaning units from all participants were grouped, compared, and analyzed to identify commonalities, leading to the construction of a formal, generalized structural description that integrated all the dimensions and components of the Filipino priests' lived experiences in providing pastoral care.

*Methodological Integrity and Ethical Considerations.* This study strictly adhered to the ethical standards for research involving human participants, guided by the principles of autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence, and justice, in accordance with the guidelines of the Philippine Research Ethics Board and the institutional requirements of the Miriam College Ethics Review Committee (ERC). Prior to data collection, the researcher secured formal ethical clearance from the ERC as well as written permission from the Bishop of the Diocese where the study was conducted. Participation was entirely voluntary, and comprehensive informed consent was obtained from all participants after they were fully informed of the study's purpose, procedures, potential risks, and benefits, including their right to refuse participation or withdraw at any time without consequence. To ensure confidentiality and anonymity, participants were assigned pseudonyms or alphanumeric codes, and all identifying details were masked in transcripts and reports. Audio recordings, transcripts, and related documents were securely stored in password-protected and encrypted files accessible only to the researcher and supervising committee, with all raw data scheduled for secure destruction after five years. Given the potentially sensitive nature of the discussions, participants were also provided opportunities for debriefing and access to appropriate psychological and counseling support resources if needed.

The researcher occupied a unique insider positionality as an ordained priest with firsthand experience in pastoral ministry, providing an invaluable emic perspective that facilitated rapport and trust with participants. However, this insider status also necessitated a rigorous commitment to reflexivity and phenomenological reduction to prevent personal theological, ministerial, and experiential assumptions from influencing the study. Following Giorgi's (2009) phenomenological approach, the researcher systematically practiced epoche or bracketing by identifying and setting aside presuppositions regarding the competencies, challenges, and nature of pastoral care. These reflective processes were carefully documented through a Reflexivity Journal to ensure transparency, self-awareness, and methodological rigor throughout data collection and analysis. Clear role clarification was maintained during interviews and focus group discussions, wherein the researcher consistently emphasized his role as an academic investigator rather than a fellow clergy member or spiritual guide. Open-ended and non-leading questions were employed to preserve the authenticity of participants' lived experiences. During analysis, the researcher rigorously applied Giorgi's five-step phenomenological method, transforming raw descriptions into psychologically sensitive meaning units while continuously engaging in self-scrutiny through reflexive journaling. To further strengthen analytical credibility, the emergent general structure underwent peer debriefing to ensure that the findings remained grounded in the participants' accounts rather than the researcher's personal ministerial perspectives. Through these disciplined ethical and methodological safeguards, the study achieved human-scientific rigor while faithfully capturing the lived experiences of Filipino priests in pastoral care ministry.

### **3. Results and Discussion**

This descriptive phenomenological study presents the analysis and interpretation of the data gathered from the participants concerning the lived experiences of Filipino diocesan priests in the practice of pastoral care. Guided by the central research questions presented in Chapter One, the discussion explores the realities encountered by priests in responding to the pastoral, emotional, spiritual, and practical needs of parishioners; the competencies and pastoral skills they employ in ministry; the contextual challenges influencing pastoral care; and the insights and recommendations emerging from their experiences that may contribute to priestly formation and ongoing pastoral development. The presentation of findings is organized according to the major themes derived from the participants' narratives, allowing the meanings embedded in their lived experiences to illuminate the nature and practice of pastoral caregiving within the context of Filipino priestly ministry.

**Table 2. Constituent Structure of the Priests Lived Experiences**

<b>Constituent Structure (Essential Psychological Dimension)</b>	<b>Description of Lived Experience (Across Participants)</b>	<b>Exemplary Expressions Across Participants</b>
<b>1. Lived Pastoral Presence as Embodied and Enduring Accompaniment</b>	Pastoral care is experienced as being physically, emotionally, and relationally present with people in their concrete life situations. This presence is not momentary or task-based but is lived as continuous accompaniment that persists despite distance, fatigue, and shifting demands.	“ <u>rhythm</u> of presence” (Fr. Angel); “embodied movement” (Fr. Jay); “steady accompaniment” (Fr. Nick); “dynamic accompaniment” (Fr. Vic); “enduring presence” (Fr. Jay); “availability even stretched across space” (Fr. Mike)
<b>2. Attentive Listening as the Primary Mode of Accessing the Other’s Lived World</b>	Listening is experienced as a receptive, interiorly grounded openness through which the priest enters the emotional, spiritual, and psychological realities of others. It involves suspending judgment and immediate resolution in order to remain present to the unfolding meaning of the other’s experience.	“ <u>art</u> of listening” (Fr. Angel); “healing listening” (Fr. Niño); “listening of mercy” (Fr. Pros); “attentive listening” (Fr. Nick); “listening as presence” (Fr. Mike)
<b>3. Sharedness of Ministry Through Relational, Communal, and Collaborative Structures</b>	Ministry is experienced as something that is not carried alone but shared through lay collaborators, ecclesial communities, and relational networks. This sharedness reduces isolation and redistributes responsibility in responding to pastoral needs.	“ <u>shared</u> presence” (Fr. Jay); “BECs extension” (Fr. Rico); “collaborative dependence” (Fr. Angel); “priestly camaraderie” (Fr. Vic); “referral and trust in others” (Fr. Rico); “collaboration with lay partners” (Fr. Dennis)
<b>4. Lived Tension of Human Finitude, Emotional Burden, and Existential Strain</b>	Priests experience ongoing tension between the demands of ministry and the limits of their physical, emotional, and temporal capacity. This includes fatigue, emotional burden from others’ suffering, uncertainty in discernment, and the pressure of being available to many needs simultaneously.	“ <u>geographical</u> and physical weight” (Fr. Jay); “overwhelming demand” (Fr. Nick); “fatigue clashes with duty” (Fr. Mike); “limited time” (Fr. Mar); “traumatic narratives” (Fr. Niño); “hidden personal burdens” (Fr. Mike); “spiritual vs psychological distress” (Fr. Rico)

### **General Structure 1: Lived Pastoral Presence as Embodied and Enduring Accompaniment**

Pastoral care is constituted as continuous, embodied presence in which the priest lives himself as being with others in their concrete and unfolding life situations. This presence is not experienced as a series of discrete tasks, but as an enduring mode of existence – a ‘rhythm’, a ‘movement’ or ‘steady accompaniment’ – through which the priest’s life becomes intertwined with the lives of those he serves.

Various context like: stable parish settings, geographically dispersed communities, or dynamic pastoral demands is lived as a sustained availability that extends beyond physical proximity into emotional and relational nearness. The priest maintains a sense of continuity in accompaniment, experienced as remaining with rather than merely acting for, even when stretched across distance, fatigue, or competing demands.

Priests enduring presence is furthermore revealed as adaptive and dynamic: where it gathers people inward in moments of liturgical encounter and moves outward toward them in their everyday realities. In all forms and aspects, the essence of pastoral care is disclosed as a persevering commitment to accompany, which is presence itself rather than a mere function or outcome – these becomes the primary expression of care.

### **General Structure 2: Attentive Listening as the Primary Mode of Assessing the Other’s Lived World**

Pastoral care is constituted through a mod of attentive listening in which the priest adopts a receptive and interiorly grounded openness toward the other. This listening is not merely functional but is lived as a way of being-present, allowing the pries to enter the emotional, spiritual, and psychological lifeworld of the person. Within this stance, the priest suspends judgment, personal assumptions, and the impulse to provide immediate solutions thereby creating a space where the other’s experience can unfold in its own meaning. Listening is thus experienced as a silence, hospitality, and mercy – an active receptivity that prioritizes understanding over intervention.

Across situations of suffering. Complexity and uncertainty, this listening becomes the primary access to the other’s reality, where presence is deepened not through action, but through a sustained openness that allows the other to be revealed as they are. In this way, listening itself emerges as the essential expression of pastoral care.

### **General Structure 3: Sharedness of Ministry through Relational, Communal, and Collaborative Structures**

The lived experiences of the different situational factors and difficulties of Filipino priests encounter in pastoral ministry is structured by sharedness, where care is not carried alone but constituted through relational, communal and collaborative participation. Situational difficulties such as large pastoral demands, geographical dispersion, emotional burden, and administrative overload are first experienced as isolation and limitation of personal capacity. However, these same conditions disclose ministry as inherently relationally sustained. What first begins as a burden are transformed through lived structures of shared presence and interdependence. Pastoral care is extended beyond the individual priest through shared presence, collaborative dependence, and priestly camaraderie, referral and trust in others, and collaboration with lay partners. All these responsibilities are redistributed within a wider ecclesial network, reducing isolation and enabling continued pastoral responsiveness. Therefore, pastoral care is fundamentally co-sustained relational practice where care is sustained through shared life rather than solitary endurance.

### **General Structure 4: Lived Tension of Human Finitude, Emotional Burden and Existential Strain**

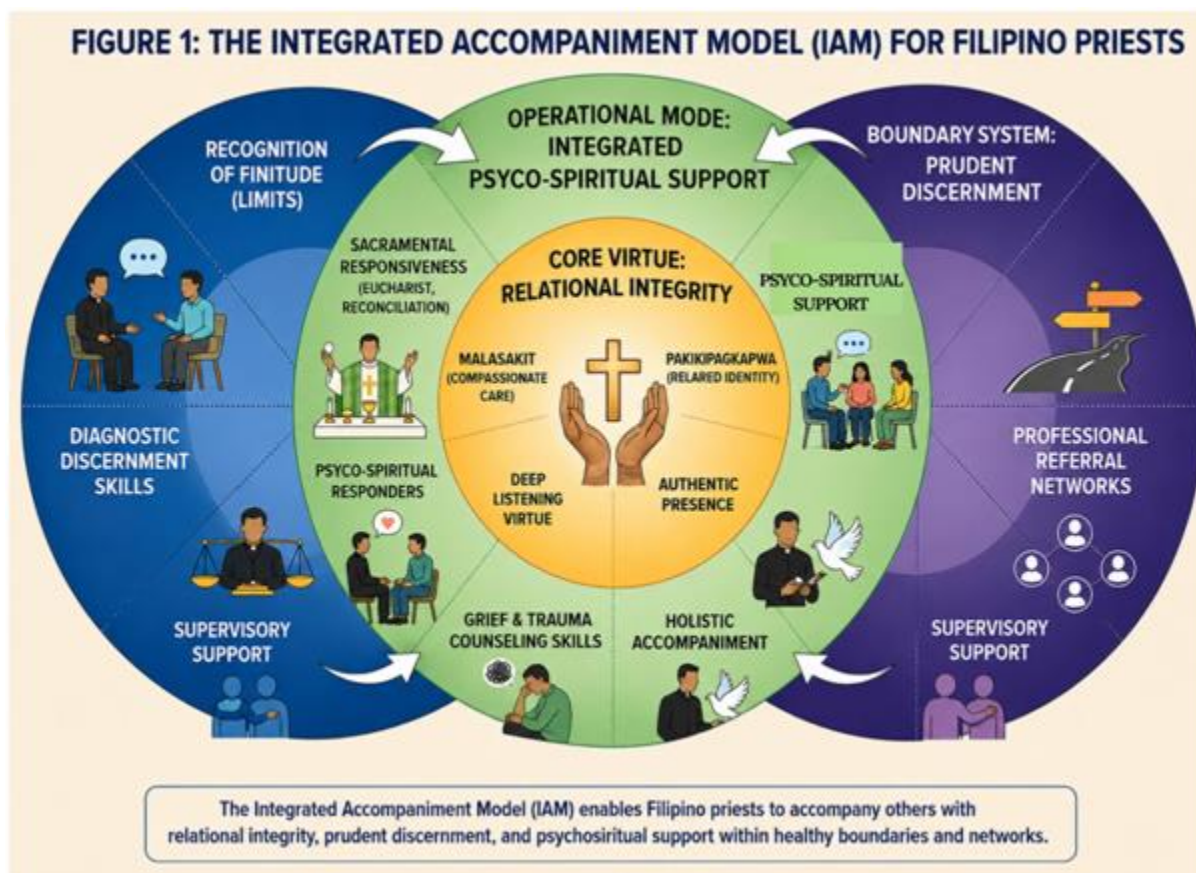
The essential psychological structure of the lived experience of providing pastoral care among Filipino priests in contemporary ministry is characterized by an ongoing tension between the expansive demands of ministry and the limits of human finitude. Priests experience pastoral life as a condition of being continually stretched across physical, temporal, and emotional boundaries while attempting to remain present to diverse and urgent pastoral needs.

The continuous and unresolved experience of strain that persists overtime in the lived reality of priests is grounded in situational overload, marked by “geographical and physical weight” (Fr. Jay), “overwhelming demand” (Fr. Nick), and “limited time (Fr. Mar), where ministry requires constant movement, availability, and responsiveness across dispersed communities. These external demands produce a sustained sense of exhaustion and being overextended.

Concurrently, priests carry a deep emotional and psychological burden, arising from encounters with “traumatic narratives” (Fr. Nino), “hidden personal burdens” (Fr. Mike), and the difficulty of discerning “spiritual vs. psychological distress” (Fr. Rico). All these encounters accumulate as interior strain intensifying feelings of fatigue and inadequacy. These condition, priests experience existential strain in discernment as they face difficult and complex situations that exceed clear pastoral categories, intensifying the pressure of responsibility and the limits of personal capacity.

In navigating these tensions they employ adaptive coping strategies like prayer, seeking counsel, and especially entering relational and collaborative support systems, which help redistribute pastoral responsibility and reduce isolation. Therefore, the structure reveals pastoral care as a lived experience of enduring tension between burden and human limitation, sustained not by individual capacity alone but through spiritual grounding and shared relational support.

**Figure 1. Emergent Framework: The Integrated Accompaniment Model (IAM) for the Professional Development of Filipino Diocesan Priests**



The model is structured as a concentric system of care, moving from the internal disposition of the minister to the external actions of ministry, ultimately moderated by a system of professional boundaries.

**I. The Core: Relational Integrity (The Ontological Foundation)**

At the center of the model is the Core Virtue of Relational Integrity. This layer represents the "Soul" of the IAM. Unlike secular professional models that prioritize technical skill sets first, the IAM posits that for the Filipino priest, pastoral care begins with the "being" of the minister.

This core is characterized by three essential psychological constituents:

**Relational Presence:** This is the foundational state of "being-with" the other. It transcends the performance of a duty and enters the realm of a covenantal relationship. It is the "radical availability" described by the participants as the most vital aspect of their ministry.

**The Ethics of *Malasakit* and *Pakikipagkapwa*:** These Filipino cultural values provide the warmth and depth of the core. *Malasakit* (compassionate care) ensures that the care is not clinical but sacrificial, while *Pakikipagkapwa* (shared identity) ensures that the priest does not look down upon the parishioner but walks beside them as a fellow traveler.

**Authentic Presence and Deep Listening:** This is the virtue of the "Discipline of the Ear." The core is sustained by the priest's ability to remain silent and receptive, creating what Winnicott terms a "holding space" where the parishioner feels safe enough to disclose deep-seated trauma or spiritual distress.

Psychologically, this core suggests that the priest's primary therapeutic instrument is his own integrated self. Professional development, therefore, must prioritize "Human Formation", the emotional and spiritual health of the priest, as the prerequisite for any external competency.

## **II. The Middle Layer: Integrated Psychospiritual Support (The Operational Mode)**

The second layer of the IAM, the Operational Mode, describes the "Hands" of the ministry. It represents how the internal core of integrity is translated into tangible action within the parish context. This layer is "Integrated" because it refuses to dichotomize the spiritual from the psychological.

**Sacramental Responsiveness:** The model recognizes that for the faithful, sacraments are the primary "language of care." The priest uses the Eucharist, Reconciliation, and Anointing not just as religious rituals, but as tools for "narrative re-authoring" and "hope-work."

**Mental Health Facilitation and other Applicable Models:** Recognizing the "complex distress" mentioned in the findings, the IAM incorporates basic counseling competencies. This involves "Diagnostic Discernment"—the ability to listen for signs of clinical depression, anxiety, or trauma.

**Grief and Trauma Accompaniment:** Because the participants consistently encountered death and tragedy, the operational mode includes specialized skills in grief work. This allows the priest to move beyond "offering prayers" to providing a structured presence that facilitates the mourning process.

This operational ring demonstrates that the contemporary Filipino priest must be a "hybrid practitioner." He must be as comfortable with the theology of suffering as he is with the psychological principles of empathy and active listening.

### **III. The Outer Layer: Prudent Discernment and the Boundary System** (The Protective Shield)

The outermost layer of the IAM, the **Boundary System**, serves as the "Shield" of the model. It addresses the critical findings regarding "Human Finitude" and the "burden of solitary ministry." This layer is essential for the sustainability of the priesthood and the safety of the parishioners.

**Recognition of Finitude:** This is the psychological acceptance that the priest is a limited human being. It acts as a guard against the "Messiah Complex"—the dangerous belief that the priest must solve every problem alone.

**The Referral Bridge:** A central component of the IAM is the establishment of professional referral networks. The model envisions the priest not as the *final* destination for care, but as a "triage officer." When a case involves severe mental health pathology or professional-grade counseling needs, the IAM directs the priest to utilize his referral bridge to psychologists or social workers.

**Supervisory Support:** Just as secular counselors utilize "Supervision" to process countertransference and emotional fatigue, the IAM advocates for a "Priestly Supervisory Framework." This involves peer support groups and mentorship where priests can "release the burdens" they have collected from their parishioners.

### **Summary of the Model's Logic**

The Integrated Accompaniment Model (IAM) operates through a reciprocal flow. The Core (Integrity) gives life and authenticity to the Operational Mode (Actions). However, without the Boundary System (Shield), the priest's core would eventually be depleted by the overwhelming needs of the flock.

For the field of Counseling, the IAM offers a unique "Third Space" model where spirituality and psychology are not in competition but are integrated into a single, resilient witness of accompaniment. It provides a roadmap for professional development that does not simply "add more tasks" to the priest's schedule but instead refines his "way of being" to be more effective, sustainable, and holistically compassionate in the modern Filipino life-world.

#### **4. Conclusion**

This study explored the lived experience of Filipino diocesan priests in providing pastoral care within contemporary ministry. The findings revealed that pastoral care is essentially an integrative act of relational presence in which the priest becomes a “living mediator” between human suffering and spiritual meaning.

Guided by Filipino values of *pakikipagkapwa* and *malasakit* priests experience pastoral care as a form of compassionate accompaniment rooted in shared humanity, empathy, and genuine concern. The study likewise uncovered the enduring tension between “radical availability” and “human finitude,” where priests strive to remain constantly present despite their own personal limitations and vulnerabilities. Yet, it is within this tension that authentic healing and meaningful connection emerge.

Finally, this study concludes that Filipino diocesan priests do not merely provide pastoral care as a ministerial task; rather, they embody hope through their presence, transforming ordinary parish encounters into experiences of spiritual accompaniment and shared humanity. This phenomenological understanding highlights priestly ministry as both a deeply human and spiritually meaningful vocation within the Filipino context.

#### **5. Limitations of the Study**

While this study provides rich phenomenological insights into the lived experiences of Filipino diocesan priests, several limitations must be acknowledged. The study was limited to diocesan priests from a single Roman Catholic diocese in Bulacan; thus, the findings may not fully represent the diverse pastoral realities across other dioceses, religious congregations, or Christian denominations in the Philippines. Consistent with Giorgi’s descriptive phenomenological approach, the study utilized a small purposive sample focused on depth rather than statistical generalization, making the findings analytically rather than universally generalizable. Since the data relied on self-reported narratives, participants’ responses may also have been influenced by social desirability bias. Moreover, the researcher’s insider status as a fellow priest, while beneficial in establishing rapport and cultural understanding, required rigorous reflexivity and bracketing to minimize potential bias and taken-for-granted assumptions during analysis. Finally, although the study identified implications for practice and professional development, it did not include the implementation or long-term evaluation of a pastoral training framework, which remains an area for future research.

## 6. Recommendations

While this study provides a foundational understanding of the lived experience of diocesan priests, it also identifies several critical areas for further investigation within the fields of Counseling and Pastoral Psychology:

**Diocesan Policy for Ongoing Formation:** It is recommended that each diocese establish a Commission for Clergy Professional Development that mandates regular training in counseling skills, ethics, and boundary management as part of post-ordination growth.

**Creation of Referral Networks:** Dioceses should curate a formal "Referral Directory" of mental health professionals who understand the religious values of the faithful, ensuring that priests have a clear path for collaborative care.

**Institutionalized Mental Health Support for Priests:** Bishops should prioritize the psychological well-being of their clergy by providing access to confidential counseling and mandatory sabbatical periods for those serving in "high-trauma" or high-density parishes.

**Future Research (Specialized Ministries):** It is recommended that future studies explore the lived experiences of priests in specialized settings, such as hospital chaplaincy or prison ministry, where the "trauma load" is even more concentrated.

- **The Lay Perspective:** A follow-up study should examine the parishioners' experience of receiving this care to see if their perception of the "Art of Presence" aligns with the priest's intent.
- **Longitudinal Resilience:** Research into the long-term resilience of priests who utilize formal supervision versus those who do not would provide valuable data for seminary formators.

## 7. Acknowledgement

With a heart full of gratitude, the researcher expresses his sincerest appreciation to all those who contributed to the completion of this dissertation. Special thanks are extended to Dr. Malou Chavez, Program Chair, for her leadership and commitment to academic excellence; to Dr. Mary Jane Jose, Dissertation Adviser, for her invaluable guidance, patience, and mentorship throughout the research process; and to the esteemed panelists, Dr. Itchel Alignay, Dr. Paz Manaligod, and Dr. Vicky Apuan, for their insightful comments, scholarly expertise, and constructive recommendations that enriched the quality of this study. The researcher also offers profound gratitude to Dennis Villarojo, Bishop of the Diocese of Malolos, for his fatherly support and permission to conduct the study within the Diocese. Deep appreciation is likewise

extended to the researcher's family, friends, and colleagues for their prayers, encouragement, and unwavering support during the completion of this work. Above all, the researcher gives thanks to God Almighty, the source of all wisdom, strength, and grace, to whom this work is humbly offered for His greater glory.

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