



Readiness of Local Parishes in Handling the Familial Stress of Dysfunctional Marriages

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Abstract

This phenomenological study delved into the lived experiences of Catholic priests in managing the familial stress of dysfunctional marriages. Catholic priests are often seen as guiding figures for a variety of concerns, including dysfunctional marriages. Grounded in Pargament's Theory of Religious Coping, the study aimed to understand the methods priests employ, the influence of their religious beliefs, and identify potential interventions to support both priests and families in distress. Through semi-structured research interviews, the researchers inquired on their experiences, methodologies, and feedback received from their counseling of dysfunctional marriages. Results revealed that the participants employ coping strategies related to their religious beliefs and utilize church communities for additional support for the families.

Keywords: Local parishes, Readiness, Familial stress, Religious Coping, Conflict resolution

1. Introduction

The Catholic Church has played a significant role in shaping religious, cultural, and societal values throughout history. With over a billion adherents worldwide, its teachings guide the lives of many, emphasizing moral responsibility, family values, and spiritual well-being. Catholic priests serve as mediators between the divine and the human world, tasked with providing spiritual guidance and support to their parishioners. Among their responsibilities is assisting families experiencing stress, particularly those dealing with dysfunctional marriages.

Marital dysfunction is a prevalent issue that affects not only spouses but also their children and the broader community. Dysfunctional marriages are often characterized by poor communication, unmet expectations, and frequent conflicts, leading to increased stress and emotional distress. Given that divorce remains illegal in the Philippines, many couples turn to alternative sources of support, such as religious leaders, for guidance and counseling. Catholic priests, in their role as spiritual leaders, are frequently sought out to help couples navigate the challenges of marital stress.

This study aimed to explore the lived experiences of Catholic priests in managing familial stress in dysfunctional marriages. It sought to evaluate the readiness of local parishes in addressing these issues and to assess the effectiveness of current pastoral support programs. Additionally, the research aimed to identify gaps in available interventions and propose solutions to enhance the support provided by the Church. By integrating insights from conflict resolution theories and religious coping mechanisms, this study contributed to a deeper understanding of the intersection between faith, mental health, and familial well-being.

2. Methodology

This study utilized a qualitative research design with a phenomenological approach to explore the readiness of local parishes in handling the familial stress of dysfunctional marriages. Phenomenology, as described by Neubauer (2019), is a qualitative method that examines human experiences to uncover deeper meanings and insights. This approach allowed the researchers to capture the subjective experiences of Catholic priests and their strategies for addressing marital challenges within their communities.

A. Research Design

This study utilized a qualitative research design with a phenomenological approach to explore the readiness of local parishes in handling the familial stress of dysfunctional marriages. As stated by Neubauer (2019), phenomenology is a qualitative research method that is particularly well-suited to assist with this investigation. Understanding the beliefs that support phenomenology was necessary to fully comprehend it. Such philosophies explain the essence of human experience. In other words, conducting phenomenological research required the researcher to familiarize themselves with the philosophical underpinnings of our interpretations of human experience.

The study of phenomena as they appeared in our experiences, how we saw and interpreted them, and the significance that phenomena had for our interpretations was known as phenomenology. To put it more clearly, phenomenology was the study of a person's actual experiences in the world. By looking at experiences from a subjective point of view, it was possible to create fresh interpretations and appreciations that could reframe or even inform how we perceived them.

B. Research Locale

The study was conducted in selected local parishes within the cities of Cabuyao and Calamba, Laguna. Specifically, four parishes in Cabuyao—St. Polycarp Parish, St. Joseph the Worker Parish, the Diocesan Shrine of San Vicente Ferrer, and St. Francis of Assisi Parish—were selected. Additionally, St. John the Baptist Parish in Calamba was included in the study. These parishes were chosen based on their active involvement in community counseling and marriage support programs.

C. Participants and Sampling

The study focused on Catholic priests who were actively engaged in counseling and pastoral care for married couples. Given the focus on Catholic priests in the Cities of Cabuyao and Calamba, Laguna, the researchers employed purposive sampling to ensure that the participants' perspectives and readiness in managing familial stress from dysfunctional marriages were well-represented. This non-random sampling method involved selecting participants based on specific criteria relevant to the study's objectives. As defined by Etikan *et al.* (2016), purposive sampling entailed the purposeful selection of individuals based on their characteristics. In this case, researchers recruited a purposive sample of four Catholic priests in the City of Cabuyao, Laguna and one Catholic priest in the City of Calamba, Laguna. These participants were chosen based on their experience as priests and their involvement in managing familial stress from dysfunctional marriages. Purposive sampling was selected to ensure an in-depth exploration of the readiness of Catholic priests who directly interacted with families facing stress related to dysfunctional marriages. This method aimed to collect valuable data and individual perspectives from individuals who could significantly contribute to the goals of the study.

D. Data Collection

The researchers conducted semi-structured interviews to gather qualitative data. The interview guide consisted of eight open-ended questions designed to explore the priests' experiences, challenges, and intervention strategies. The questions were formulated based on the Conflict Resolution

Theory by Morton Deutsch and the Theory of Religious Coping by Kenneth Pargament. The interviews were conducted in person, allowing the researchers to observe non-verbal cues and gain deeper insights into the participants' responses. Participants were given the option to respond in either Tagalog or English.

To ensure accuracy and validity, all interviews were audio-recorded (with consent) and transcribed. The transcribed data were then validated through member checking, where participants reviewed their responses to confirm accuracy.

E. Research Instrumentation

The researchers employed semi-structured interviews to gain insights into the readiness of local parishes in handling familial stress caused by dysfunctional marriages. A step-by-step process was implemented to ensure the effectiveness and validity of the interview instrument. Open-ended questions were formulated to directly target the study's objectives, exploring the priests' experiences, challenges faced, and strategies employed in supporting families dealing with dysfunctional marriages. Additionally, the formulation of the interview questions was anchored in Conflict Resolution Theory by Morton Deutsch and The Theory of Religious Coping by Pargament, ensuring their relevance to the present study.

The interview guide questions underwent a comprehensive review process by a group of experts, which included experienced qualitative researchers. Their review ensured the clarity, comprehensiveness, and relevance of the questions to the study's focus. The interviews were conducted face-to-face to allow for a deeper understanding of the Catholic priests' responses. This format facilitated the observation of non-verbal cues that accompanied their verbal responses. It is important to note that throughout the interview process, participants retained the right to decline or terminate the interview at any point if they felt uncomfortable. Additionally, they had the flexibility to choose their preferred language for the interview, either Tagalog or English.

The interview guide questions consisted of eight open-ended questions categorized thematically that addressed the study's objectives comprehensively. While providing a framework for the interview, these questions also allowed Catholic priests the flexibility to elaborate on their experiences. The thematic categories encompassed encountering dysfunctional marriages, challenges faced by the Catholic priests, and the emotional support provided by them.

F. Data Gathering Procedure

Participants were selected for this study from four Catholic parishes in the City of Cabuyao, Laguna: St. Polycarp Parish, St. Joseph the Worker Parish, Diocesan Shrine and Parish of San Vicente Ferrer and St. Francis of Assisi and one Catholic parish in the City of Calamba, Laguna: St. John the Baptist Parish. Before approaching the Catholic priests, consent was secured from every parish official. All participants provided informed consent after a full disclosure of the study's objectives, risks, and benefits, as well as their freedom to withdraw from participation at any time. The research question guided the selection of participants, with established guidelines used for this purpose.

Semi-structured interviews were employed in private locations to preserve participant privacy and generate in-depth responses. All interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent and thoroughly transcribed for thematic

analysis. A member checking method was conducted to evaluate the transcribed data with participants before proceeding to thematic analysis. Thematic analysis involved multiple readings of the transcripts, descriptive coding, and identifying emerging themes related to the participants' readiness. These themes were then organized to simplify data interpretation. The final stage involved developing a narrative report that covered the research methodology, findings, and discussion.

G. Ethical Considerations

The study aimed to provide an in-depth explanation and understanding of the readiness of local parishes in handling familial stress of dysfunctional marriages. In this undertaking, the researchers strictly adhered to the research ethical guidelines and the Data Privacy Act of 2012 throughout the entire research process. Before any data gathering was conducted, the researchers obtained Informed Consent Forms from the respondents. It was also ensured that the respondents had a clear understanding of the nature of the study, that their participation was completely voluntary, and that they were free to withdraw their participation at any point of the study. Participants were also informed of the possible consequences of their participation. The participants were also provided with information regarding how their information was collected, used, and protected. The researchers understood that this might be a sensitive topic for some individuals, thus the researchers redacted their actual names and replaced them with pseudonyms to protect their identity, unless the participants requested to be referred to by their actual names in the paper.

In gathering research data, the researchers only collected data that was relevant to the study's objectives. These data remained in the researchers' care for as long as the study required and were disposed of after at least five years of the study's publication. The collected research data was presented back to the respondents to ensure that the data was correct and precise from the information they provided the researchers. This was also to reassure the respondents that their provided information was not misrepresented by the researcher. In addition, the collected data was only accessible to the researchers and no other third parties so as to protect the confidentiality of the research participants. Moreover, the gathered data was treated with utmost integrity, transparency, and responsibility and was only used for the purpose of this research.

3. Results and Discussion

The following table presents the themes that emerged from the semi-structured interviews conducted with the participants. There are eight superordinate themes in total, comprising two subordinate themes each, with the exception of superordinate theme 6. The superordinate themes are as follows: (1) Role and responsibilities of Local Parishes and Catholic priests and parishes in marital guidance; (2) Religious influence on marital counseling; (3) Training and preparation for marital counseling; (4) Church-based coping strategies and support systems; (5) Family response to church-based guidance and interventions; (6) Challenges in counseling marital concerns; (7) Integration of Bible and church doctrine; Lastly, (8) Balancing pastoral duties with counseling for marital issues.

Table 1: Summary of superordinate themes and constituent subthemes

Superordinate Theme	Subthemes
Role And Responsibilities of Local Parishes and Catholic Priests in Marital Guidance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Marriage Preparation and Counselling • Support In Marital Challenges
Religious Influence on Marital Counseling	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Foundation In Catholic Doctrine • Focus On Love and Commitment
Training And Preparation for Marital Counseling	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Educational Foundation • Experiential And Ministry-Based Training
Church-Based Coping Strategies and Support Systems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community Support Resources • Faith And Prayer
Family Responses to Church-Based Guidance and Interventions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Positive Reception and Gratitude • Initial Resistance Due To Emotions
Challenges in Counseling Marital Concerns	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack Of Cooperation and Commitment
Integration of Bible and Church Doctrine in Counseling	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Foundational Role of Biblical Teachings • Use Of Specific Verses and Doctrine
Balancing Pastoral Duties with Counseling for Marital Issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Delegation And Support from Lay Leaders • Scheduling And Personal Balance

Catholic parishes and priests play a vital role in guiding couples through both the preparation for marriage and the challenges that arise within it. Participants in the study shared how priests offer premarital counseling through programs like Pre-Cana, emphasizing marriage as a sacred covenant and preparing couples spiritually and emotionally. This guidance continues after marriage, with priests supporting couples through conflicts and difficulties such as financial struggles and parenthood. Their approach reflects both conflict resolution and religious coping theories—providing practical tools for managing disputes and drawing on faith to build resilience. Couples often turn to their parish for help, trusting in the spiritual and emotional support rooted in biblical teachings. Through this, parishes help foster stronger,

more committed relationships grounded in communication, respect, and shared faith.

The second theme explores how Catholic priests rely on religious teachings to guide their approach to marital counseling. Grounded in faith, their support focuses on healing and strengthening relationships through prayer, Scripture, and Church doctrine. Two key subthemes emerged: Foundation in Catholic Doctrine highlights how priests root their counseling in core Catholic values like love, fidelity, and the sanctity of marriage. They view marriage as a divine, lifelong bond, using Church teachings to help couples navigate struggles with a shared spiritual framework. This aligns with the theory of religious coping, where faith serves as a source of resilience and guidance. Focus on Love

and Commitment emphasizes emotional connection, empathy, and dedication as pillars of a strong marriage. Priests encourage open communication and shared goals, helping couples resolve conflicts and deepen their bond. This reflects both conflict resolution and religious coping theories, showing how love and faith together provide a foundation for enduring relationships.

Catholic priests are prepared for marital counseling through a combination of academic education and real-world ministry experience, equipping them to support couples both emotionally and spiritually. Their educational foundation includes psychology, sociology, philosophy, and theology, providing a deep understanding of human behavior, relationship dynamics, and religious values. This interdisciplinary training allows them to address marital issues holistically, aligning with both conflict resolution and religious coping theories. In addition to formal education, experiential and ministry-based training gives priests practical skills in empathy, communication, and conflict management. Through direct involvement in counseling sessions, family integration programs, and parish ministry, they gain insight into the realities couples face, enabling them to offer compassionate, faith-based guidance tailored to each situation.

Catholic parishes address the stress of dysfunctional marriages through church-based coping strategies and support systems rooted in community and faith. Support groups like Couples for Christ, Marriage Encounter, and Parish Renewal Experience play a central role by offering guidance, counseling, and emotional support, often extending their outreach beyond the church to create a continuous support network for couples. These community resources promote mutual understanding, resilience, and spiritual growth, reflecting Pargament's theory of religious coping, which emphasizes social and spiritual connection during times of crisis. In addition to these community efforts, faith-based practices such as prayer and mass attendance are encouraged as coping strategies. Participants shared that these spiritual practices help couples regulate emotions, foster communication, and develop a deeper bond, offering clarity and peace amid marital difficulties. These approaches, deeply aligned with both conflict resolution and religious coping theories, demonstrate how local parishes blend emotional support and faith to help couples rebuild their relationships and find hope.

Families generally responded positively to church-based guidance and interventions provided by local parishes, with many couples showing gratitude and actively seeking help for their marital problems. Participants observed that families often approached them first, motivated by respect for their wisdom and a desire for improvement. This positive reception reflects strong trust and cultural norms where clergy are valued sources of spiritual support. Couples' proactive involvement—such as attending mass and participating in church communities—signaled successful intervention outcomes, aligning with conflict resolution principles like trust-building and active engagement. However, some families initially resisted guidance due to heightened emotions, particularly anger, which hindered communication and receptiveness. To manage this, participants practiced patience, allowing emotions to settle before engaging in deeper conversations—demonstrating emotional intelligence and effective conflict management. In more complex cases, they referred families to mental health

professionals, acknowledging the limits of pastoral counseling. These responses reflect a blend of religious coping and conflict resolution theories, where faith-based support is balanced with practical strategies for emotional regulation and professional intervention.

Participants encountered significant challenges in counseling couples with dysfunctional marriages, particularly due to issues like poor communication, emotional barriers, and most notably, a lack of cooperation and commitment from one or both partners. This reluctance was seen in behaviors such as skipping counseling sessions, avoiding open dialogue, or showing little effort to repair the relationship. Such resistance made it difficult for counselors to accurately assess problems and offer effective interventions. The lack of engagement hindered progress and limited the potential for resolution. This challenge directly aligns with Conflict Resolution Theory, which emphasizes the importance of mutual cooperation, effective communication, and shared commitment to resolving issues. When couples fail to collaborate or invest in the counseling process, the ability to build trust, understand differing perspectives, and find common solutions is severely compromised. Thus, the participants emphasized the need for both partners to actively participate and commit to the counseling journey for meaningful and lasting outcomes.

The integration of Bible teachings and Church doctrine in marital counseling plays a central role in the participants' approach to addressing dysfunctional marriages, as it blends spiritual principles with practical counseling strategies. Participants emphasized the foundational role of biblical teachings, which offer wisdom on love, forgiveness, communication, and conflict resolution—core elements that align closely with both Conflict Resolution Theory and religious coping frameworks. These principles not only guide the counseling process but also help couples understand the sacredness of marriage as a lifelong, God-ordained commitment. The use of specific Bible verses and doctrinal teachings further reinforces this perspective, offering couples a spiritual framework to navigate their struggles and find hope and healing. By citing Scripture and highlighting the sanctity of the sacrament of marriage, the participants help couples derive meaning from their challenges, build emotional resilience, and establish shared values rooted in faith. This faith-based approach fosters emotional support, encourages ethical behavior, and enhances communication, ultimately supporting the goal of conflict resolution while nurturing the couple's spiritual and relational growth.

Balancing pastoral duties with counseling for marital issues presents a unique challenge for Catholic priests, as they strive to fulfill their roles as spiritual leaders while addressing complex marital concerns. Participants highlighted the importance of collaboration, particularly through delegation to lay leaders such as members of the Parish Pastoral Council and Parish Finance Council, to ensure comprehensive support for couples while preserving the priest's spiritual focus. This collaborative approach enables the church to offer diverse support services, including counseling and educational programs, that foster effective conflict resolution through improved communication and problem-solving skills. In addition to collaboration, participants stressed the importance of effective scheduling and personal balance. By creating structured schedules, prioritizing critical responsibilities, and maintaining personal well-being through rest and spiritual renewal, priests can prevent burnout and sustain their ability

to provide compassionate, effective guidance. This integration of delegation and personal care aligns with Conflict Resolution Theory, as a well-supported and emotionally balanced counselor is better equipped to facilitate empathetic communication and guide couples toward reconciliation and relational growth.

Table 2: Proposed program and workshops

Name of Workshop / Program	Activity
Integration Initiative for Licensed Therapists	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Provide each parish with a licensed therapist ○ Establish relationships with certified psychologists or counselors ○ Provide families who require professional therapy with referral methods
Dysfunctional Family Dynamics Seminar	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Strategies for resolving conflicts that are specific to families experiencing problems
Resilient Shepherds: Emotional and Spiritual Well-being for Priests	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Workshops on stress management and self-care (such as mindfulness and meditation) ○ Talks in community support circles about the challenges of pastoral work ○ Vacations for emotional and spiritual healing
Program for Parish Community Assistance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Implementing family support groups that promote mental health awareness for those suffering from dysfunctional marriages ○ Organize open forums on handling marriage issues in a religious setting

The results of the study showed that Catholic priests played an important role in helping families deal with stress caused by dysfunctional marriages. Many priests shared that their responsibilities went beyond conducting religious ceremonies, as they also acted as counselors and sources of emotional support for couples facing marital problems. They discussed their involvement in various marriage preparation programs, such as Pre-Cana and Post-Cana seminars, which were designed to guide couples before and after marriage. These programs aimed to strengthen relationships through faith, open communication, and shared values. However, while these initiatives helped couples understand marriage better, they did not fully equip priests with the necessary skills to handle serious marital conflicts. One major challenge faced by priests was their lack of formal training in psychology and counseling. While they had strong theological knowledge, many admitted that they felt unprepared to handle complicated marital problems that required psychological intervention. Their approach to counseling was mainly based on faith, focusing on prayer, forgiveness, and spiritual reflection. Although these methods provided emotional support, they were not always enough to address serious marital issues such as infidelity, financial difficulties, and domestic violence. Some priests mentioned the need for additional training in psychological counseling to improve their ability to give meaningful and practical advice to couples.

Another issue faced by Catholic priests was the heavy emotional burden of their pastoral duties. Since more couples sought their guidance, many priests experienced stress and emotional exhaustion. Balancing their roles as religious leaders and counselors was overwhelming, affecting both their mental and physical well-being. Some priests also noted that there was stigma within the church community regarding seeking professional psychological help. This made it difficult for them to refer couples to mental health professionals when needed. Because of this, there was a growing need for better collaboration between religious institutions and mental health professionals to create a more effective way of counseling married couples. Despite these difficulties, Catholic priests used different strategies to support married couples. One common approach was incorporating biblical teachings into counseling sessions. Many priests believed that Christ's teachings provided valuable lessons on love, patience, and understanding, which helped couples handle marital challenges. They also encouraged confession and prayer as ways to strengthen the bond between spouses and find emotional healing. Additionally, some priests worked with lay leaders and church groups to offer further support to couples experiencing problems. These partnerships helped lighten the workload and ensured that families received continuous guidance and encouragement.

The study also explored how prepared Catholic priests were in handling family stress caused by dysfunctional marriages. The findings suggested that while priests were dedicated to helping families, their ability to manage complex marital issues was limited due to a lack of psychological training. Their methods mostly focused on spiritual guidance, which, although helpful, was not always enough to address the emotional and psychological aspects of marital problems. To improve their effectiveness, it was important to implement structured training programs that combined theological principles with psychological counseling techniques. In addition, establishing support systems within parishes, such as peer counseling groups and partnerships with mental health professionals, could have helped the church provide better assistance to families dealing with marital stress.

The study examined how prepared Catholic priests were in handling family-related stress caused by dysfunctional marriages. Their dedication to providing spiritual guidance and emotional support made them key figures in their communities. However, the findings revealed certain limitations in their readiness, particularly in dealing with psychological counseling and understanding mental health concerns. The difficulties they encountered, such as emotional strain and lack of formal training in counseling, affected their ability to effectively assist couples experiencing marital struggles.

To improve the capability of Catholic priests in managing familial stress, several recommendations were suggested. First, there was a need for specialized training programs to enhance their counseling skills by integrating religious principles with psychological approaches. By incorporating psychological knowledge into their pastoral responsibilities, priests could have provided more well-rounded guidance to couples facing marital difficulties. Second, forming partnerships between the church and mental health professionals could have established a more effective support system for struggling families. Priests should have access to referral networks that would allow them to connect couples

with licensed therapists when necessary. Third, reinforcing support groups within the church could have given additional assistance to families in distress. Peer counseling initiatives and community workshops could have encouraged healthier relationships and reduced the stigma of seeking professional support.

Overall, this study emphasized the importance of strengthening the readiness of Catholic priests in addressing familial stress. By overcoming the challenges they faced and improving their counseling skills, the Catholic Church could have played a greater role in fostering stable marriages and emotionally resilient families. Future research should explore how psychological training programs can improve the effectiveness of priest-led counseling and how integrating mental health support into church initiatives can positively impact families. Through continuous education and collaboration, Catholic priests could become more effective in guiding families toward stability, harmony, and faith-based resilience.

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