

Single Blessedness as a Lived Experience in Roman Catholic lay Institutes

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ABSTRACT

This phenomenological research aimed to explore single blessedness as a lived experience in lay institutes of the Roman Catholics. An interview was used as the primary tool for extracting the meaning of single blessedness among laywomen. There were twelve (12) cases that were selected which underwent data saturation for emerging themes and categories. Findings revealed two categories of single blessedness—to serve God and serve the family. Having the desire to serve God and the community, especially the poorest of the poor, the unmarried female members in Roman Catholic lay institutes had shown their charity through opportunities to be with the needy, have prayerful reflection and discernment, and offer their God-given talents to others. Their experience of reluctance to respond with this vertical call led to uneasiness and incompleteness. Meanwhile, another cohort of women found blessedness as a choice to selflessly serve their family while enjoying independence and autonomy. This was described as a traversal free from worries and other responsibilities full of filial love from friends and family members. Staying single for the rest of their lives, these women described daily life as prayerful and charitable, chaste and pure in words and deeds, and with a strong and decisive commitment to work for their families and the poor. Nevertheless, these women in blessed singleness nourished themselves with prayers, positive relation with self and others, their families, and most especially God.

KEYWORDS: *single blessedness, women in Catholic Church, lived experience, lay institutes, phenomenological research*

INTRODUCTION

Vocation is a specific call to holiness; vocation is a turning point on the path of our relationship with the living God; vocation involves choice and decision; vocation has its origin in baptism; vocation is a grace showing us what is possible for each of us; vocation represents a specific way in which to live out one's response to God (Rose, 2003). In Simpson (2011, as cited in Rose, 2003) vocation means journey or the path on- the journey to holiness. To holiness, God calls each and every member of the human race which is commonly referred to as the “universal vocation”. The final meaning of “vocation” has to do with how, as adults, we travel down the path to God and that “how” is called our “primary vocation.” Traditionally, the Church has identified three of these: holy orders, marriage and consecrated life. Each of those primary vocations is defined by the gift of self.

The priests give themselves to Christ's Church; married people give themselves to a husband or wife; and consecrated people give themselves directly to God (Simpson, 2011).

Rose (2003) study mentioned that everyone has a call to holiness, that there are differing roles and charisms for all baptized individuals, that there is a variety of gifts given to the faithful which are to be used for the service of the apostolate. Accordingly, the Pontifical Council of the Laity mentioned that the lay vocation to holiness is a vocation to holiness within the secular world. The role for some may be marriage, for others it may be the single life or the ordained life. While those in ordination and marriage receive the relevant sacrament which formalizes the commitments, those in the single state do not have a similar sacrament upon which to base their choice for living. The single person, however, has the primary sacraments of initiation (baptism, confirmation and Eucharist) as the basis for his or her commitment to God. Simpson (2011) noted that it's important to remember that a person doesn't have to be religious in order to live the consecrated vocation. If people don't feel called to marriage, holy orders or a religious order, it might mean that they're called to live the consecrated vocation in the world as a consecrated single, having solemnly vowed the entirety of their life to God.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

The English word "single" is derived from the early fourteenth century Old French term "sengle" (a synonym for someone who is not married). Now, associated cognates—including continence, chastity, and celibacy—and comparative states—including widowhood, marriage, and the monastic life—are found to frequently characterize historical discussions on this and has brought to the ideological and theological perspectives (Treweek, 2020) of single blessedness.

Outside of formal institutional channels, yet within the structure of their faith and the constraints of their society, Catholic laywomen practiced a kind of theology as they interpreted domestic ideology in ways that they perceived as empowering them as Catholics and as women (Pryor, 2014). The study of singlehood could provide valuable information about interpersonal relationships and the personal realm (Watt, 2015) of women. In particular, the lived experience of their faith and concern about their marginalization both as women and as Catholics, led them to develop their own concepts that privileged them to have their own belief systems and behaviors (Pryor, 2014). As this study also centers on the minimal studies on laywomen (Watt, 2015) and the issue on singleness (Biri, 2021), the catholic women studies focusing beliefs, practices, and parish life (Gray & Gautier, 2019) can be a pivotal in the Philippine-based research and studies.

Dramatic changes in Philippine life have occurred in the past decades. Some of the traditional Filipino ways of relating to one another have quietly faded away. New heightened expectations have roused formerly dormant people to actively espouse various causes for: a) liberating the many oppressed; b) defending the human rights of the exploited; c) improving working conditions, raising salaries, and d) promoting better living conditions among the less fortunate. The Catholic Church in the Philippines has consistently exercised a major influence on this new "social awareness" and concern for justice and the poor (CBCP, 2011). This context of the study concurred with the beliefs system of single women in the Catholic Church particularly that also depicted in the construct of single blessedness.

Just like in the study of Mattick (2008), telling stories of the single women in lay institutes, addressed the idea of domesticity, the proper role of women, and how it was reinforced in Catholic terms by women who seemingly defied the ideal. This also unearthed that many single women have concerns and struggles that may lead to perceptions of exclusion in the church and community (Johnson, 2022) and explored the contemporary singlehood reflecting Philippine research on modern-day relationships (Garriga, et al., 2018) existing in the Catholic Church.

RESEARCH FOCUS AND QUESTIONS

This study focused on describing the single blessedness from the narratives of unmarried women reflected by their lived experience in Roman Catholic lay institutes. Specifically, the study sought to answer the following questions: What does single blessedness reveal about the unmarried women who are affiliated in Roman Catholic lay institutes? What do laywomen learn from the experience of blessed singleness in Roman Catholic institutes and how does this inform their vocation?

METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

Along with the epistemological perspective of constructionism, this study utilized Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis ([IPA], Smith et al., 2009) that focused on the “intentionality, the axis of phenomenology’ (Crotty, 2003). This theoretical perspective purported the important connection between the conscious subjects and their objects—i.e. laywomen and their experience of blessed singleness. As Crotty described, phenomenology offers the engagement with the phenomena (e.g. single blessedness) in our world and makes sense of them directly and immediately, letting the phenomena speak to us at first hand. Having the concepts for IPA, Smith et al. highlighted the centrality and relevance of a concentration on experience and perception. Inspired from the work of Villanueva (2004), addressing concerns relating to commitment processes in vocation production, the exploration of discovering the vocation as a life option, in contrast to following a career path, entails the understanding of religious and faith experiences. In seeking to achieve this, Bowie’s (2006) theorized application of phenomenology in religion figures as backdrop or mise-en-scène for the theoretical framework of the research. Using phenomenology to interpret religious or faith experiences, perceptions and meanings, researches and books well inform on giving a venue for the attempt to make sense of religious experiences (Villanueva, 2004).

From a sociological standpoint, this article applied the Social Exchange Theory (Homans, 1961) to further explore the construct of blessed singleness among women in lay institutes of the Roman Catholic. For Homans, the dominant emphasis was the individual behavior of actors in interaction with one another—in its philosophical sense, laywoman’s social interaction lies in a continuum of utilitarianism and behaviorism (Cook & Rice, 2006). Applying the metrics that collectively build social exchange theory can be a great tool to analyze relationships and human behavior (Tulane University, 2018). In particular, Rose (2013) summed up that a single person as a follower of Christ experiences the joy of singleness when facing the limits of earthly existence and accepting that without God, she can do nothing.

Participants

Criteria for inclusion in this study were the female unmarried members of the Ladies of Charity and the sisters of the Daughters of Charity. The association of the Ladies of Charity is many countries

with thousands of members. Since the Ladies of Charity are mostly married and there is a great need for service “at all times” and “at all places”, the single who later became the Daughters of Charity (DC). This first, Charities (or Confraternities) at that time were composed of women from relatively modest backgrounds, who wished to devote themselves to the service of the poor and the sick in their villages or parishes. Specifically, there were twelve (12) participants of which eight (8) are members of the Ladies of Charity and four (4) Daughters of Charity though religious but belong to a lay group of people. Both cohorts of laywomen have never been married in their entire lives.

Procedures of the Study

The researchers secured the consent of women in lay institutes to share their narratives of single blessedness. These single laywomen have been in the Roman Catholic institutes and served the Institution and the community for years. The researchers used interview protocols as a primary method to investigate the lived experience of the laywomen. The study utilized an open-ended interview guide to secure a rich, detailed information from the participants.

In IPA, Smith et al. (2009) elaborated a set of procedures to shape a phenomenological account, the researchers have to identify, characterize, and comprehend two connected part of the participant's account: the major “items of concern” (i.e. single blessedness) in the participant's environment (i.e. lay institutes of the Roman Catholic) and the “experiential claims” made by the participants (i.e. rich, detailed, first-person account of experiences). Although an IPA follows a non-restrictive and flexible analytic process, the investigators employed Smith's (2007) strategies involving an iterative and inductive cycle and Hycner's (1985) concrete, step-by-step procedure of phenomenological analysis of interview data. For the rigor and vigor of the analyzed data, results validated by fellow researchers who specialized in women studies and/or phenomenological research while the participants confirmed their lived experience relevant to their own meaning-making through a review of the interpreted set of themes and discussions. Along with the stated strategies, Moustakas' (1994) 8-step approach for approach effective in organizing, analyzing, and synthesizing the data were also integrated in the study.

FINDINGS

This paper investigated the experience of laywomen in the Roman Catholic institutes on how single blessedness affected their vocation. Through the narratives shared by the participants, the discussion includes the interactions of service made by laywomen to their family and to God. A grounding to the theory of social exchange further supports how the reciprocal exchanges or negotiated exchanges are ubiquitous in life as laywomen in Roman Catholic institutes.

Single Blessedness Among Laywomen in Roman Catholic Institutes

Single blessedness, as revealed in this study, is a feeling of contentment, satisfaction, security, and happiness of single participants in their choice to selflessly dedicate themselves to serve God and other people. As shown in Table 1, this choice to selflessly serve God and/ or others has causes, manifestations, and outcomes benefiting the people around the laywomen and the community, especially those who are in poverty situations.

Table 1. Differences and Similarities between Single Blessedness in Response to God's Call and Single Blessedness for Independence and Autonomy

Categories of Single Blessedness	Single Blessedness in Response to God's call	Single Blessedness in Independence and autonomy
<i>Group of single participants</i>	<i>Consecrated or with vows</i>	<i>Unconsecrated or without vows</i>
<i>Causes of Single Blessedness</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Uneasiness due to reluctance to answers God's call</i> • <i>Unlimited opportunities to be with people</i> • <i>Result of prayerful reflection and discernment</i> • <i>Be instrument of God to accomplish His plan</i> • <i>Recognition of God as the source of life and everything</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Taking over family responsibilities</i> • <i>Laziness in doing house chores</i> • <i>Having many worries</i> • <i>Hadn't met the right man</i> • <i>Love to be free</i> • <i>Trust, love, and care of family and friends</i> • <i>Free from family disturbances</i> • <i>Having stable income</i>
<i>Manifestations</i>	Satisfaction, contentment, happiness, security, and calm	
<i>Feelings</i>	<i>Happy, Blessed, Satisfied, Contented, secured and Calm</i>	
<i>Outcomes</i>	<i>They are prayerful, charitable, chaste and pure in words and deeds, strong, decisive, committed to work, supportive to their family and others; and trusted by their family and friends.</i>	

A Vocation: Causes of Single Blessedness in Response to God's Call

The Sisters Ester, Clarinda, Carmen, and Sandra experienced blessedness in their choice to selflessly serve God. This is because of their aspiration to serve Him and the people especially those who are needy. In responding to God's call, they experienced unlimited opportunities to be with people and make themselves available for service. Also, as Daughters of Charity, they feel happy for their decision as the result of prayerful reflection and discernment. Lastly, they are willing to be God's instrument for the people through their time and talents or gifts.

Cause 1: Selfless dedication to serve God

The calling for each person starts from the time of his/her conception, and it's up for the person to respond to it. One of these calls is to selflessly serve God. Reluctance to answer this call gives a feeling of incompleteness like what happened to Sister Ester. Sister Ester felt that "*there is something lacking in her that she cannot understand as if she will be insane.*" Despite having a salary, a good family with problems or issues, still there is something she cannot describe and understand. This feeling of incompleteness has been fulfilled when she said "yes" to God to be a Daughter of Charity. This is also an answer to her desire to serve people especially those who are in poverty.

Moreover, Sister Elsie experienced incompleteness like Sister Ester. The only difference is that, in Sister Elsie's case, she is sure that if she could be a Daughter of Charity (DC) she would be single. As a resolution, she opted to serve God for she knows that: "*when God calls, God provides*". Rose

(2003) further explained that a single person as a follower of Christ experiences the joy of singleness when faced by the limits of earthly existence and accepts that without God, she can do nothing.

Cause 2: Unlimited opportunities to be with people

Another experience is the unlimited opportunities to be with people. Being with the people, the DC can see God in each event and in different circumstances. They have the opportunities to enrich and expand her unconditional love to the people with different personalities and principles in life. They have the opportunity to enter into their lives by listening to their stories, problems, and sentiments. These are some of the experiences of *Sister Clarinda* and *Sister Carmen*. For instance, *Sister Carmen* said,

“... Experiencing going to the barrios and helping the priest in baptizing the people, conducting seminars, and preparing them [the people] for Holy Matrimony [...] how to take care of their life and prepare them for life after death would be considered an opportunity...”

In the study of Rose (2003), the nature of the relationship of the people to Christ—each of them has been called by God Himself and invited to a personal relationship with Him. The relationship is personal; God calls each into fellowship, to holiness. The vocation of single state is a turning point on the path of our relationship with the living God; represents a specific way in which to live out one's response to God; and all are called by baptism to relationship with God. Those who are single are also in an inclusive relationship with Christ. Singleness or blessedness enables the individual to be available to others, to be able to share with them their own search and journey as well as be compassionately present to them.

Cause 3: Results of prayerful reflection and discernment

Another factor in choosing a vocation is the prayerful reflection and discernment. All the Sisters experienced this process. As one of the Sisters would say, *“Every day, we [DC] find time to pray in a group or as a community....”* Like in the study of Rose (2013) who said that there are many ways in which each of us discerns vocation. Firstly, vocation can be seen as grace showing what is possible for each of us. Secondly, vocation is a grace which shows us what is perhaps applicable to an individual. Thirdly, vocation is a grace which enables us to make a choice.

Cause 4: The desire to offer talents/gifts and time to God

Recognizing that life is a blessing and a gift from God makes a person grateful to the Lord. This moved a person to serve Him in return for all the talents, time and blessings received. In the desire of Sandra to return to God her service she helps and trains people around her. She composes music that depicts her experiences. Since she can also play instruments, she trains the choir in school and lets them sing her songs. She finds time to give service to the Church and even in her community work. She teaches little children to sing and play instruments patiently. Sister Carmen, Sister Elsie, Sister Clarinda, and Sister Ester offer their time to conduct sessions and spiritual talks to inculcate deep love of children and people to God. They act as a model to children by hearing mass every day and offer their talent in singing to encourage others to do the same for God. All of them believe that all these things are for the greater glory of God. This experience is parallel to Rose (2003), he emphasized that freedom allows single people to respond to His calling, to engage more

closely with Christ. They want to explore their gifts of creativity and to live in dedication to the betterment of the world. Further, he emphasized that a single person has the responsibility to develop his/her abilities and gifts and to thereby make an appropriate contribution to the church and to others.

Single Blessedness to Serve the Family while Having Independence and Autonomy

On the other hand, unconsecrated single participants experience blessedness in their choice to stay single and selflessly serve their family and others. Many of the participants are committed to serving their family so they opted to stay single and focus their attention on their family. Others are afraid to face the reality that if married, they have many responsibilities to undertake. So their laziness in doing house chores, having many worries, and to be free from any disturbances stirred them to stay unmarried and enjoy a worry-free kind of life. Many of them also experience the trust, love, and care of family and friends, so they feel secure rather than being alone and lonely. Some had the desire to marry but since they hadn't met the right man so they decided to stay single. These factors are presented and discussed further below.

Cause 1: Selfless service to the family

Family is one of the factors that single people consider before making their choices and decisions in life. So as a sign of their love, many of them opted to altruistically serve their family like in the case of *Candelaria*, *Guima*, *Ines*, and *Malou*. Specifically, *Candelaria* said, "...it is our (family's) love; it is their care that I made it a point to serve."

Ibrahim and Hassan (2009) and Simpson (2003) noted that caring responsibility has always been the role of unmarried daughters. In the research of Simpson (2003) on caring relationships of contemporary spinsters as daughters and mothers concluded that caring responsibility remains an important role for unmarried women. It was also noted on the traditional "family strategy" of keeping one daughter at home to ensure the well-being of parents as the explanation to spinsterhood was evident. Everybody has a primary vocation but not everyone will necessarily enter into the vocation to which God calls them. Consequently, others choose to remain single and devotedly help the family, or devotedly serve others and the community (Simpson, 2011). Jose (2003) who says when one is single, one's experience, one's expression of love and service has to embrace whoever God sends one's way, wherever the need arises for care in the course of a day, a month, and a year.

Cause 2: Preferences to be free from worries and other responsibilities

Having many worries about family is another factor considered by the single participants because this does not give them a peace of mind. It makes them feel uneasy and bothered. They rather opt to stay single and focus on their parents instead of building their own family. *Pau* shared, "I worry what will happen to my children and husband... what if my family encountered accidents, what if she could not provide everything for my children?" She also said, "I am a worrier, I worry a lot, so maybe, God has given me this particular state of being or mind..."

Another scenario is revealed by *Candelaria*. Her cowardice of having a family of her own is due to her avoidance in doing house chores for everyone in the family; thus, staying single is better rather than having a family. She said, "If I get married, my laziness would make family life miserable."

Cause 3: Haven't met the right man

Meeting the right man is always the dream of single participants. They have set qualities and standards that would satisfy themselves. Looking for Mr. Right entails assessment of certain characteristics, attitudes, and many others. As an example, *Cecille* had many suitors but no one reached her set of criteria. She mentioned, “*I didn’t want to adjust to the family of my suitors.*” In the search for an ideal partner in life, educational attainment is one of the factors being considered. Similar with the discussions of Berg-Cross, et al. (2004) which accentuated female economic empowerment compounded with relatively lower male educational attainment has had profound effects on the psychological and social aspects of dating and finding a partner.

Cause 4: *Trust, love, and care of family and friends*

The trust, love and care of family and friends consoled the feelings of the single participants for staying single. In the narratives, *Malou* values her loyal and sincere friends, *Pau* has a supportive family and always with her in times she needs them, and *Guima* and *Percy* found life easy for their nieces, nephews, and grandchildren. Family and friends acted as their social support system. Social support is a multidimensional construct that consists of different types of support, including emotional support, integration, tangible help, and information support (Darrington, et al., 2005). Having supportive family and friends help single women in facing the challenges of negative perceptions towards their single status. DePaulo and Morris (2005) said that singles by old age, sibling relationships often become closer, and any rivalry that did exist are likely to have softened. Singles are likely to have close ties with siblings (as well as nieces and nephews) and especially likely to have maintained those ties throughout their lives.

Cause 5: *Desire to enjoy independence and autonomy*

Independence and autonomy or being free is also a factor in single participants’ choice to stay single. Having independence is having time with their friends, relatives and others. Being single is also having autonomy in making decisions. This autonomy is exercised if they want to buy their wants, to decide on their own, to go somewhere else, to help or not to help. *Percy* used to decide for herself and dislike consulting others when making decisions. She emphasized, “I want to join tours, picnics, going to malls, and the like without asking permission from anybody.” Findings in the study of Berg-Cross, et al., (2004) revealed that many of the single women in some countries chose to remain single not because of unavailability of suitable partners but because they feel that a relationship particularly marriage might imply the loss of personal freedom to pursue their interests. Freedom for them is a celebration of single professional women finding themselves.

Manifestations of Single Blessedness

Single participants in this study experienced single blessedness in their choice of selflessly serving God and in their choice to selflessly serve their family. There are two cohorts of women in this study that are manifesting single blessedness on their own vows or relations with God.

It is said that the dependence on the other person to make him/her happy is not good, because one has to know how to make one content and happy before making someone else happy. In the same manner, going the extra mile, being at times tough on oneself, having high expectations are all integral to their work ethic, which contribute to the fulfilment of their lives and feeling of security (Rose, 2003).

Feelings of Single Blessedness

All the participants expressed their feelings of happiness, security, contentment, satisfaction, and tranquility of being single. These are the consolations of their choice, the choice of the selfless response to serve God and choice of selfless dedication to serve family while enjoying the independence and autonomy.

Outcomes of Single Blessedness

This study revealed that consecrated single participants become prayerful, more holy and sanctified, selfless to their service to God and people, satisfied, and happy. The study of Rose (2003) supported these results stating single blessedness as a vocation and a specific call to holiness. It represents a specific way in which to live out one's response to God. He emphasized that single people are called to holiness by their baptism. There are differing roles and charisms for all baptized individuals. The lay vocation to holiness is a vocation to holiness within the secular world. The gifts that each one receives are also given to enable each to live out the calling and the way in which we respond to God in our Christian lives. Furthermore, a person doesn't have to be religious in order to live the consecrated vocation. If people don't feel called to marriage, holy orders or a religious order, it might just mean they're called to live the consecrated vocation in the world as a consecrated single, having solemnly vowed the entirety of their life exclusively and enduringly to God (Stimpson, 2011).

CONCLUSIONS

Exploring the phenomenological experience of single blessedness in lay institutes of the Catholic Church, this study revealed its two major categories: a choice to respond to the call to serve God and to serve the family and others whether as lay or religious. The reluctance to respond to this call would lead to a kind of uneasiness and incompleteness to single participants. This has been only fulfilled by saying "yes" to God.

In addition to this, single blessedness in their choice of enjoying independence and autonomy surfaced from the narrative of the participants. The option for enjoying independence and autonomy the participants stipulated their commitment to their family responsibilities, laziness in doing house chores, having many worries and the like. Active laywomen come from consecrated or with vows and unconsecrated or without vows women for God. In general, the consecrated single women found blessedness in their choice for their vacation and dedicated their life to Him. They live out the vows of charity, simplicity, and poverty aside from being chaste and obedient. Second, single women in Roman Catholic institutes felt blessed in their choice to have independence and autonomy. This independence and autonomy of lay single women leads them to a kind of satisfaction and happiness. More importantly, in doing all these things for God, for family and for others, single women experienced great happiness, contentment, satisfaction, security, and tranquility.

Acknowledgments

The researchers would like to extend her gratitude to the participants for their time and effort in sharing their experiences of transactional distance in distance education. The research received no external funding. Hence, the authors declare no conflict of interest.

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