

A PATH Less Traveled: Explicating the Lived Experiences of Religious Vocation ASPIRANTS

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ABSTRACT

Vocation in the context of religious life refers to a calling from God to dedicate one's life to His service, often through a formal commitment to a specific way of life. However, a noticeable reduction in the number of individuals responding to God's call warrants an investigation into the factors discouraging them from pursuing a religious life. This phenomenological study was conducted to explore and understand the lived experiences of vocation aspirants regarding their preparation for admission to religious life, and to gather insights into their coping strategies for addressing the challenges in pursuing their calling. The participants of this investigation, chosen purposively, were the females who had joined for a while but were not accepted into the religious life and those who had joined for less than a year but decided not to pursue it. Thematic analysis revealed six themes centered on their lived experiences, including exposure to religious activities, finding joy in serving the Church, responding to the call to religious life, family members' skepticism of their decision, adjusting to convent life, and experiencing internal struggle. Despite these struggles, the vocation aspirants revealed their coping strategies, which were captured in three themes: community support, confidence in the call of God, and embracing the religious life. The study also identified three crucial insights for new aspirants: self-forgiveness and acceptance are a must; trust and guidance from the formators; and emphasis on Spiritual Education. Uncovering the different perspectives of individuals aspiring to embrace the religious life contributed to a comprehensive understanding of the diverse trajectories individuals undertake in their quest for spiritual fulfillment. The insights garnered are expected to empower religious institutions and congregations to create initiatives that contribute to their success.

KEYWORDS: *Education, vocation aspirants, religious life, phenomenology, Philippines*

INTRODUCTION

Vocation in the context of religious life refers to a calling from God to dedicate one's life to His service, often through a formal commitment to a specific way of life. It is the response to God's personal invitation to follow Him and serve in love and faithfulness. However, a Vatican survey revealed a decline in the total number of religious women, with a decrease of 9,730 or 1.59 percent, from 608,958 at the close of 2021 to 599,228 at the end of 2022 (Glatz, 2024). Over the years, there has been a noticeable reduction in the number of individuals responding to God's call globally, with Asia experiencing this trend as well (Cardinal Bo, 2023). Even countries that once had a significant presence of men and women in formation houses are witnessing a decline.

A particularly concerning trend is the diminishing interest in religious vocations among aspirants, as highlighted by a study in the Philippines by Sapidula and Cornelio (2014), which found reduced religiosity. This decline presents challenges for the sustainability and leadership of religious communities. It is essential to investigate the factors discouraging individuals from pursuing religious life, as the decreasing number of women joining congregations raises broader implications. Catholic institutions depend on dedicated aspirants to secure future leadership, making it vital to conduct thorough research to understand the causes of this shortage and devise strategies to foster a committed community.

Moreover, in the Philippines, the congregation grapples with the challenge of a relatively low number of women entering and remaining committed to their religious vocation. This trend raises serious concerns regarding the continuity of their apostolates and ministries.

This context prompted the researcher to investigate what happens to individuals who initially enter a Religious Congregation but later depart. In light of this concern, the researcher identified a significant gap in the existing studies regarding the declining number of aspirants entering religious life. Prior research, such as that by Lingier and Vandewiele (2021), examined reasons for the decline of religious life in the twentieth century, categorized responses, and presented statistical data from qualitative studies. However, these studies did not specifically focus on the experiences of aspirants during their preparation for religious life or on the reasons behind their decisions to withdraw. Additionally, Curley (2018) reviewed existing literature emphasizing the importance of

mentors, spiritual directors, and supportive communities in shaping the vocational discernment journey of aspirants.

Furthermore, Okoye (2024) examined how religious congregations have developed various strategies to prepare individuals for a life of devotion. Key components of effective preparation include formation programs, spiritual retreats, and intentional community living, which adapt to contemporary challenges while maintaining the core essence of religious life.

On the one hand, previous studies have focused on the declining number of individuals entering religious life, emphasizing the importance of mentors, spiritual directors, and supportive communities in aiding aspirants in their discernment process. They also examined how congregations developed strategies for effectively preparing individuals for a religious vocation. On the other hand, this study will focus on aspirants who choose to enter religious life, exploring what motivates them to remain and the challenges that prompt them to reconsider their decision.

This gap underscores the need for a thorough investigation of the perspectives of aspirants who chose not to pursue their vocations, to gather insights that can enhance congregational practices. Furthermore, the study intends to explore the complexities of aspirants' experiences and their choices regarding their religious calling. By gaining an understanding of their viewpoints, the researcher aims to collect valuable information that can inform strategies to counteract the decline in individuals entering religious life. The ultimate objective is to identify the challenges faced by aspirants and solicit their suggestions to make religious congregations more appealing and relevant.

Research Questions

1. What are the lived experiences of the aspirants in their preparation for admission to religious life?
2. How do the aspirants cope with the challenges in relation to admission to religious life?
3. What insights can the aspirants share to encourage new aspirants to continue a religious life?

METHODOLOGY

Research Design. In this study, a qualitative research method,

specifically a phenomenological design, was employed.

To ascertain the essence of the phenomena, the aspirants' experiences were further categorized, scrutinized, and contrasted. It is necessary to "bracket," or set aside, one's own opinions or preconceptions about the phenomenon in order to understand its essence or structure. I employed a qualitative-phenomenological design because, as the researcher, I used a set of research techniques, such as IDI and FGD, to elicit participants' lived experiences while setting aside my own views.

Research Participants. In this study, purposive sampling was used to select participants, following the criteria outlined in the study's objective. This method, often referred to as judgment sampling, involved intentionally selecting participants based on specific personal characteristics (Etikan et al., 2016). Specifically, the participants in this research were 16 females who joined for a while but were not accepted into the religious life, and those who joined for less than a year or more and decided not to pursue it. Of the 16 females interviewed, 10 joined the IDI, and 6 participated in the FGD.

Data Sources. The data sources were FGD and IDI, conducted via video conferencing, phone, and face-to-face interaction. These were the sources of participants' responses to the questions. Another source was my field notes. These are the most efficient ways to connect with the participants. The participants were the aspirants and those who had joined Religious Life for a while but did not pursue it.

Data Collection. Data collection was conducted through virtual and face-to-face conferences. But during the face-to-face interview with the other participants, the researcher first asked them what would be their most convenient way or platform for the interview. Their preference was to conduct the online FGD and IDI because of the distance. They came from different parts of the country, and others from outside the Philippines. Likewise, the participants were more than willing to share their experiences.

Data Analysis. The researcher gathered rich, detailed data through methods such as interviews, observations, and document analysis. Second is the Data Organization. The researcher systematically organized the data to facilitate analysis. This included transcribing interviews, coding, and categorizing. Third is the Data Reduction. The researcher condensed the data into manageable units,

such as themes or patterns, in the Data Display. The researcher represented the condensed data visually using matrices, charts, or diagrams to facilitate interpretation and comparison. Fifth is the Conclusion Drawing and Verification. The researcher interpreted the data, drew conclusions, and ensured the findings aligned with the research questions.

Ethical Considerations. This investigation was guided and monitored by the UIC-REC to ensure its ethical soundness. Thus, the following ethical dimensions were validated: social value, informed consent, vulnerability of the research participants, risks, benefits and safety, privacy and confidentiality of the information, justice, transparency, qualification of the researcher, adequacy of facilities, and community involvement.

RESULTS

Lived Experiences of the Aspirants in their Preparation for Admission to Religious Life

Table 1 shows the six essential themes that emerged after a thorough analysis of the collected and transcribed data. As shown, each theme is broken down into the identified core ideas, established earlier through participants' recurring testimonies.

Table 1
Lived Experiences of the Aspirants in their Preparation for Admission to Religious Life

Essential Themes	Core Ideas
Being exposed in religious activities	Exposed by family in religious activities Worked in the convent Influenced by friend nuns Participated in the search-in activities
Finding joy in serving the Church	Happy with the life they had in serving the church Embraced service and simplicity of life Looked forward to every church activity
	Document preparation Personal conversion Simplifying their personal needs Turnover of work responsibilities

Responding to the call of religious life	Joined retreats Attended the vocation formation Sought spiritual guidance
Family being skeptical of their decision	Family and friends having mixed emotion. Their parents accepted their decision Family members disagreed at the beginning but had no choice
Adjusting to convent life	Letting go of dreams Avoiding the urge of using gadgets Constricted with the laws and practices in the convent Conflict with the formator
Experiencing internal struggle	Worried of the relationship with their family Doubts and fears in joining the monastery Felt insecure Felt anxious with the things they do

Being exposed in religious activities. This theme emanated from the core ideas, which resonated with the participants' shared experiences: their familiarity with the church's events and undertakings prepared them for admission to religious life. The exposure and participation of their family in church activities, having worked in the convent themselves, and having been influenced by nuns they knew, have made them more aware of the life they are getting into.

Finding joy in serving the Church. This is another theme that was extracted from the qualitative data. The core ideas on which this was based centered on the participants being happy with the lives they have had in serving the church, embracing service and a simple life, which made them look forward to every church activity. The participants' interest in religious life is reflected in their joy at the genuine service they provide through various church activities.

Responding to the call of religious life. This generated theme describes participants' direct, immersive experiences of their commitment to religious life. Their embrace of the various tasks and responsibilities is a mark of their preparation for religious life, as reflected in core ideas such as document preparation, personal conversion during retreat, vocation formation, simplifying personal needs, and their turnover of work responsibilities, to name a few.

Family being skeptical of their decision. Among the highlighted cluster of responses from the vocation aspirants regarding their preparation for admission to religious life are echoes and thoughts of doubt about their intention. The core idea of mixed emotions when family and friends initially disagree but eventually accept their decision to enter the convent is a significant factor for the participants to consider.

Adjusting to convent life. One of the extracted themes is about the participants’ adjustment to convent life. This was based on core ideas such as letting go of dreams, avoiding the urge to use gadgets, being constrained by the convent's laws and practices, and the conflict between these and the formator. These experiences manifest the initial transformation the aspirants need to incorporate into their daily routines as they prepare to enter the religious life.

Experiencing internal struggle. This particular theme was derived from the following core ideas: being worried about their relationship with their family, having doubts and fears about joining the monastery, and feeling insecure. The participants expressed that there were times when they pondered the uncertainties of their intentions as they prepared to enter religious life.

Coping Mechanisms of the Aspirants in their Preparation for Admission to Religious Life

Table 2 presents the three essential themes extracted from a thorough analysis of the transcribed data. As shown, each theme is supported by the identified core ideas from participants' recurring testimonies.

Table 2
Coping Mechanisms of the Aspirants in their Preparation for Admission in Religious Life

Essential Themes	Core Ideas
Community Support	Sought the help of formators Allowed the congregation to decide on their behalf Helped by the vocation directress Sisters motivated them
Confidence in the Call of God	Grounded with their intentions Avoided dwelling on things that cannot be controlled Surrendering to God

Embrace Religious Life	Turned to prayer
	Observed what everyone was doing
	Followed instructions
	Complied with the task given to them

Community Support. This theme emanated from the core ideas of participants seeking the help of formators or allowing the congregation to decide on their behalf. During the IDI and FGD, participants stressed that the support they received from the religious community, including guidance and motivation from the vocation directress and the congregation sisters, was a vital factor in their decision to enter the convent.

Confidence in the Call of God. Another theme extracted from the transcribed data concerns participants’ confidence in the call of God. The core ideas that established this include the beliefs that their plan of embracing the religious life is grounded in their intentions and in strong faith through surrendering to God and turning to prayer. The participants also expressed that avoiding dwelling on things beyond their control was a manifestation of this confidence in the call of God.

Embrace Religious Life. This theme was developed from core ideas, such as observing others, following instructions, and complying with the task given. The participants’ acceptance of the ways, routines, and nuances of religious life, as they prepared to enter the convent, was a coping mechanism.

Insights Shared by the Aspirants to Encourage New Aspirants to Continue a Religious Life

Revealed in Table 3 are the three essential themes pertaining to the insights shared by the aspirants to encourage new aspirants to continue a religious life. These themes emanated from a meticulous analysis of the gathered qualitative data. As shown, each theme is anchored in the identified core ideas from participants’ recurring testimonies.

Table 3
Insights Shared by the Aspirants to Encourage New Aspirants to Continue a Religious Life

Essential Theme	Core Ideas
	Religious life is not perfect Disappointments are part of the journey

Self-forgiveness and acceptance are a must	Stay rooted and grounded on the purpose Know self well
Trust and guidance with the formators	Consider the formator as confidant Seek advice from a formator or a spiritual director Open communication with the formator Give aspirants to freely express themselves
Emphasis on Spiritual Education	Pray and surrender everything to God Pray and listen to your heart Pray and ask the Holy Spirit's guidance Develop the ability to adapt and accept change Cultivate daily meditation practice

Self-forgiveness and acceptance are a must. This theme was identified through the following core ideas extracted from the participants’ testimonies: that religious life is not perfect and that disappointments are part of the journey. Also, staying rooted and grounded in the purpose, as well as knowing oneself well, could lead to acceptance of the decision.

Trust and guidance with the formators. The participants believe that fostering a supportive and nurturing environment for aspirants by encouraging open communication with formators is an important insight worth sharing with new aspirants. This theme is embodied in the following core ideas: considering the formator as a confidant, seeking advice from a formator or a spiritual director, establishing open communication with the formator, and allowing aspirants to freely express themselves.

Emphasis on Spiritual Education. Another theme extracted from the transcribed data, worth sharing to encourage new aspirants to continue a religious life, is the emphasis on spiritual education. The participants believed that praying and surrendering everything to God, praying and listening to one’s heart, and praying and asking for the Holy Spirit's guidance could help aspirants continue a religious life. Also, developing the ability to adapt to and accept change and cultivating a daily meditation practice are strong factors that would enable new aspirants to embrace the religious life.

DISCUSSION

Lived Experiences of the Aspirants in their Preparation for Admission to Religious Life

Being exposed in religious activities. Being immersed in or familiar with religious activities is a common lived experience among vocation aspirants. This resulting theme is similar to the report of the 2nd Edition of the International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences (2015), which states that religious activities encompass a wide range of rituals and practices, including rites of passage, daily worship, and private prayer. These activities can be formal or informal, collective or individual, reflecting both continuity and change in religious practices over time; thus, this theme, which encapsulates the multifaceted lived experiences of vocation aspirants to religious life activities, particularly in the church. This result also supports the study by Paz (2022), which found that vocation aspirants shared experiences of vulnerability and self-discovery as they navigate the challenges of religious life within the church. This theme also aligns with Okoye (2024), who highlighted the significance of silence and solitude in the daily lives of nun aspirants. The church serves as a sanctuary where these individuals grapple with their innermost fears and desires, often feeling exposed in moments of contemplation and prayer.

Finding joy in serving the Church. This theme implies that the call to religious life is a profound and soul-stirring experience that shapes the entire existence of the participants of this study as they immerse themselves in various religious activities, for instance, in the Church, and that they often experience a deep spiritual growth, self-discovery, and passionate dedication. This finding aligns with Curley's (2018) study, which reflects on the pivotal moment when a sense of calling first stirs within a person, setting them on a path of introspection and discernment. This also resonates with the experiences of many aspirants who describe a profound sense of inner conviction and divine guidance that compels them to explore religious life.

Likewise, this finding supports Paz's (2022) reports that the struggles individuals face in grappling with uncertainties and societal pressures elucidate the complex nature of developing interest in religious life, which demands resilience, faith, and a steadfast resolve to overcome obstacles along the way. This theme also jibes with Brown (2023), who emphasizes the importance of supportive networks and guidance in shaping the spiritual development of aspirants.

Responding to the call of religious life. This theme aligns with the experience of vocation aspirants: the call to religious life is a profound, deeply personal journey in pursuit of spiritual fulfillment and service to a higher purpose. This finding aligns with Curley's (2018) claim that vocational aspirants often describe a sense of calling or divine nudging that compels them to explore the possibility of a religious life. Their experiences are marked by introspection, prayer, and engagement with spiritual mentors to discern their fit within a particular religious community. Also, the said theme is in line with Paz's (2022) notes that aspirants may face internal conflicts and external pressures as they grapple with the demands of religious life, such as celibacy, poverty, and obedience and that these challenges serve as opportunities for growth, resilience, and deepening of faith as aspirants learn to surrender control and trust in the divine guidance that sustains and empowers them along their journey. The theme also aligns with Curley (2018), who highlights the formation process within religious communities as a transformative period in which aspirants develop meaningful relationships, receive spiritual guidance, and engage in ministries that align with their passions and talents.

Family being skeptical of their decision. This theme implies that the decision to enter religious life is a deeply personal and spiritual one, often met with skepticism and concern from family members. This skepticism can create tensions within families and challenge the vocation aspirants as they navigate their path towards religious life. This result aligns with Curley's (2018) findings, which highlight the struggles vocational aspirants face in dealing with their families' skepticism. The authors found that many aspirants felt conflicted between honoring their families' wishes and following their own calling to religious life. Additionally, Curley also corroborates the claims that shed light on the lived experiences of vocational aspirants as they navigate familial skepticism. The authors found that aspirants often felt isolated and unsupported by their families, leading to feelings of guilt and alienation. Despite these challenges, many vocation aspirants found strength in their faith and community support to persevere in their decision to enter religious life. Moreover, this theme explains the findings of Paz (2022), which explore the profound impact of societal expectations and familial pressures on vocational aspirants, adding an additional layer of internal conflict to their journey. The struggle to balance external influences with personal convictions can lead to feelings of guilt, isolation, and a sense of alienation from oneself.

Adjusting to convent life. This theme encapsulates the transformative

journey of adjusting to convent life that religious vocation aspirants undertake when they choose to dedicate their lives to a higher calling. It involves a process of adaptation, self-discovery, and spiritual growth that can be both rewarding and challenging. The foregoing statements embody the research findings of Oyoke (2022), which highlighted that the initial stages of adjusting to convent life can be particularly difficult for vocation aspirants. They may experience feelings of homesickness, loneliness, and doubt as they leave behind the familiar and embark on a journey of faith and commitment. This theme also aligns with Paz's (2022) findings, which indicate that the process of adjusting to religious life is ongoing and dynamic. Also, the theme resonates with Borneman's (2020) contentions, which underscore and explore how vocation aspirants undergo a profound inner metamorphosis as they grapple with questions of identity, purpose, and service, drawn to this path by prayer, spirituality, charism, community life, and mission. This transformative journey often involves a deepening sense of connection with the divine, a heightened awareness of social justice issues, and a renewed commitment to living out one's faith in tangible ways (Borneman, 2020).

Experiencing internal struggle. This theme implies that vocation aspirants may face myriad challenges as they navigate the call to devote their lives to a higher purpose. The internal struggle these individuals experience is a defining aspect of their spiritual quest, shaping their understanding of self and their relationship with the divine.

This theme aligns with Paz's (2022) claims, which highlight the complex emotions and internal conflicts that vocation aspirants encounter throughout their discernment process, often experiencing doubt, fear, and uncertainty about their decision. The internal struggle manifests as a tension between following one's personal desires and responding to a higher calling, leading aspirants to question their motivations and beliefs, which also brings in the profound impact of societal expectations and familial pressures on vocation aspirants, adding an additional layer of internal conflict to their journey (Curley, 2018). The struggle to balance external influences with personal convictions can lead to feelings of guilt, isolation, and a sense of alienation from oneself. However, through prayer, reflection, and guidance from mentors, individuals can navigate their internal struggles and find strength in their commitment to religious life.

Additionally, the findings by Oyoke (2024) which shed light on the lived experiences of vocation aspirants as they navigate through a number of external factors which could be responsible for the desertion of religious life,

namely, influence of the contemporary culture, inadequate initial formation, wrong exercise of authority, and unhealthy, unsupportive community leaving the aspirants often felt isolated and unsupported by their families, leading to feelings of guilt and alienation. Despite these challenges, many vocation aspirants found strength in their faith and community support to persevere in their decision to enter religious life.

Coping Mechanisms of the Aspirants in their Preparation for Admission to Religious Life

Community Support. This theme encapsulates the belief that creating a supportive and nurturing community is essential for individuals aspiring to enter religious life, as it plays a crucial role in their coping mechanism during the challenging preparation process. This finding supports Borneman's (2020) statement that vocation aspirants who actively engaged in a supportive religious community reported lower levels of stress and anxiety during the discernment and admission process. The researchers highlighted the importance of communal prayer and fellowship in building resilience and sustaining the candidates' commitment to religious life. This result is also in consonance with Oyoke's (2024) study findings, which underscore the role of mentors and spiritual advisors within the community in boosting the confidence and preparedness of aspirants for admission into religious life. The theme also aligns with Cadge's (2014) beliefs that building and maintaining strong relationships within the religious community can offer emotional and social support. Shared experiences and a sense of belonging can be crucial for coping with the challenges of religious life.

Confidence in the call of God. This idea is associated with the biblical description of "God-confidence," which starts with faith in God's promises (1 John 5:15-15), an internalized aspect of self-confidence as a process of setting realistic, increasingly challenging goals that leave a trail of achievements along the way. This theme implies that discerning a call to religious life is a deeply personal and transformative experience. The aspirant's efforts to maintain confidence in the call of God can serve as a powerful coping mechanism, providing strength, resilience, and clarity amidst the complexities of vocation discernment. This theme aligns with Borneman's (2020) claim that confidence in the call of God empowers vocation aspirants to navigate the challenges and uncertainties that may arise during the discernment process. It implies that vocational aspirants are motivated by their desire for prayer, spiritual growth, and a deeper relationship with God.

This finding also resonates the ideas of Oyoke (2024), which states that by cultivating a deep trust in God's guidance and providence, aspirants are able to overcome doubts and fears, and embrace the journey with courage and conviction and that it draws upon spiritual practices such as prayer, meditation, and contemplation, vocation aspirants to deepen their relationship with God and gain a deeper understanding of His calling in their lives. This spiritual grounding fosters a sense of inner peace and clarity, enabling aspirants to make informed decisions and respond with openness to the promptings of the Holy Spirit. Moreover, community support and mentorship play a crucial role in nurturing confidence in the call of God. By engaging with spiritual directors, mentors, and fellow aspirants, vocation seekers find encouragement, guidance, and solidarity in their discernment journey (Oyoke, 2024).

Embrace Religious Life. This theme reflects that religious life has long served as a source of guidance, solace, and purpose for individuals seeking a greater connection with their spirituality. For many religious vocation aspirants, the decision to pursue a life dedicated to religious service is a deeply personal and transformative journey. As VanderWeele (2017) states, participation in religious services is associated with numerous aspects of human flourishing, including happiness and life satisfaction, mental and physical health, meaning and purpose, character and virtue, and close social relationships.

These findings jibe with the claims in the research study by Oyoke (2024) that have shown that the communal aspect of religious life can offer vocation aspirants a sense of belonging and solidarity, helping to alleviate feelings of isolation and providing a support network during the rigorous process of discernment and preparation, and indicates that the rituals, traditions, and teachings associated with religious life can provide vocation aspirants with a sense of purpose, direction, and clarity as they prepare for admission into religious communities.

Insights Shared by the Aspirants to Encourage New Aspirants to Continue a Religious Life

Self-forgiveness and acceptance are a must. This theme implies that in the journey towards religious life, aspiring individuals often face the dilemma of self-forgiveness and acceptance. The ability to forgive oneself and accept past mistakes is crucial for fostering inner peace and spiritual growth. Self-forgiveness involves letting go of negative emotions associated with past wrongdoings and finding a sense of peace within oneself. This was demonstrated

in the study by Exline et al. (2013), which found that some components of religiosity, such as religious struggles, are negatively related to trait forgiveness. Religious struggles occur when some aspect of a religious belief, practice, or experience becomes a focus of negative thoughts, emotions, concerns, or conflict.

This theme also confirms the research findings of Neff and Beretvas (2022), which highlight the importance of self-compassion in promoting emotional well-being and reducing depressive symptoms among individuals, and emphasize the significance of self-acceptance in religious practices. As aspiring individuals share their experiences of self-forgiveness and acceptance, they serve as role models for new aspirants, demonstrating the transformative power of these practices in fostering spiritual growth and inner peace.

Trust and guidance with the formators. This theme pertains to the fact that in the pursuit of a vocation in religious life, aspirants often undergo a period of discernment and formation that is shaped by their interactions with formators - individuals entrusted with guiding and supporting them along their spiritual journey. Through insightful reflections from aspirants themselves, it becomes evident that the quality of communication with their formators greatly influences their journey towards embracing a religious vocation. This finding aligns with Oyoke's (2024) findings, which showed that aspirants who reported a strong relationship with their formators were more likely to experience a sense of belonging and connection within their religious community. This sense of support and understanding fosters a nurturing environment that empowers aspirants to navigate the challenges and uncertainties of discerning a religious vocation. This finding also agrees with the belief of Harrington (2025) which suggests that the church, a place of worship, is a vital means of grace for Christians, providing a space for corporate worship, fellowship, and fulfilling the mission of spreading the gospel, which implies that ongoing education and formation within the religious community can help individuals deepen their understanding of their faith, the traditions of their order, and the challenges they may face, providing them with tools for coping and this resonates with Curley (2018) that believes seeking guidance from experienced spiritual directors can provide individuals with valuable insights and assistance in navigating the complexities of religious life.

Emphasis on Spiritual Education. The holistic meaning of spiritual education serves as the foundation for this theme. It pertains to all forms of education —moral, sports, health, character, science, and religion (Husain, 2008).

Specifically, for this present study, the context parallels that of Abdu'l-Baha as cited by Huang (2020), which states that spiritual education helps humans to understand the connection between spiritual and physical reality, and how to use divine power to help control their lower nature (animalistic nature) and raise it to a higher nature (divine nature). Thus, this theme agrees with the claims of Curley (2018) which embodies that spiritual education serves as a guiding light for the vocation aspirants on their spiritual journey, providing them with the necessary tools and knowledge to deepen their understanding of their faith and that by engaging in spiritual practices and seeking spiritual knowledge, individuals can cultivate a sense of tranquility and serenity in their lives, leading to a greater sense of fulfillment and purpose. This inner peace not only benefits the individual but also radiates outwards, positively impacting those around them and creating a more harmonious community.

This result also aligns with the claims of Oyoke (2024) and Paz (2022), who argue that spiritual education plays a crucial role in developing a strong moral compass and ethical foundation. By learning the teachings and principles of their faith, individuals are guided to make ethical choices and act in alignment with their spiritual beliefs. This moral clarity helps individuals navigate the complexities of life with integrity and compassion, fostering empathy and understanding for others.

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