

From Moral Rupture to Vocational Reconstruction: An Interpretative Phenomenological Study of Roman Catholic Priest-Fathers

Rev. Romel M. Apurillo, RPsy 

Vicar For Clergy: RCAP

romelmapurillo@gmail.com

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Corresponding Email:

romelmapurillo@gmail.com

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Abstract. Vocational identity represents a central psychological construct through which individuals organize meaning, purpose, relationships, and moral commitment across the lifespan. Although previous research has substantially advanced understanding of clergy well-being, burnout, and resilience, little empirical evidence explains how Roman Catholic priests who become biological fathers reconstruct their vocational identity while remaining in active ministry. This study explores the lived experiences of Roman Catholic diocesan priest-fathers and examined the process through which vocational identity was reconstructed following fatherhood. Using an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), eight Roman Catholic diocesan priest-fathers who had fathered biological children after ordination and continued active ministry following ecclesiastical mandated renewal program participated in semi-structured interviews. Data were analyzed using the idiographic and hermeneutic procedures of Smith et al., (2022). Four interrelated experiential themes emerged: Constructing the Priestly Self, Relational Vulnerability, Moral Rupture, and Vocational Reconstruction. The findings revealed that priesthood initially functioned as participants' master identity, while emotional loneliness and unmet attachment needs gradually created conditions for significant relationships that culminated in fatherhood. Rather than experiencing fatherhood as the end of vocation, being a breach of celibacy, participants described profound identity disruption followed by an ongoing process of reconstructing vocation through responsibility, relational accompaniment, narrative reinterpretation, and spiritual integration. These findings informed the development of the Phenomenological Framework of Vocational Identity Reconstruction, an interpretative model illustrating how vocational identity may be disrupted and subsequently reconstructed through lived experience. The study contributes to vocational psychology, narrative identity theory, attachment theory, moral injury research, and the psychology of religion by suggesting that vocational identity is a dynamic interpretative process continually reconstructed through significant life experiences rather than a fixed achievement established at ordination.

Introduction

Roman Catholic priesthood has long been recognized as one of the most comprehensive forms of vocational commitment because it integrates spiritual identity, pastoral ministry, moral responsibility, and lifelong ecclesial service into a unified way of life. Within vocational psychology, vocation has likewise been conceptualized as a central identity through which individuals organize purpose, values, relationships, and meaning across the lifespan (Dik & Duffy, 2009; Duffy et al., 2018). Consequently, experiences that fundamentally challenge vocational commitment have implications that extend beyond occupational functioning to influence identity, psychological well-being, spirituality, and existential coherence.

Recent empirical research has substantially expanded understanding of clergy well-being by documenting elevated levels of burnout, emotional exhaustion, compassion fatigue, loneliness, and occupational stress among priests and other religious leaders (Francis & Crea, 2021; Clarke et al., 2023). These psychological outcomes have been associated with increasing

pastoral responsibilities, administrative burdens, emotional labor, unrealistic congregational expectations, and limited opportunities for reciprocal emotional relationships. While these studies have significantly advanced knowledge concerning clergy mental health, they have focused primarily on occupational functioning rather than the reconstruction of vocational identity following profound life events. They rarely touched on how such stressors affect the totality of priestly identity and how such could lead to unhealthy copings.

One population remains almost entirely absent from empirical psychological investigation: Roman Catholic diocesan priests who become biological fathers while remaining in active priestly ministry. Existing discussions surrounding priest-fatherhood have predominantly emerged from theological, canonical, and ecclesiastical perspectives, emphasizing celibacy, institutional accountability, and pastoral governance. Although these perspectives remain essential, they provide limited understanding of how priest-fathers themselves experience fatherhood, negotiate competing relational identities, and reconstruct vocational identity following a life event that appears to challenge one of the defining commitments of ordained ministry.

This absence represents a significant gap within vocational psychology, identity development, and the psychology of religion. Despite increasing scholarly attention to clergy well-being and vocational resilience, no empirically grounded psychological framework currently explains how Roman Catholic priest-fathers reconstruct vocational identity after fatherhood while continuing active ministry. Understanding this process has implications not only for priestly formation and pastoral accompaniment but also for broader theories of vocational development, narrative identity, attachment, moral injury, and identity reconstruction.

The present study addresses this gap by examining the lived experiences of Roman Catholic diocesan priest-fathers through Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). By exploring how participants interpreted fatherhood, priesthood, moral conflict, relational vulnerability, and continuing ministry, the study develops an interpretative framework that explains how vocational identity is reconstructed following profound moral and existential disruption.

Objectives of the Study

The primary objective of this study was to explore the lived experiences of Roman Catholic diocesan priest-fathers and to understand how they reconstructed their vocational identity while remaining in active priestly ministry following fatherhood.

Specifically, the study sought to:

1. Explore how Roman Catholic diocesan priest-fathers experienced priesthood as a vocational identity before becoming fathers.
2. Examine the relational, emotional, and psychological experiences that preceded fatherhood.
3. Describe how participants experienced moral rupture and identity disruption following fatherhood.
4. Explain how participants reconstructed vocational identity through responsibility, relational accompaniment, spiritual integration, and narrative reinterpretation.
5. Develop a phenomenological framework that explains the process of vocational identity reconstruction among Roman Catholic priest-fathers.

Conceptual Framework

The present study is informed by four complementary theoretical perspectives that collectively provide a foundation for understanding vocational identity reconstruction among Roman Catholic priest-fathers. Rather than functioning as hypotheses to be tested, these perspectives served as sensitizing concepts that informed interpretation while remaining subordinate to participants' lived experiences, consistent with the interpretative orientation of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis.

The first theoretical foundation is Vocational Psychology, which conceptualizes vocation as a psychologically significant identity through which individuals organize meaning, purpose, values, and occupational commitment (Dik & Duffy, 2009; Duffy et al., 2018). Within Roman Catholic priesthood, vocation extends beyond occupational identity to encompass an enduring sacramental commitment that integrates spiritual calling, pastoral service, moral responsibility, and personal identity. This perspective provides the conceptual basis for understanding priesthood as participants' primary interpretative framework prior to fatherhood.

The second perspective is Narrative Identity Theory, which proposes that identity develops through evolving autobiographical narratives that organize life experiences into coherent understandings of self (McAdams, 2001; McAdams

& Guo, 2015). Significant life events often disrupt previously established narratives, requiring individuals to reinterpret experiences and reconstruct personal meaning. Within the present study, fatherhood following priestly ordination is understood as a profound narrative disruption requiring participants to reorganize competing identities into renewed vocational coherence.

The third perspective is Attachment Theory, which recognizes that the need for emotionally significant and secure interpersonal relationships continues throughout adulthood (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2019). Although priests devote themselves to extensive pastoral relationships, these relationships are often characterized by emotional asymmetry in which priests provide emotional care without experiencing equivalent opportunities for reciprocal vulnerability. Attachment Theory therefore provides an important lens for understanding the relational vulnerability described by participants prior to fatherhood.

The fourth theoretical perspective is Moral Injury Theory, which explains the psychological, relational, and spiritual consequences of experiences perceived to violate deeply held moral commitments (Litz et al., 2009; Griffin et al., 2019). Rather than conceptualizing fatherhood solely as moral transgression, the present study uses Moral Injury Theory to understand how competing moral identities generated profound existential conflict and identity fragmentation before participants gradually reconstructed vocational meaning.

These theoretical perspectives converge within the Phenomenological Framework of Vocational Identity Reconstruction proposed in this study. Grounded in participants' lived experiences, the framework illustrates four interconnected interpretative movements: Constructing the Priestly Self, Relational Vulnerability, Moral Rupture, and Vocational Reconstruction. Together, these movements explain how vocational identity may evolve through recurring processes of identity formation, relational challenge, existential disruption, and renewed integration. Rather than viewing vocation as a fixed identity established at ordination, the framework suggests that vocational identity is continually interpreted and reconstructed through significant life experiences, ultimately contributing to a deeper and more authentic understanding of one's calling.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to explore how Roman Catholic diocesan priest-fathers experienced fatherhood and reconstructed their vocational identity while remaining in active priestly ministry. IPA is a qualitative research methodology grounded in phenomenology, hermeneutics, and ideography that seeks to understand how individuals make sense of significant lived experiences through a process of interpretative engagement between participant and researcher (Smith et al., 2022). Rather than generating explanatory theory or identifying causal relationships, IPA seeks to illuminate the meaning individuals attribute to experiences that are personally, psychologically, and socially significant (Eatough & Smith, 2017).

The methodological orientation of the present study was informed by Husserl's phenomenological emphasis on lived experience while incorporating Heidegger's interpretative phenomenology, which recognizes that understanding is inherently interpretative and contextually situated (Heidegger, 1962). Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics further informed the analytic process by emphasizing that meaning emerges through the interaction between the participant's account and the researcher's interpretative understanding (Gadamer, 1975). Consequently, the study embraced IPA's principle of the double hermeneutic, wherein participants sought to make sense of their lived experiences while the researcher simultaneously interpreted those interpretations (Smith et al., 2022).

This methodological approach was particularly appropriate because priest-fatherhood represents a complex psychological, moral, relational, and spiritual phenomenon that cannot be adequately understood through descriptive accounts alone. Rather than investigating whether fatherhood violated ecclesiastical expectations, the present study explored how participants understood, interpreted, and reconstructed their vocational identity following fatherhood. The emphasis therefore remained on lived experience, subjective meaning, and identity reconstruction rather than institutional evaluation.

Consistent with IPA's idiographic commitment, the analysis focused on obtaining rich, detailed, and contextually grounded accounts from a relatively small and homogeneous sample before identifying experiential convergence across individual cases (Smith et al., 2022). This approach allowed the researcher to preserve the uniqueness of each participant's experience while developing a broader interpretative understanding of vocational identity reconstruction.

Research Locale

The study was conducted among Roman Catholic diocesan priests serving in various dioceses in the Philippines. To protect participant anonymity, the names of dioceses, parishes, ecclesiastical jurisdictions, and other identifying contextual information are intentionally withheld. The research was undertaken in settings selected by the participants to ensure privacy, confidentiality, and psychological safety during the interview process.

Interviews were conducted in private locations mutually agreed upon by the researcher and participants, including parish offices, retreat houses, and other confidential venues that provided an environment conducive to open and reflective conversation. These settings enabled participants to discuss highly sensitive personal experiences without fear of institutional exposure or social repercussions.

Given the unique and potentially identifiable nature of Roman Catholic priest-fathers, maintaining confidentiality within the research locale constituted an essential ethical consideration throughout the study. Consequently, all contextual descriptions were intentionally limited to preserve participant anonymity while providing sufficient information for readers to understand the context in which the phenomenon occurred.

Participants

Participants were selected using purposive homogeneous sampling, consistent with the methodological principles of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith et al., 2022). IPA prioritizes experiential richness over statistical representativeness and therefore recommends relatively small samples comprising individuals who have experienced the same phenomenon under investigation (Smith et al., 2022; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Eligibility for participation required individuals to satisfy the following inclusion criteria:

1. They were ordained Roman Catholic diocesan priests.
2. They had fathered at least one biological child after ordination.
3. They had undergone ecclesiastically sanctioned renewal program or canonical intervention following disclosure of fatherhood.
4. They remained engaged in active priestly ministry at the time of the study.
5. They voluntarily agreed to participate and provided informed consent.
6. Priests who had permanently left ordained ministry, belonged to religious congregations, or declined to discuss their experiences were excluded from participation.

Eight Roman Catholic diocesan priest-fathers participated in the study. Participants ranged in age from 40 to 60 years and had accumulated between 10 and 24 years of ministerial experience. Fatherhood occurred at varying stages of priestly ministry, providing diversity in vocational trajectories while maintaining the experiential homogeneity required for idiographic inquiry.

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the participants.

Participant	Current Age	Years in Ministry	Years in Ministry Before Fatherhood	Age at Ordination
P1	40	10	8	30
P2	49	21	8	28
P3	43	11	2	32
P4	52	24	2	28
P5	51	20	15	31
P6	42	12	8	30
P7	60	24	7	36
P8	41	10	3	31

Table 1. Participant Characteristics

To ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms (P1–P8) were assigned to all participants, and identifying information relating to diocesan affiliation, ministerial assignment, family members, and geographic location was removed from transcripts and subsequent reporting.

Data Gathering Procedure

Data were collected through individual semi-structured interviews, the primary method recommended in Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis because it allows participants to articulate their experiences using their own language while providing flexibility for the researcher to explore emerging meanings (Smith et al., 2022). Semi-structured interviewing is particularly appropriate when investigating emotionally significant and complex phenomena because it facilitates in-depth exploration without constraining participants to predetermined response categories (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014).

Prior to data collection, ethical approval was secured from the appropriate Institutional Research Ethics Board. Potential participants were contacted individually and received written information describing the purpose of the study, procedures, risks, benefits, confidentiality safeguards, and their rights as research participants. Those who agreed to participate signed written informed consent before the commencement of each interview.

An interview guide was developed based on the study objectives and informed by the relevant literature on vocational identity, narrative identity, attachment, and moral injury. Open-ended questions invited participants to reflect on their vocational journey, experiences preceding fatherhood, emotional and spiritual responses following fatherhood, relationships with their children, experiences of ecclesiastical accompaniment, and evolving understandings of priesthood and vocation. Additional probing questions were employed to clarify meanings and encourage deeper reflection whenever appropriate.

Each interview lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes and was audio-recorded with participants' permission. Interviews were subsequently transcribed verbatim to preserve the richness and authenticity of participants' narratives. Immediately following each interview, the researcher prepared reflective field notes documenting contextual observations, non-verbal communication, emotional tone, and preliminary interpretative insights that informed subsequent analysis.

Recognizing the emotionally sensitive nature of the phenomenon, all interviews adopted a trauma-informed approach emphasizing empathy, participant autonomy, emotional safety, respect, and the right to decline any question or terminate participation at any point during the interview process (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014).

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed the systematic and iterative procedures of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis outlined by Smith et al. (2022). Analysis commenced immediately after transcription to facilitate immersion in each participant's account while preserving IPA's idiographic commitment to understanding each individual case before examining patterns across participants.

Each transcript was read repeatedly to enable the researcher to become intimately familiar with the participant's narrative. During subsequent readings, exploratory comments were documented, attending simultaneously to descriptive content, linguistic characteristics, and conceptual interpretations. Descriptive comments focused on participants' experiences, linguistic comments examined patterns of expression and language use, while conceptual comments represented the researcher's initial interpretative engagement with participants' accounts (Smith et al., 2022).

Emergent themes were then developed independently for each participant by identifying concise statements that captured the psychological essence of meaningful sections of text. Rather than fragmenting the narratives into isolated codes, the analysis preserved the contextual integrity of each participant's lived experience.

Only after completing the analysis of each individual case were patterns examined across participants. Related experiential themes were clustered into broader superordinate themes through constant movement between individual quotations, complete transcripts, emergent themes, and evolving interpretations, reflecting IPA's hermeneutic circle (Smith et al., 2022). This recursive process ultimately resulted in the identification of four interconnected superordinate themes: Constructing the Priestly Self, Relational Vulnerability, Moral Rupture, and Vocational Reconstruction. These themes subsequently informed the development of the Phenomenological Framework of Vocational Identity Reconstruction.

Reflexivity

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) recognizes that knowledge is co-constructed through the interaction between the participant and the researcher. Rather than assuming complete objectivity, IPA acknowledges that researchers inevitably bring their own personal, professional, cultural, and theoretical perspectives into the interpretative process.

Consequently, reflexivity was maintained throughout the study to enhance methodological transparency and trustworthiness (Smith et al., 2022).

The principal researcher is a Filipino Roman Catholic diocesan priest with formal training in clinical psychology and extensive experience in priestly formation, psychological assessment, and clergy accompaniment. As both an ordained minister and a psychologist, the researcher shared important aspects of the participants' ecclesial and cultural world while remaining attentive to the differences in their individual experiences. This insider position facilitated rapport, trust, and openness during interviews, particularly given the highly sensitive nature of priest-fatherhood, moral conflict, and vocational identity. Participants frequently expressed thoughts and emotions that might have been difficult to disclose to researchers outside the Catholic priesthood.

At the same time, the researcher recognized that this insider status could shape both data collection and interpretation. Shared assumptions regarding priesthood, celibacy, ecclesial life, and Filipino Catholic culture could lead to the uncritical acceptance of participants' accounts or the inadvertent projection of the researcher's own experiences and theological perspectives onto the narratives. To mitigate these risks, the researcher adopted a stance of disciplined reflexivity, intentionally distinguishing participants' meanings from personal assumptions while remaining open to interpretations that challenged preconceived understandings of priestly vocation.

Reflexive practice was sustained throughout the research process. Following each interview, the researcher maintained a reflexive journal documenting personal reactions, emerging assumptions, emotional responses, and preliminary interpretations. These reflections served not as data but as an audit trail that enabled continual examination of how the researcher's positionality might influence subsequent analysis. During coding and theme development, interpretations were repeatedly checked against the original interview transcripts to ensure that themes remained grounded in participants' lived experiences rather than the researcher's expectations or theological commitments.

The researcher's dual identity as both priest and psychologist ultimately informed the study through what Smith et al. (2022) describe as the *double hermeneutic*: participants sought to make sense of their experiences of priesthood and fatherhood, while the researcher sought to make sense of the participants' meaning-making. Rather than attempting to eliminate subjectivity, the study embraced reflexivity as a methodological resource that enhanced interpretative depth while promoting transparency, credibility, and trustworthiness. In this way, the findings represent a carefully considered interpretation of participants' lived experiences, situated within the shared yet critically examined context of Filipino Catholic priesthood.

Ethical Considerations

The study received ethical approval from the DLSU-D Institutional Research Ethics Board before participant recruitment commenced (Protocol Code DLSU-DERC 2019-0263T2). All procedures complied with internationally accepted ethical principles governing research involving human participants, including respect for persons, beneficence, justice, confidentiality, and voluntary participation (American Psychological Association, 2017; World Medical Association, 2013.).

Participants received both written and verbal explanations regarding the study's purpose, procedures, potential risks, anticipated benefits, confidentiality measures, and their rights as research participants. Written informed consent was obtained before participation, and participants were informed that they could decline any question or withdraw from the study at any time without consequence.

Given the highly sensitive nature of priest-fatherhood, extensive measures were implemented to safeguard participant confidentiality. Pseudonyms replaced all identifying information, and any references to diocesan affiliation, parish assignment, geographical location, or family members were removed during transcription. Digital audio recordings, interview transcripts, consent forms, and analytic materials were stored in encrypted password-protected files accessible only to the principal researcher.

Because discussing fatherhood, vocational conflict, and personal relationships could evoke emotional distress, interviews were conducted using trauma-informed principles emphasizing emotional safety, nonjudgment, empathy, and participant autonomy (SAMHSA, 2014). Participants were reminded throughout the interview that they remained in control of the depth and direction of disclosure and could suspend or terminate participation whenever they wished. These safeguards were implemented to ensure that the research process prioritize the participants well-being while maintaining the integrity and trustworthiness of the study.

Results and Discussion

Analysis of the interview transcripts identified four interconnected superordinate themes that explained how Roman Catholic diocesan priest-fathers experienced fatherhood and reconstructed their vocational identity while remaining in active priestly ministry. Consistent with Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), these themes do not represent discrete chronological stages but interconnected interpretative movements through which participants continually revisited, questioned, and redefined their understanding of vocation in light of the lived experience (Smith et al., 2022). Across all narratives, vocational identity emerged as a dynamic psychological and spiritual process that is shaped by relationships, attachment needs, moral conflict, responsibility, and ongoing meaning-making.

Superordinate Theme	Subthemes
Constructing Priestly Self	the The call that defined my life; Living the ideal of priesthood; Priesthood as identity rather than occupation
Relational Vulnerability	Emotional loneliness beneath ministry; The gradual crossing of boundaries; Discovering unmet attachment needs
Moral Rupture	The collapse of the ideal self; Shame, fear, and spiritual disorientation; Becoming both priest and father
Vocational Reconstruction	Accepting responsibility; Integrating fatherhood into vocation; Rediscovering priesthood through authenticity

Table 2. Superordinate Themes and Subthemes

Constructing the Priestly Self

Participants consistently described priesthood as the defining center of their personal identity long before becoming fathers. Ordination was experienced not simply as entrance into religious ministry but as the realization of a lifelong calling that organized their purpose, values, relationships, and understanding of self. Rather than functioning as an occupation, priesthood became the primary lens through which participants interpreted every aspect of life. One participant reflected,

"I never saw priesthood as work. It was who I am. Everything about my life was built around being a priest." (P3)

Another participant explained,

"When I was ordained, I believed my whole future had already been decided. I belong completely to God and to the Church." (P7)

Similarly,

"Everything I planned, every decision I made, was measured against my vocation. I honestly could not imagine myself as anything other than a priest." (P1)

These narratives demonstrate that priesthood functioned as participants' core identity; it provides coherence, existential meaning, and psychological stability. Participants consistently described vocation as encompassing every aspect of their lives rather than representing one social role among many. Consequently, fatherhood did not merely challenge ministerial responsibilities; it threatened the very identity structure through which participants understood themselves.

This finding supports vocational psychology, which conceptualizes calling as a psychologically meaningful identity that organizes life purpose and personal commitment (Dik & Duffy, 2009; Duffy et al., 2018). However, the present findings extend existing scholarship by illustrating that among Roman Catholic priests, vocational identity functions phenomenologically as an overarching interpretative framework through which relationships, sacrifice, suffering, and meaning are continuously understood. The stronger the integration of priesthood into personal identity, the more profound the subsequent disruption became following fatherhood.

These findings also resonate with Narrative Identity Theory, which proposes that identity develops through autobiographical narratives that provide coherence across the life course (McAdams, 2001). Prior to fatherhood, participants possessed highly coherent vocational narratives centered upon ordination and lifelong priestly commitment. This narrative coherence subsequently became vulnerable when fatherhood introduced experiences that could not easily be integrated into previously established understandings of self (McAdams & Guo, 2015).

Relational Vulnerability

Although participants consistently described priestly ministry as deeply meaningful, they also reported experiencing persistent emotional loneliness despite constant interaction with parishioners and communities. Participants distinguished between being continually available to others and experiencing emotionally reciprocal relationships characterized by vulnerability, trust, and authentic mutual care.

One participant observed,

"I was always surrounded by people, but eventually I realized that nobody really knew me." (P5)

Another reflected,

"Everyone expected me to listen. Very few people ever asked how I was really doing." (P2)

Likewise,

"It didn't begin with romance. It began with someone asking whether I was okay." (P4)

Participants consistently rejected interpretations portraying fatherhood as an impulsive rejection of celibacy or priestly commitment. Instead, emotionally significant relationships developed gradually within relational spaces that remained psychologically unfulfilled despite years of committed ministry. In retrospect, participants recognized that their deepest need extended beyond companionship to the experience of being emotionally known, accepted, and understood.

These findings suggest that fatherhood should be understood within a broader developmental and relational context rather than as an isolated behavioral event. Emotional intimacy developed progressively through relationships that fulfilled attachment needs insufficiently addressed within participants' vocational lives.

This finding strongly supports Attachment Theory, which recognizes that the need for secure emotional attachment remains fundamental throughout adulthood (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2019). Although priests engage in numerous pastoral relationships, those relationships often require emotional availability without reciprocal vulnerability. Participants' narratives therefore illustrate how vocational roles characterized by chronic emotional asymmetry may inadvertently leave attachment needs incompletely fulfilled. An experience that left them vulnerable, something beyond what they can handle in a given moment.

The findings likewise complement empirical research documenting emotional loneliness as one of the most persistent psychological challenges among Catholic clergy (Francis & Crea, 2021; Proeschold-Bell & Byassee, 2018; Clarke et al., 2023). However, the present study extends this literature by demonstrating how relational vulnerability functions not simply as an occupational stressor but as an important psychological condition preceding vocational identity reconstruction.

Moral Rupture

Participants described fatherhood as producing profound disruption within their previously coherent vocational identities. Importantly, fatherhood itself was not experienced as the principal source of suffering. Rather, participants described intense psychological distress because priesthood and fatherhood were simultaneously experienced as authentic, meaningful, and morally significant identities that initially appeared impossible to reconcile.

One participant shared,

"I wasn't only afraid of what people would think. I no longer recognized the person I had become." (P8)

Another explained,

"Everything I believed about myself collapsed in a single moment." (P5)

Despite this profound disruption, participants consistently affirmed their children without reservation.

As one participant stated,

"I never wished my child had not been born. My struggle was understanding who I was supposed to be now." (P2)

These narratives reveal that participants' suffering emerged less from fatherhood itself than from the collapse of previously integrated vocational narratives. Priesthood and fatherhood were not experienced as opposing moral realities but as equally meaningful identities whose coexistence generated profound existential conflict. A conflict can potentially break or remake the priest.

This finding aligns closely with Moral Injury Theory, which describes the psychological consequences of experiences perceived to violate deeply held moral commitments (Litz et al., 2009; Griffin et al., 2019). Participants reported experiences of shame, identity fragmentation, spiritual conflict, diminished self-understanding, and existential disorientation consistent with contemporary descriptions of moral injury (Carey & Hodgson, 2018; Mantri et al., 2020).

However, the present findings also extend Moral Injury Theory by suggesting that profound psychological suffering may arise not only from perceived wrongdoing but also from conflicts between identities that individuals regard as equally authentic and morally significant. In this context, moral rupture reflects the collapse of interpretative coherence rather than guilt alone, emphasizing identity organization as a central mechanism underlying existential distress.

Vocational Reconstruction.

Participants ultimately described vocational reconstruction as an ongoing process through which priesthood, fatherhood, responsibility, vulnerability, and personal brokenness became integrated into a renewed understanding of vocation. Reconstruction did not involve returning to an idealized priestly identity but developing a more authentic, compassionate, and psychologically integrated understanding of themselves coming from current lived experience.

Acceptance of responsibility consistently emerged as the decisive turning point. One participant reflected,
"The moment I accepted responsibility for my child was the moment I finally became honest with myself." (P6)

Another stated,
"Fatherhood didn't destroy my vocation. It forced me to live it more truthfully." (P1)

Ecclesiastically sanctioned renewal program likewise played a significant role in facilitating reconstruction. Participants described dialogue with bishops, spiritual directors, confessors, and trusted companions as providing spaces in which priesthood and fatherhood could be gradually reconciled through accountability, discernment, forgiveness, and renewed commitment.

One participant concluded,
"I stopped trying to become the perfect priest. I started trying to become an honest one." (P5)

Across participants' narratives, vocational reconstruction emerged not as the elimination of moral tension but as an ongoing interpretative process through which vocation was continually redefined in light of lived experience. Rather than recovering former identities, participants developed increasingly integrated understandings of priesthood that embraced vulnerability, authenticity, responsibility, and compassion.

These findings extend Narrative Identity Theory by demonstrating that vocational reconstruction involves more than revising autobiographical narratives (McAdams & Guo, 2015; McLean & Syed, 2015). Participants continually reorganized competing identities through relational accompaniment, spiritual discernment, personal responsibility, and reflective meaning-making, gradually constructing new vocational narratives capable of integrating previously conflicting aspects of self. Eventually finding a new way of living the priesthood, one that embraces ministerial functions and biological fatherhood in a healthy integration.

Collectively, the findings suggest that vocational resilience is sustained not by preserving an idealized identity but by the capacity to reinterpret disruption as part of one's continuing vocational journey. Vocational identity therefore emerges as a dynamic interpretative accomplishment that remains open to reconstruction throughout adult life, particularly following experiences that fundamentally challenges established understandings of self (Hirschi et al., 2019; Duffy et al., 2018).

Conclusion and Implications

Proposed Phenomenological Framework of Vocational Identity Reconstruction

The findings of this study culminated in the development of the Phenomenological Framework of Vocational Identity Reconstruction; an interpretative model grounded in the lived experiences of Roman Catholic diocesan priest-fathers.

Unlike explanatory models that seek to establish causal relationships among variables, the proposed framework illustrates the evolving process through which participants interpreted, disrupted, reconstructed, and integrated their vocational identity following fatherhood. The framework emerged inductively from participants' narratives and reflects the phenomenological commitment to understanding lived experience from the perspective of those who have directly encountered the phenomenon (Smith et al., 2022).

The framework consists of four interconnected experiential movements: Constructing the Priestly Self, Relational Vulnerability, Moral Rupture, and Vocational Reconstruction. These movements should not be interpreted as rigid chronological stages but as recursive interpretative processes through which participants continually revisited earlier experiences while constructing new understandings of themselves. Participants frequently moved back and forth between memories of priestly formation, experiences of emotional vulnerability, moments of existential conflict, and emerging interpretations of vocation. This recursive movement reflects the hermeneutic circle that underpins Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, wherein understanding develops through continuous dialogue between individual experiences and the evolving meaning attributed to those experiences (Smith et al., 2022; Gadamer, 1975).

The first movement, Constructing the Priestly Self, represents the formation of vocational identity through priestly discernment, seminary formation, ordination, and pastoral ministry. Participants consistently described priesthood as the organizing center of their identity rather than simply an occupation or professional role. Their understanding of self was deeply embedded within ecclesial commitment, sacramental theology, pastoral responsibility, and lifelong service. This finding supports vocational psychology, which conceptualizes calling as a central identity that provides coherence, purpose, and existential meaning throughout adulthood (Dik & Duffy, 2009; Duffy et al., 2018). The present study extends this perspective by demonstrating that priestly vocation functions phenomenologically as a master narrative through which individuals interpret their personal history, relationships, and future aspirations.

The second movement, Relational Vulnerability, reflects the gradual emergence of unmet emotional and attachment needs beneath sustained pastoral ministry. Participants did not describe themselves as abandoning their vocation or intentionally seeking intimate relationships. Rather, they recounted prolonged experiences of emotional loneliness, relational asymmetry, and the absence of reciprocal vulnerability despite constant engagement with parishioners and pastoral communities. Significant relationships developed gradually through experiences of being emotionally understood, accepted, and personally known. These findings are consistent with Attachment Theory, which maintains that attachment needs remain psychologically significant throughout adulthood and continue to influence interpersonal functioning across the lifespan (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2019). The present findings further suggest that vocational commitment does not eliminate fundamental human attachment needs but may influence the contexts in which those needs are expressed and experienced.

The third movement, Moral Rupture, captures the profound disruption that occurred when participants became fathers. Across all narratives, participants described fatherhood as producing an existential crisis characterized by identity fragmentation, shame, spiritual disorientation, and uncertainty regarding their continuing vocation. Importantly, participants consistently distinguished between rejecting their children and struggling to reconcile fatherhood with priesthood. Their suffering arose primarily from the collapse of previously coherent vocational narratives rather than from fatherhood itself. These findings align with Moral Injury Theory, which describes the psychological and spiritual consequences of experiences perceived to violate deeply held moral commitments (Litz et al., 2009; Griffin et al., 2019). However, the present study extends existing formulations by demonstrating that moral injury may also emerge from conflicts between two identities that individuals regard as equally authentic and morally meaningful. Thus, moral rupture is understood not solely as a consequence of moral transgression but as the disintegration of an established interpretative framework through which individuals previously understood themselves.

The fourth movement, Vocational Reconstruction, represents participants' gradual integration of priesthood and fatherhood into a renewed vocational identity. Reconstruction was consistently described as an ongoing interpretative process rather than a definitive resolution of conflict. Participants reported that assuming responsibility for their children, engaging in ecclesiastical accompaniment, deepening spiritual reflection, and honestly confronting their vulnerability enabled them to reinterpret vocation through greater authenticity and psychological integration. Rather than attempting to recover an idealized identity that existed before fatherhood, participants developed more complex understandings of vocation characterized by humility, responsibility, compassion, and relational maturity. These findings resonate with Narrative Identity Theory, which proposes that individuals continually revise autobiographical narratives in response to significant life experiences in order to preserve coherence and meaning (McAdams & Guo, 2015; McLean & Syed, 2015). The present study extends narrative identity scholarship by illustrating that vocational narratives remain open to reconstruction throughout adulthood, particularly when individuals encounter experiences that fundamentally reshape their understanding of self.

Taken together, the proposed framework conceptualizes vocational identity as a dynamic interpretative process rather than a fixed psychological achievement. Identity reconstruction occurs through continuous interaction among personal experience, relational engagement, moral reflection, spiritual discernment, and autobiographical meaning-making. Consequently, vocational disruption should not necessarily be interpreted as the termination of vocation but may represent a critical context through which vocation is reinterpreted and renewed. This perspective challenges static conceptualizations of vocational identity by emphasizing its developmental, relational, and phenomenological nature.

The proposed framework contributes to vocational psychology by demonstrating that vocational identity may undergo profound reconstruction without necessarily losing its existential significance. It contributes to the psychology of religion by providing an empirically grounded understanding of how religious vocation is interpreted following significant moral and relational disruption. It also extends attachment theory, moral injury theory, and narrative identity theory by illustrating how these perspectives converge within the lived experiences of Roman Catholic priest-fathers. Collectively, the framework offers a psychologically informed model that may guide future qualitative and quantitative investigations of vocational identity reconstruction among clergy and other vocation-centered professions confronting profound identity transitions.

Conclusion

This study explored the lived experiences of Roman Catholic diocesan priest-fathers to understand how vocational identity was reconstructed following fatherhood while continuing active priestly ministry. Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), the findings revealed that vocational identity is neither static nor permanently established at ordination but remains an evolving interpretative process shaped by lived experiences, relationships, moral conflict, and ongoing meaning-making. Across participants' narratives, four interconnected experiential movements—Constructing the Priestly Self, Relational Vulnerability, Moral Rupture, and Vocational Reconstruction—collectively explained how participants navigated profound identity disruption and gradually developed renewed understandings of vocation.

The findings demonstrate that priesthood initially functioned as participants' master identity, organizing their understanding of purpose, spirituality, relationships, and personal meaning. Beneath this coherent vocational identity, however, participants described enduring experiences of emotional loneliness and unmet attachment needs that gradually facilitated emotionally significant relationships culminating in fatherhood. Rather than experiencing fatherhood solely as institutional failure, participants consistently portrayed it as an event that disrupted previously integrated vocational narratives and generated profound existential questioning. Through responsibility, ecclesiastical accompaniment, spiritual discernment, and narrative reinterpretation, participants gradually reconstructed vocation in ways that integrated priesthood and fatherhood into more authentic understandings of self.

The study contributes to vocational psychology by proposing that vocational identity is best understood as a dynamic interpretative accomplishment continually reconstructed through significant life experiences rather than a fixed developmental endpoint. Furthermore, the findings extend Narrative Identity Theory, Attachment Theory, and Moral Injury Theory by demonstrating their complementary value in explaining how individuals reinterpret vocation following profound relational and existential disruption. The Phenomenological Framework of Vocational Identity Reconstruction offers an empirically grounded model that may inform future investigations of vocational identity among clergy and other professions characterized by lifelong commitments and deeply internalized identities.

Practical Implications

The findings have important implications for priestly formation, pastoral leadership, clergy accompaniment, and mental health services within the Roman Catholic Church. Seminary formation programs may benefit from integrating evidence-informed psychoeducational initiatives addressing emotional development, attachment patterns, interpersonal boundaries, relational maturity, and identity formation alongside theological and spiritual formation. Such integration may strengthen future priests' capacity to recognize and respond adaptively to emotional vulnerability before it develops into significant vocational conflict.

The findings also underscore the importance of establishing structured systems of confidential accompaniment for priests experiencing personal, relational, or vocational crises. Participants consistently described compassionate ecclesiastical accompaniment as instrumental in facilitating responsibility, accountability, and vocational reconstruction. Accordingly, dioceses may consider expanding interdisciplinary models of accompaniment that integrate spiritual direction, psychological services, pastoral supervision, and peer support while maintaining fidelity to ecclesial teaching and safeguarding the welfare of all persons involved, particularly children.

For counseling psychologists, pastoral counselors, spiritual directors, and clergy mental health practitioners, the proposed framework provides a clinically relevant understanding of vocational identity reconstruction that extends beyond deficit-oriented models of crisis intervention. Therapeutic interventions that emphasize narrative reconstruction, identity integration, attachment-informed psychotherapy, self-compassion, and moral repair may facilitate healthier psychological adjustment among clergy confronting profound vocational disruption (Carey & Hodgson, 2018; Mantri et al., 2020).

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the study employed a relatively small, homogeneous sample of eight Roman Catholic diocesan priest-fathers, consistent with the idiographic orientation of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith et al., 2022). Consequently, the findings are intended to provide depth of understanding rather than statistical generalization.

Second, participants were drawn exclusively from diocesan clergy within the Philippine context. Cultural, ecclesiastical, and pastoral factors unique to this context may have shaped participants' experiences of vocation, fatherhood, and identity reconstruction. Future studies involving clergy from different countries, ecclesiastical traditions, and cultural settings may further illuminate similarities and contextual differences in vocational reconstruction.

Third, the study focused exclusively on priests who remained in active ministry following fatherhood. Future research should examine the experiences of priests who permanently left ministry, religious-order priests, bishops involved in accompaniment processes, priest-fathers' children, and family members to develop a more comprehensive understanding of vocational transition from multiple perspectives.

Finally, the Phenomenological Framework of Vocational Identity Reconstruction proposed in this study was inductively derived from qualitative findings and therefore requires further empirical examination. Future quantitative research may operationalize the framework to investigate relationships among vocational identity, attachment security, moral injury, narrative identity, psychological well-being, and clergy resilience. Mixed-methods and longitudinal designs may further clarify how vocational reconstruction evolves across different stages of ministry and life.

Despite these limitations, the present study contributes an original and empirically grounded perspective on vocational identity reconstruction among Roman Catholic priest-fathers. By foregrounding participants' lived experiences, the study demonstrates that vocation is not merely preserved or lost following profound life events but may instead be continuously reinterpreted, reconstructed, and renewed through authentic engagement with human vulnerability, responsibility, and enduring commitment to one's calling.

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Competing Interests Statement

The author declares that there are no competing interests regarding the publication of this article.

Data Availability Statement

The qualitative interview transcripts generated during the current study are not publicly available because they contain sensitive and identifiable information. De-identified excerpts and supporting materials may be made available by the corresponding author upon reasonable request and subject to approval by the appropriate Research Ethics Committee and relevant ecclesiastical authorities.

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Appendices

No appendices are attached to this study.