



TECHNIUM
SOCIAL SCIENCES JOURNAL

Vol. 20, 2021

**A new decade
for social changes**

www.techniumscience.com

ISSN 2668-7798



9 772668 779000

Experiences of Being Evangelized by the School's Evangelizing Mission: The Case of Employees in a Philippine Catholic University

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Abstract. One unique function of a Catholic school is developing a campus-based Christian community and nurturing the Christian life of the members of the academe. The Church stresses its importance in the task of evangelization. Hence, this phenomenological study intended to explore the lived experiences of the permanent employees on the evangelizing mission of a Catholic university. Through a purposive sampling method, the data were gathered from five participants through a semi-structured in-depth interview. The data were analyzed using recursive textual analysis adopting the framework of *Lichtman's 3C's*. The findings of the study revealed that the evangelizing mission of the university through its religious and outreach activities helped the employees have a more meaningful life, enriched and deepened their faith, and strengthened their relationship with God, the Church, and the members of the institution. They also considered their work as part of the evangelizing mission of the school. In addition, the witnessing of the religious administrators and the visible community life in the university inspired and encouraged them to share in the task of evangelization. Generally, the findings suggest a semblance in the employees' experience and the true identity and mission of Catholic schools highlighted by the Church. This charge is a lifelong challenge for all Catholic institutions to carry out.

Keywords. Religious Education, evangelization, phenomenology, Catholic school, Philippines

1. Introduction

The task of evangelization comprises the indispensable mission of the Church [23]. The Church exists in order to evangelize. By virtue of the Sacrament of Baptism, all its members have the right and the duty to share in this evangelizing mission. Evangelization is not an option but is at the core of what it means to be the disciples of the Lord. It stems from the mandate of Jesus Christ: "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptize them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit" [24]. Evangelization is the mission of the Church [26] as a result of the charge entrusted to her by the Lord.

The Church affirms that one of the most potent means of evangelization is the Catholic educational institutions. They are very valuable instruments for evangelization [24]. Every Catholic school is a venue to experience the transforming love and truth of the living God through Jesus Christ [3]. This recalls Vatican II's Declaration on Christian Education, *Gravissimum Educationis*, which explains the special function of the Catholic schools in developing a Christian community in the campus and nurturing the Christian life of the people [22]. Supporting this document, Pope Francis maintains that Catholic institutions are educating communities where students and teachers come together as a community through a "curriculum of life and experience" [35]. Similarly, Pope John Paul II's *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* [14] declares that priority should be given to the integration of human and professional education with religious values in the light of Catholic doctrine. Along this path, the Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education [29] recognizes the Catholic institution as an important place for evangelization and development of the mission of the people of God. Consequently, the carrying out of this important task of the Church is clear for Catholic schools.

The Church in the Philippines does not move away from the concern of the Universal Church. Echoing the words of the Holy Fathers, the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines stresses that Catholic schools are one of the effective channels of missionary initiatives [6]. One study showed that the Catholic schools in the Philippines are symbols of hope and inspiration in Asia [12]. In the pastoral letter of the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines [21], it was declared that the Catholic schools in the country provide a stable and systematic evangelization through education, with religion as the core of the curriculum, spiritual formations, and outreach programs for the benefit of the community. What makes the Catholic school a venue for authentic ecclesial experience is when all the members of the academe take part in fraternal communion, sustained, and nurtured by a living experience with Jesus Christ and the Church [30].

However, Catholic schools also need to provide ongoing support and systematic faith formation programs to the academic community to achieve their religious goals [11]. They have fulfilled their task only when their school personnel (administrators, teachers, staff, and students) clearly understand and actively participate in the evangelizing mission [9]. There is also a need to revisit the evangelical mission of the Catholic university through the alignment of its programs and activities to the vision, mission, goals, and objectives [18]. At present, there are limited local studies that explore employees' experiences on the evangelizing mission of Catholic schools; hence, this paper is presented.

In its mission of providing quality Catholic Christian education, and as a cradle of evangelization and academic excellence, the Catholic university under study aims to form in its members the knowledge and love for Christ and the Church (*Caritas et Scientia*) through the proclamation of the Gospel, sacramental life, and moral education that will truly make them witnesses and sharers in the work of evangelization.

This phenomenological study aimed to explore the lived experiences of the permanent employees with the evangelizing mission of a Catholic university. The employees' lived experiences are generally defined as the employees' thoughts, views, feelings, attitudes, and practices related to the evangelizing mission. The following questions guided the inquiry: What is the meaning of evangelizing mission for the employees? How do the employees experience the evangelizing mission of the university?

2. Method

This study utilized the qualitative research design using the phenomenological approach to collect more information about the prevailing lived practices of the employees on the

evangelical mission of a Catholic university. A phenomenological approach in qualitative research aims to explore the lived experiences of a particular group that describes the nature of the particular phenomenon [36]. It stresses that those who have actually experienced the phenomenon are the ones who can understand and communicate it well to the outside world [20]. Moreover, it is concerned with the everyday human experiences to gain knowledge of people's common understanding and the meaning they make of their experiences and that of others [4].

The participants of the study were the five (5) permanent employees of the university who have stayed for at least ten (10) years and have the knowledge and involvement in the evangelizing mission of the institution. They are composed of lay administrators, faculty members, and support staff identified using the purposive sampling technique. Purposive sampling is a deliberate or planned selection of participants based on their adeptness to explain a specific theme, concept, or phenomenon [25]. The data were gathered using a semi-structured in-depth interview. The interview was done individually to obtain the employees' thoughts, views, feelings, attitudes, and practices on the evangelizing mission. The use of the interview was very useful in getting the significance and meaning behind the experiences of the participants [33]. Guided by the interview protocol, the participants were oriented on the purpose of the research, duration of the interview, interview approach, content, confidentiality of the information, consent of the participant, the recording methods, and how the data will be used. For the phenomenological method to be processed, the recursive textual analysis was used to determine what the experience implies for the participants. Using Lichtman's 3 C's [17], which refers to coding, categorizing, and conceptualizing, the meaning of evangelizing mission experienced by the employees was culled out.

3. Results

The findings of the study showed four themes and their specific sub-themes, which described the experiences of the participants on the evangelizing mission of the Catholic university where they are employed.

3.1 Enriches faith and life. Most of the participants revealed that their experience of the evangelizing mission deepened their faith in God. Having a closer relationship with the Lord also enabled them to appreciate themselves and have a more positive outlook on life.

Deeper self-knowledge. According to the participants, the evangelizing mission of the university helped them to know and love themselves better. It also enabled them to recognize the value of life despite the problems they encountered. They also said that it added meaning to their life. Consequently, Catholic schools exist to foster the holistic formation of the members of the institution. Some of them mentioned the following:

"It enabled me to discover more about myself, the value of life and its real meaning, and it makes my life beautiful. My life has meaning even if I have problems."

"It helped me to know and love myself more, and it helped me to have a more meaningful life."

"I learned to know and love myself more. As I continued my journey, I recognized the love and presence of God in my life."

Growth in spiritual life. The participants were consistent in sharing that the evangelizing mission of the school nourished their spiritual life. They shared the same view that it helped them discover God and grow deeper in their relationship with Him. They said that it enlightened their Christian faith and nurtured their spiritual journey. Hence, Catholic schools are effective venues in experiencing the transforming love of God as shared by some of the participants:

"It strengthened my faith and drew me closer to God. It provided an avenue to experience friendship with the Lord."

"My faith in God increased, and my spiritual life is enriched and nourished."

Love for God and the Church. The employees said that their love for God and the Church developed as they participated in the evangelizing mission of the university. They agreed that it inspired them to know, love, and serve God. Moreover, they said that it did not only deepen their relationship with Him but also with others. Thus, love for God compels love for others and the Church as expressed by the participants:

"The evangelizing mission of the university developed in the minds and hearts of the members of the community the love for God and the love for the Church."

"My heart and my whole being was formed towards greater love for God and the Church."

"It deepened my relationship with others and with God. It encouraged me to know, love, and serve God more."

3.2 Participation in religious and outreach activities. The religious and outreach activities were among the university's endeavors mentioned by the participants as specific manifestations of its evangelizing mission. Almost all said that these activities brought them joy and contentment.

Importance of religious activities. The participants recognized the value of religious activities in the task of evangelization. These undertakings helped them to encounter God in their life and experience His presence. Accordingly, providing avenues for spiritual growth is essential to the life of the employees. Some of them stressed:

"The Eucharistic celebrations, recollections, feast days of the Blessed Mother and the saints, and other religious activities are very helpful in my spiritual growth."

"I am always at peace each time I visit and pray in the Adoration Chapel or when I attend the Holy Mass at the Oratory."

"Most of the time, whenever I receive the sacraments of the Eucharist and Reconciliation, I feel a deep joy in my heart."

Value of outreach activities. The employees agree that the evangelizing mission of the school is evident in its outreach activities. They said that they are touched and amazed by the concern of the academic community to the needs of others, especially the poor. Hence, the school is not just a venue for maturing in one's spiritual life but also a place for growing in compassion for others, especially the least in society. They articulated this way:

"I am always moved by how much the community cares for the needs of others, especially the poor,

through the outreach activities and financial assistance.”

"The University's outreach programs and initiatives remind and encourage me to also be in solidarity with others, especially those in need.”

"Based on my experience, the school is always looking for ways to help the poor by offering assistance to adopted communities and providing help for victims of calamities.”

3.3 Inspired by the witnessing of the members of the community. Seeing other members of the school community living a life according to the values of Jesus Christ is very inspiring to the rest of the employees. The participants said they are encouraged to live authentic Christian lives through the good examples they have witnessed.

The role of religious administrators. The role of the religious administrators is very vital in the evangelizing mission of the university. The employees see them not only as owners of the school but also as spiritual guides. Their daily life witnessing and presence in the academe is crucial for they serve as models to the members of the institution, as evident in the following statements of the participants:

“The witnessing, presence, and supervision of the Religious Fathers encouraged me to be one with them in practicing the Gospel values and bringing forth the message of love to everyone.”

“The inspirational speeches and talks of the religious administrators are a great help in my formation as a member of the academic community. These strengthened my faith and drew me closer to God.”

“Our religious priests, whenever they give homilies, or simply by their witnessing, they always inspire me to love and serve God more. They are always looking for ways to help those in need.”

The witnessing of employees in the workplace. The participants said that they consider their work as part of the whole mission of evangelization. They regard their work as their vocation and a task entrusted to them by the Lord. They also mentioned that they enjoy the communal atmosphere in the university because of the friendly and warm relationship manifested among the members. They conveyed their experience in these words:

“I consider my work as a vocation, a part of the evangelizing mission of the university. It motivates me to share my life and serve other people and it is very fulfilling for me.”

“Having served and participated in the evangelical mission of the university as a teacher, I am given the opportunity to minister to the young people. For me, this is the happiest and the most fulfilling moment of my life.”

"The guidance of the priests and the friendship of colleagues helped me realize my sense of purpose in this university.”

3.4 Sharing in the task of evangelization. Because of their positive experience of the evangelizing mission of the university, the participants expressed their eagerness to share in its missionary endeavors. They conveyed their interest in helping the institution realize its mission of making Christ's presence evident in the community.

Being instruments for others. The participants stated that they are happy with their experience of the evangelizing mission of the university, and they are hoping that the other members of the academe could also take part in it. They expressed their willingness to take

part in making the evangelizing mission more visible in the community. The task of evangelization is fulfilled when the members of the academe recognize their responsibility as sharers in the mission. Some of them responded:

"The evangelizing mission of the university leads me to joy, and I have the desire to also share that joy to others. God is our joy. I want to share this joy that comes from Jesus."

"Our school community is sensitive to the needs of the poorest of the poor. I am inspired to motivate my students to develop the same attitude of being sensitive and compassionate to others."

"Being involved in the evangelizing mission of the school is challenging yet fulfilling. I believe that God is using me as an instrument of sharing His love to others."

Getting others involved in the work of evangelization. Most of the participants mentioned that there are members of the academic community who are not yet involved in the evangelizing mission of the school, specifically, in the spiritual activities and outreach programs. They suggested that more encouragement should be done to motivate the rest of the employees to be actively engaged in the task of evangelization. Thus, evangelization would be more evident and alive if it is permeated in the life of every member of the institution. These are some of their views and suggestions:

"It is still a challenge for the university to get the full and active involvement of all the employees. I suggest that there will be a monthly regular spiritual accompaniment for the employees for a more consistent formation."

"For me, outreach programs and activities are very important aspects of evangelization. I suggest that more information and campaigns for outreach initiatives be strengthened."

4. Discussion

Generally, the findings of the study suggest a semblance in the employee's experience and the identity and mission of Catholic schools as highlighted by the Church. This means that the experience of the employees on the evangelizing mission of the school reflects the true identity of Catholic schools as mentioned in the documents of the Church. It may not resemble everything, but there is an evidence of alignment which indicates the Catholic school's nature and characteristic distinguished by the Church. For example, the employees' experience of deeper self-knowledge, growth in spiritual life, love for God and the Church, and service to others reflect the identity of Catholic schools as the center of integral human formation [26], where people discover who they are as children of God and as members of the Church, thus, realizing their worth and meaning. All people who work in Catholic schools, whether as teachers, directors, administrators, or support staff, are all called to a life of holiness [27]. They need continuous support and ongoing formation in order to achieve the goals of evangelization [11].

The employees recognized the significance of religious activities in the deepening of their Christian faith. Indeed, prayer activities and spiritual formations are indispensable in a Catholic school to remain true to its identity. The celebration of Christian values both in the Word of God and the Sacraments expressed the religious dimension of the school. Moreover, the spirit of the Gospel must be manifested and should permeate all aspects of the educational climate [28]. In addition, the outreach activities of the university are perceived by the employees as another essential element of evangelization. This implies that there is a connection between love for God and love for neighbor. Indeed, the words of Pope Paul VI [22] prove true when

he mentioned that the proper function of a Catholic school is providing a special atmosphere animated by the Gospel spirit for freedom and charity. It also resounds the Church's emphasis on the character of Catholic schools as a place for relentless evangelization [21]. Effective evangelization means communicating the enduring message of the Gospel [31]. Likewise, at the heart of every Catholic school is Jesus Christ, which denotes the integration of Gospel values and Church teachings into the totality of school life [32]. It is when all the members of the educational community participate in fraternal communion, nourished by a relationship with Christ and the Church through the sacraments, that makes the Catholic school an ecclesial experience [30]. The deepest nature of the Church is expressed in proclaiming the Word, celebrating the sacraments, and exercising the ministry of charity. These aspects are inseparable [2].

The participants identified Christian witnessing by the members of the academe as another unique feature of evangelization. First, they see the vital role of the religious administrators as spiritual guides and witnesses, making the evangelizing mission more evident in the university. Pope John Paul II [15] pointed out that people today listen more to witnesses than to teachers, believe more in experience than in teaching, and trust in life and action than theories. Therefore, it is crucial for Catholic schools to have effective leaders to achieve their goals and carry out their mission [9]. The role of administrators is very important in fulfilling the evangelical mission [5]. Moreover, it is remarkable how the employees recognize their work as part of evangelization. They consider themselves not only as recipients of evangelization but also as sharers of the mission. This echoes the teaching of the Church, which says: "All the faithful baptized have the right and duty to participate in the evangelizing mission" [23]. By virtue of baptism, the faithful are incorporated into the Church and share in the missionary goal due to the mission of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit [34]. All Christians are challenged to be actively involved in the work of evangelization [24]. In addition, it has been affirmed by many Church documents, individual scholars, and empirical research that good administrative leadership and committed employees are necessary for developing Catholic schools as faith communities [8]. Indeed, the Catholic identity of the school influences the workforce [1]. Moreover, the goal of evangelization in Catholic schools would only be convincing if brought about by those who are deeply motivated and are witnesses to a living encounter with Jesus Christ [30].

The employees expressed their joy in receiving the Gospel message and experiencing the beauty of having a deep relationship with the Lord. They believe that all the members of the community should experience this joy. It is true, then, that the joy of the Gospel fills the hearts of all who encounter Jesus and accept His offer of salvation [24]. At the same time, the employees are cognizant of the tremendous responsibility the Catholic schools are facing in answering the mandate of Christ of making disciples of all nations [7]. Their willingness to participate in the missionary initiatives proves that they understand their role as workers and laborers in the vineyard of the Lord [13]. Truly, it is fortunate for Catholic schools to have dedicated teachers and staff who are guided by a Gospel-centered spirituality, providing service generously without so much considering the financial reward for their labor [10]. Schools can accomplish what is expected of them as Catholic learning institutions when they have dedicated and committed personnel [19]. On the other hand, the participants are aware that the school's evangelizing mission has not yet fully permeated all the university members. They agreed that there is still a lot to be done to get the active participation of the rest of the employees. With this, they conveyed their eagerness to motivate and encourage others to participate in the work of evangelization. Undoubtedly, it is a continuous challenge for Catholic schools to present the Christian message more convincingly and systematically in a society that is gradually becoming secularized [16].

In summary, the evangelizing mission of the university is very vital to the faith formation and spiritual growth of the employees. They find fulfillment in their specific work, and they appreciate the communal atmosphere in the university. As to the whole task of evangelization, they believe that more initiatives should be done to draw the interest of the rest of the members of the academe and make evangelization more evident in the whole university.

5. Conclusion

The views, observations, understanding, and practices of employees on the evangelizing mission of the university under study reflect the nature of the Church as a missionary. It has been made clear that the indispensable task of the Church is evangelization. As a mandate from Christ, this task is an ongoing endeavor that the Church must act on in the midst of an increasingly secular world. The Catholic school, faithful to its identity as co-missionaries of the Church, indeed forms part in this mission of proclaiming the good news of salvation to all. If it ceases to evangelize, it loses its identity as a place where one encounters the transforming love and truth of the living God in Jesus Christ. The charge to make the evangelizing mission more profound in the university is a continuous challenge that the school must carry on.

As a genuine instrument of the Church, the university under study continues to provide integral and holistic formation to its members through evangelization. This charge must not only fall on the shoulder of few individuals but should be a communal effort that must be acted upon by the whole academic community. Thus, the religious and lay administrators, faculty members, support staff, and students are all beckoned to work hand in hand in making the thrust of evangelization a reality.

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