

Using Religious Symbols and Religious Teachings to Cope during Times of Adversity

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Abstract—This qualitative descriptive study explored how devout Catholics described how they used religious symbols and teachings to cope with personal challenges in southeastern Virginia in the United States of America. The sample included the faithful, who regularly used religious symbols and teachings and actively worshipped in a church building or remotely at least once a month. The theoretical foundation was the Symbolic Interactionism Theory (SIT). The instruments to collect the data included a questionnaire and an interview. The data collection incorporated demographics, descriptive statistics, and the descriptive data used in thematic analysis. The findings from this study provided insights into how the participants demonstrated the process of ascribing, understanding, and interpreting the meaning of using religious symbols and teachings in times of adversity. We found that using the sensory experiences had a significant impact on the participants to help them cope with personal challenges. Based on the findings, we suggested further studies to measure the effects of religious symbols and teachings and further explore the role of religiosity in mental health and psychological well-being, particularly the relationships between coping and the constructs as they are related to religiosity.

Index Terms—Adversity, coping, religiosity, symbols, teachings

I. INTRODUCTION

In the past five years, considerable research has been conducted on religiosity's physical, neuro-biological, and psychological effects on the faithful. The literature review indicated a trend in research to focus on studies that explored the effects of religious beliefs, practices, and teachings on cognition, behavior, and emotions. Extant empirical studies have explored how using religious rituals, symbols, and teachings helped alleviate feelings of cognitive dissonance [1], soothe fears and anxieties [2], forge prosocial behavior [3], boost mental development [4], and enhance the overall quality of the individuals' daily lives [5]. These findings constitute an emerging research trend in religious sociology.

This paper explored how devout Catholics described how they used religious symbols and teachings to help them cope with personal challenges. Despite the growing interest in empirically assessing the effects of religious symbolism and religious teachings on health, mental well-being, quality of

life choices, and life satisfaction, the topic is still under-explored.

II. HISTORY

A. Background of the Study

A preliminary review of the extant literature indicates that the mention of religious symbols and teachings related to faith and how they help one's mind focus on a single element and reduce restlessness nature is well-documented. Sacred Scriptures are filled with symbolic imagery [6]. Jung [7] purported that everything could assume symbolic meaning. Over the last few decades, empirical research focused on the link between religious symbols and individuals' thoughts and behaviors that encouraged social bonding and moral decisions [8], promoted greater life satisfaction [9], and fostered interfaith dialogue [10].

We reviewed considerable empirical research. Villani et al. [11] found that a commitment to a religious identity positively predicted the individuals' self-perceived well-being, which helped them cope better with adversity. Furthermore, religious beliefs implicit in the Catholic faith could provide a sense of meaning, purpose, and belonging during difficult life circumstances [12]. Scott and Wepener [13] suggested that the ritualistic nature of the worship service, with its embedded symbolism, offers a transformative experience to the faithful. Furthermore, Kovačević *et al.* [14] purported that the interpretation of religious symbols affected individuals' psychological and social functioning. Therefore, based on previous literature, devout Catholics have used religious symbols and teachings for different life circumstances and events. However, a further in-depth study was needed to understand how this phenomenon helped them cope in times of adversity. We based our study on a seminal theory to guide the study and formulate the research questions.

B. Theoretical Framework

We selected Symbolic Interactionism Theory (SIT) as the theoretical framework to provide the structural foundation for the study in developing the research questions, the protocols for data collection, and data analysis. SIT offered insights into how meaning for individuals is developed and modified over time, and the effects on the psychological and social functioning of the individual by focusing on the understanding of the symbolic shared meaning that emerges from the interaction of individuals with other individuals in a social environment [15]. The foundational tenets of SIT: 1. Ascription of symbolic meaning. 2. Use of language to negotiate meaning, and 3. Individuals' interpretations of symbols heavily influenced this study since the tenets enabled

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an understanding of how the participants made meaning of their world through their interpretations of religious symbols and teachings in times of personal challenges. The findings of this study advanced existing literature.

C. Review of the Literature

Religious beliefs can promote a positive and hopeful worldview that facilitates the acceptance of suffering, prompting prosocial obligations that help reduce isolation and loneliness [16]. Extant research suggests that when individuals turn their attention inwards toward their bodily sensations, they embody their emotions, deepening their spiritual understanding and rendering it more palpable and real, creating a feeling of factuality around their religious experience [17]. Carlson et al. [18] also focused on religiosity and its effects on emotional resilience when facing difficulties, effective dealing with adverse effects, and greater satisfaction with life. Further research demonstrated that religious symbols might influence the evaluation of neutral stimuli at the positive or negative emotional valence [19]. Moreover, Stöckigt et al. [20] suggested that prayers for supplication, intercession, or gratitude expressed in religious symbolic, or ritualistic form could help the faithful manage crises and illnesses.

Furthermore, there is salient scholarly work on the pedagogical effects that symbolic religious, cultural, and social contexts exert on individuals. For example, Weaver [21] explored the positive impact that studying Catholic history and philosophy had on the learner, such as Adult Religious Education (A.R.E.), Rite of Christian Initiation of Adult (R.C.I.A.), and Bible studies. Weaver [21] concluded there was a need to increase catechism and religious education due to its positive effects on individuals. In addition, further empirical studies emphasized the socio-cultural significance of teaching and learning in individuals' mental development [22]. Overall, extant studies emphasized that religious practice is not only about how the faithful perceive God or interpret sacred scriptures but also entails the social forces that mobilize people and reshape their cognitive and behavioral functions by focusing on the well-being of the collective whole [23]. These studies explored how the use of religious symbols and religious teachings and their embodied sense-making conveyed meaning across shared social environments.

The research questions were designed to gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon. Based on previous literature, devout Catholics have used religious symbols and religious teachings for different life circumstances and events. However, there was a dearth of research studies exploring how devout Catholics described how the use of religious symbols and teachings helped them cope during times of adversity. Thus, this paper was designed to explore the experiences related to the use of religious symbols and teachings to cope with personal challenges by devout Catholics located in southeastern Virginia in the United States of America. The following research questions guided this qualitative descriptive study:

RQ1: How do devout Catholics describe how they use religious symbols to cope during times of personal challenges?

RQ2: How do devout Catholics describe how they use religious teachings to cope during times of personal

challenges?

The focus of the research questions was to understand the faithful's interpretation of how the use of religious symbols and teachings helped them cope with adverse circumstances. The instruments of the study consisted of a questionnaire and an interview. The questionnaire and the interview questions were designed to probe the faithful reactions and detailed accounts of their experiences to answer the research questions.

III. METHODOLOGY AND DESIGN

This is a qualitative descriptive study. There were two data sources:

1) a questionnaire, and 2) an interview. The data sources were based on the participants' first-hand experiences related to the phenomenon. In addition to an analysis of descriptive findings, a six-phase thematic analysis was used to derive the themes that ultimately answered the research questions and described the phenomenon [24]. The study was approved by an Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the university, a place of employment of the researchers.

A. Questionnaire

A questionnaire, containing 16 questions, and two open-ended questions collected descriptive findings based on the frequency and relevance of the use of religious symbols and religious teachings to help the faithful cope during difficult times. Based on the previous literature, the thirteen most widely used religious symbols included the church as a worship site; the crucifix; iconographies such as religious statues, holy cards, and stained glass; the reception of communion; rosary; sacred scripture; sacred music; incense; oil anointment; confession - reconciliation; vigil candles; church bells; and holy water. The three religious teachings included homily/sermon, bible study groups, and religious readings (books, magazines, forums, apps, websites, etc.). The open-ended questions allowed the participants to expound on the details of their experiences, and the reason why that was important to them. A group of 36 devout Catholics completed the questionnaire.

B. Interview

The participants in the questionnaire were invited to partake in the interview. Twenty-five participants partook in the interview. The interview questions were developed by a collaboration of the researchers of the study and asked for additional detailed descriptions from the faithful based on their perceptions, experiences, and reactions. The interview with open-ended questions allowed participants to expound on the details of how they used individual religious symbols and religious teachings to help them cope in times of personal challenges. There were four general background questions. Furthermore, sixteen interview questions were based on thirteen Catholic religious symbols and four additional interview questions were based on three Catholic religious teachings. The interview questions provided details to understanding the reasons, the frequency of use, and the description of where, how, and when the participants used individual Catholic religious symbols and religious teachings to help them cope in times of personal challenges.

IV. DATA COLLECTION

We used maximum variation purposive sampling to ensure that the potential participants met the inclusion criteria. Therefore, they needed to be devout Catholics, 18 years old or older, live in southeastern Virginia in the United States use religious symbols and/or religious teachings regularly, and actively worship in a Church building or remotely a minimum of once a month. Furthermore, this sampling procedure captured various perspectives from participants of all career levels, roles, and genders within the adult devout Catholic population to explore all available angles of the topic of interest and ensure a deep understanding of the phenomenon.

We implemented a recruitment plan that started with the study announcement during one 5:30 PM Saturday Mass, and at 8 AM and 11 AM Masses on one Sunday offered at the Church. After Mass, a member of the research team remained at the Grand Hall with a display and a poster that included the research study's title and purpose. We had a sign-up sheet to collect the contact information of those interested in participating. Finally, we sent an email invitation to the devout Catholics who signed up to partake in the study. There were 42 devout Catholics who signed up, ultimately 36 completed the questionnaire and 25 participated in the interview.

V. FINDINGS

A. Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics contained demographics of the participants and measurements of the frequency and relevance of the use of the individual religious symbols and religious teachings. The participants' demographic comprised devout Catholics, 69.4% of whom were 51+ years of age, and 22.2% of whom were 35-50 years of age. In addition, most participants (0.6%) claimed to be devout Catholics for 21+ years. Finally, 88.9% of the sample were White/Caucasian, with the remaining 11.1% of participants being of Hispanic/Latino descent, which left significant ethnicities unrepresented. Descriptive statistics of the participants' demographics are shown in Tables I and II.

TABLE I: DEMOGRAPHICS: AGE GROUP AND NUMBER OF YEARS AS DEVOUT CATHOLICS OF PARTICIPANTS

Category	N=36 (Source: Questionnaire)			
	18-25	26-35	36-50	51+
AGE-GROUP	1	2	8	25
NUMBER OF YEARS AS A DEVOUT CATHOLIC	1-5	6-10	11-20	21+
	1	3	3	29

TABLE II: RACE AND ETHNICITY

Race or Ethnicity	N=36
Hispanic or Latino	4
White, Caucasian	32

Furthermore, the questionnaire surveyed the frequency and relevance of the use of Catholic religious symbols and teachings to help them cope in times of personal challenges. Fig. 2 shows a count for each religious symbol and teaching the participants found most helpful. For example, 16

participants (44%) attributed the rosary as the most helpful symbol among the 16 religious symbols and teachings. Similarly, 16 participants (44%) attributed religious readings as the most helpful religious teaching in times of personal challenges. Conversely, only three or fewer participants selected the following symbols: the oil anointment, church bells, vigil candles, incense, and holy water to help them cope with personal challenges. Descriptive statistics of the count of religious symbols and teachings found most helpful are shown in Fig. 1.

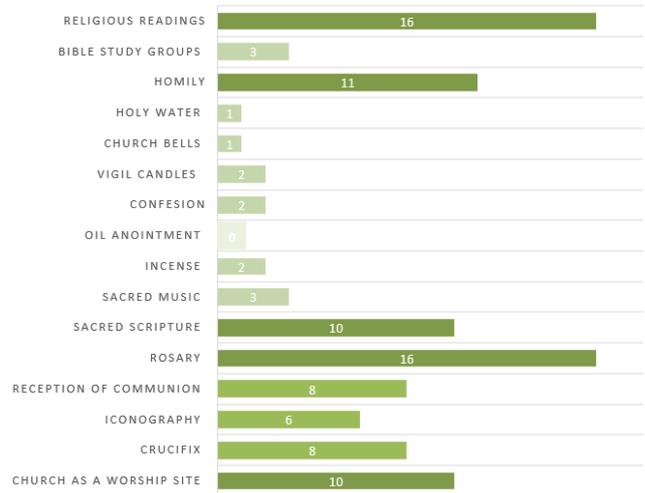


Fig. 1. Count of religious symbols and religious teachings found most helpful in times of adversity.

TABLE III: USE OF RELIGIOUS SYMBOLS AND RELIGIOUS TEACHINGS DESCRIPTIVE DATA OF FREQUENCY

Religious Symbols and Teachings	Frequency of Use				
	2-3 Daily	1- Daily	2-3 Weekly	1- Weekly	Never
Church as a Worship Site	3	6	8	19	0
Crucifix	9	9	4	7	7
Iconography	6	10	2	8	10
Reception of Communion	0	4	4	26	2
Rosary	4	10	5	10	7
Sacred Scripture	6	8	4	13	5
Sacred Music	2	6	9	10	9
Incense	2	0	1	5	28
Oil Anointment	0	1	0	6	29
Confession	1	1	5	13	16
Vigil Candles	3	3	1	7	22
Church Bells	1	3	0	9	23
Holy Water	3	3	4	19	7
Homily	1	5	8	20	2
Bible Study Groups	2	1	1	7	25
Religious Readings	6	8	5	12	5

Table III summarizes and visually depicts the descriptive statistics regarding the frequency of religious symbols and teachings used during personal challenges. Gazing at iconography, the crucifix, praying the rosary, and reading the sacred scriptures and other religious readings were the most frequently used amongst devout Catholics to help them cope in times of personal challenges. Conversely, incense, oil

anointment, confession, and bible study groups were not among the most frequently used symbols and teachings, despite their perceived positive effects on the devout Catholic.

B. Descriptive Data

We collected qualitative descriptive data using a pre-interview questionnaire with two open-ended questions and an interview to address the research questions. We used a six-phase thematic analysis process based on Braun and Clarke’s [25] tenets to prepare the interview data for coding and theme development. We collaborated on coding the data, reviewing the coding to identify the themes, and using quotes from participants to ensure that our findings remain unbiased to the best of our knowledge and belief. We derived the four themes after iterative reviews and regrouping of the applicable codes. The four themes addressed and answered both RQ1 and RQ2. Table IV presents a summary of the themes by research question.

TABLE IV: THEMES BY RESEARCH QUESTION

Research Questions	Themes
RQ1: How do devout Catholics describe how they use religious symbols to cope during times of personal challenges?	T1: Feeling the Presence of God through Religious Symbols and Religious Teachings. T2: Finding Solace during Personal Challenges.
RQ2: How do devout Catholics describe how they use religious teachings to cope during times of personal challenges?	T3: Understanding Social Interactions through Ascription, Negotiation, and Interpretation of the Meaning and Use of Religious Symbols and Religious Teachings. T4: Feelings of Faith Emerged from using Religious Symbols and Religious Teachings.

C. Themes

The primary findings for RQ1 and RQ2 supported the extant review of the literature. Our findings suggested that sacramentals or sacred objects such as the bible, the rosary, crucifixes, iconography, vigil candles, sacred bells, sacred music, incense, holy water, oil anointment, and the church as a site for worship, among other artifacts, facilitated interactions with the divine creating a trance sensation that encouraged a harmonious inner balance state. Additionally, the descriptive findings from the questionnaire and the interview transcripts demonstrated how devout Catholics used religious teachings such as homily and religious readings as a conduit to interpret and further understand how to proclaim the truth of God and thus helped them cope with adversity.

1) Theme 1: Feeling the presence of god through religious symbols and religious teachings

Theme one identified how using religious symbols and religious teachings in times of personal challenges helped them share intimate moments with God and made them feel cared for, loved, and relieved from their burdens. This theme emerged from multiple codes arising from both data sources that led to patterns describing how the participants connected to God, felt that God was in control, listened to God’s message, and sensed the sphere of God’s presence through the sensory aspects of the religious symbols and religious teachings. The predominant feelings of the participants’ description of their use of religious symbols and teachings

could be summarized as follows: “I’m not alone”; “I’m worth it in the eyes of God”; “I’m relieved from my burdens,” “I’m closer to God when I use all my senses,”; and “I listen to God’s message”. In evaluating the total responses in connection with how the questionnaire and interview participants described how they felt the presence of God through religious symbols and religious teachings, the findings suggested an overall sense of feeling closer to God when they employed all their senses when using religious symbols and religious teachings.

Additionally, the participants described how using religious symbols and religious teachings reminded them that God was asking them to trust and have more faith in Him. Also, they emphasized that the ritualistic practice of using religious symbols and teachings reminded them that God had a plan. Similarly, the sphere of God’s presence was represented by participants who described how the sensory aspect of symbols transported their spirit, creating a sense of being in God’s presence. Finally, the participants described the magnitude of God’s message as it emerged through iconography and other symbols. Table V presents theme one, Feeling the Presence of God Through Religious Symbols and Religious Teachings.

TABLE V: THEME ONE – FEELING THE PRESENCE OF GOD THROUGH RELIGIOUS SYMBOLS AND RELIGIOUS TEACHINGS

Theme Description: Devout Catholics shared intimate moments with God, feeling loved and relieved from their burdens as they used religious symbols and teachings.		
Codes	Sources	
	Interviews (Count)	Questionnaire (Count)
PG1-Connecting to God	14	5
PG2-Personal Worth	19	3
PG3-God is in Control	10	3
PG4-Sphere of God’s Presence	12	2
PG5-God’s Message	16	3

Quotation Examples:

- QP16: Regarding entering a Catholic Church, knowing that Jesus is present in the Tabernacle and entering the silent sanctuary provides very uplifting and healing environment when personally challenged.
- P7: Makes me feel like I can let go a little bit of my attempts to control the world, my attempts to control what’s happening, and trust more that he has a plan.
- P13 The presence of Christ in the Tabernacle. You just want to be in the presence of Christ.
- P18: Fight the good fight. You are not alone in the fight.
- P25: Just bringing to the forefront that you are loved and cared for.
- P2: I always pay great attention to the Homily because I’ll look to my husband and say, that has to do with us today. That’s something we need to know. It’s very uplifting, and in times of trouble, if I’m going in and I forgot something, I’ll hear that homily, and it will make me feel better.
- P17: And just this feeling came over me of just a feeling of warmth and a feeling that things were gonna be okay.

2) Theme two: Finding solace during personal challenges

The participants described various moments of personal challenges related to stressful situations requiring mental strength and concentration, such as going on a combat mission or sleepless nights due to anxiety. In addition, participants described personal challenges that involved tragedies such as suicide in the family, health issues such as strokes, and untimely death due to accidents. Furthermore, participants described their personal challenges during times of mental and emotional difficulties, such as attempted

suicide, fighting different types of addictions, affiliations with the wrong crowd, or being laid off. Finally, other participants described their personal challenges regarding physiological issues such as surgeries, different types of cancers, and various diseases.

Overall, the findings in theme two were significant in depth and intensity. For example, some participants described how praying the rosary helped them find solace by giving them peace and a connection to a lifeline or lifeboat. Others described how humming or listening to sacred music empowered them when their strengths were depleted. Another participant described how gazing at the crucifix reminded the participant that God Himself had also experienced trouble, thus providing this participant with a sense of consolation and comfort. The findings suggested that using religious symbols and teachings gave the participants a sense of solace that helped them cope in times of personal challenges. Table VI presents theme two, Finding Solace during Personal Challenges.

TABLE VI: THEMES TWO - FINDING SOLACE DURING PERSONAL CHALLENGES.

Codes	Sources	
	Interviews (Count)	Questionnaire (Count)
SPC1- Stressful Situations	8	3
SPC2-Tragedy	6	1
SPC3-Mental and Emotional Issues	5	1
SPC4-Physiological Issues	6	3

Theme Description: Devout Catholics reflected on personal challenges and strenuous circumstances where using religious symbols and teachings helped them cope.

Quotation Examples:
 QP9: I pray the Rosary daily during personal challenges. It has brought a sense of peace in times of distress and confusion.
 QP34: Holy Oils are used for the Anointing the Sick, and I have had that twice in my lifetime before a surgery.
 P21: Your sense of power, your sense of strength, is depleted over time. Praying the Rosary is a lifeline. It's a lifeboat, it's a whole, it's a connection. It's the whole notion of a mystery.
 P1: I'm agonizing over the past, and I'm fretting about the future, and I'm not focused on the now. And so using the iconography brings me back to the, now when I'm in mass.
 P22: The first flight I had on a combat mission, I was pretty scared, which I guess is normal. And I sang to myself the words "Be not afraid," that song "Be not afraid, I go before you always, come follow me."
 P4: When my nephew was diagnosed with cancer, his mom, who is my sister-in-law, whose very strong faith, and my best friend, who also has extremely strong faith, we started saying the Rosary.

3) *Theme three: Understanding social interactions through ascription, negotiation, and interpretation of the meaning and use of religious symbols and religious teachings*

Theme three identified the tenets that supported Mead's (1934) Symbolic Interactionism Theory (SIT) as the theoretical framework for this study. First, the descriptions by the participants depicted how they ascribed symbolic meaning to the religious symbols and religious teachings. Second, the descriptions showed that social interactions gave the participants a sense of community through shared experiences, images, or objects. Third, the descriptions also demonstrated ways the participants interpreted and understood the religious symbols and teachings and the effects and influences on how the participants used the

religious symbols and teachings to help them cope with adversity. The central finding of theme three, which addressed both research questions, was that the participants described how they acted towards religious symbols and teachings based on their ascribed meaning, social interactions with others using shared symbols and teachings, and the interpretation derived from their understanding.

The narratives and in-depth descriptions provided by the participants emphasized the functions in which individuals attached to a particular object, image, or symbol made it meaningful based on what they believed and perceived rather than what was objectively true [26]. Thus, the fundamental functions in which the individuals attach to provide a sense of unity and coherence when interacting with others through shared symbols [27, 28]. For example, a participant ascribed to the reception of Communion the meaning of being the source and summit of his life. In contrast, another participant believed Communion was a time to become one with Christ. Furthermore, another participant ascribed to the holy water the meaning of a sign of birth and death, finiteness, and infinity. Regarding social interactions, the findings showed that individuals negotiated reality by employing complex mental processes that integrated social information imbued with personal meaning in shared symbols and experiences. For example, a participant found shared meaning when praying with others who also called Jesus and gathered in His name. Furthermore, other participants described how receiving Communion with their families and their church community gave them a sense of peace and comfort while connecting with others with shared religious practices. Finally, participants further described how religious teachings such as Bible study groups were helpful because this creates a cohort of people with shared values to be amongst during times of challenge. Participants also described how being part of the church community, receiving communion, and even just being in Church were humbling experiences.

Concerning the interpretation of the participants based on their use of religious symbols and teachings, the findings showed, for example, that church bells could be interpreted as a calling to Mass like a timer or clock. Furthermore, a participant described how he enjoyed listening to the Homily, based on the priest's interpretation of the Sacred Scriptures, since he felt he was learning the meaning behind the Word back in history. Also, another participant described his interpretation of receiving Communion as the reception of God in what he considered the real presence of God on a vertical plane while receiving Communion with other churchgoers signified a horizontal plane. Therefore, theme three demonstrated that participants ascribed, negotiated, and interpreted the meaning of how they used religious symbols and religious teachings in social interactions during times of personal challenges, which supported the basic tenets of the theoretical framework, SIT. Table VII presents theme three, Understanding Social Interactions through Ascription, Negotiation, and Interpretation of the Meaning and Use of Religious Symbols and Religious Teachings.

TABLE VII: THEME THREE - UNDERSTANDING SOCIAL INTERACTIONS THROUGH ASCRIPTION, NEGOTIATION, AND INTERPRETATION OF THE MEANING AND USE OF RELIGIOUS SYMBOLS AND RELIGIOUS TEACHINGS

Theme Description: Devout Catholics described how they acted towards using religious symbols and teachings based on the meaning they ascribed to them. They also explained their interactions with others using shared symbols and teachings and the interpretations derived from their understanding.

Codes	Sources	
	Interviews (Count)	Questionnaire (Count)
SIANI1-Ascription of Symbolic Meaning	13	6
SIANI2-Negotiation of Meaning via Social Interaction	10	3
SIANI3-Interpretation of Meaning	13	6

Quotation Examples:

QP7: Communing with my family and my church community brings me peace and comfort.

QP18: Christ crucified is the purpose of our life.

QP16: Religious education is helpful during such times because it affords one a cohort of people to be amongst during times of challenge; socialization.

P5: Reception of Communion is a time to become one with Christ, have him within me. I do believe he is always here with us, especially when we gather and two or more and call him in our presence.

P7: I enjoy the feeling of community in church. I enjoy feeling like the connection participating in a mass with other people.

4) *Theme four: Feelings of faith emerged from the use of religious symbols and religious teachings*

The participants described feelings of recentering and getting a higher perspective, otherworldly protection, the joy of religiosity, and spiritual nourishment that they experienced when they used religious symbols and teachings in times of personal challenges. Based on the findings, the feelings of faith described by the participants demonstrated a sense of refocusing the mind with humility and empathy to gain peace and more profound insight into the meaning of life. In addition, the descriptions narrated the feeling of being in a powerful, healing, cleansing, miraculous, and fortifying sanctuary when under spiritual warfare, such as when they questioned their faith in God or struggled with their internal turmoil. Furthermore, the participants described feeling uplifted when rejoicing in the beauty and comfort of religious symbols and teachings. The findings showed an overall sense of kindness, trust, faith, and hope that emerged with the use of religious symbols and religious teachings. Additionally, other participants described feelings of humility, empathy, inner peace, miraculous coincidences, protection, and comfort in times of personal challenges.

Therefore, the participants consistently reflected on the positive impacts of using religious symbols and teachings to help them cope with personal challenges. For example, a participant described that receiving Communion provided a feeling of oneness and completeness. Another participant described feeling the call to stop, reflect, and communicate with God when she heard the church bells. Also, a participant described the sense of calm, trust, and kindness that gazing at the stained windows prompted. Overwhelming was the participants' response when describing their feelings of otherworldly protection. For example, a participant described feeling protected when praying the Rosary as he was flying into combat. Another participant described how using religious symbols during personal challenges prompted

feelings of miraculous occurrences since he felt they were statistically close to impossible to be a coincidence. Another participant also described the use of religious symbols, such as oil anointing, as healing, fortifying, and almost miraculous since he experienced no pain after major surgery. Furthermore, a participant referred to the cleansing power of religious symbols such as incense, clearing out negative energy. And a participant even referred to the Holy Water as a spiritual disinfectant.

Other participants referred to the feelings of rejoicing and comfort that using religious symbols and teachings exerted over them. For example, a participant described the Rosary as a meditative experience that got her mind off her challenges and into a trance-like state of contemplation. Another participant described her experience gazing at stained glass, rejoicing in the beauty of the miracles happening when contemplating it since this activity put her in a mindset with God. Collectively, the story told by the participants demonstrated the feelings of faith emerging from using religious symbols and teachings in times of adversity. Table VIII presents theme four, Feelings of Faith Emerged from using Religious Symbols and Religious Teachings.

TABLE VIII: THEME FOUR - FEELINGS OF FAITH EMERGED FROM USING RELIGIOUS SYMBOLS AND RELIGIOUS TEACHINGS.

Theme Description: The devout Catholics explained how they felt when using religious symbols and teachings in times of personal challenges.

Codes	Sources	
	Interviews (Count)	Questionnaire (Count)
FE1-Recentering and Getting a Higher Perspective	13	3
FE2- Otherworldly Protection		
FE3-Joy of Religiosity	19	7
FE4-Spiritual Nourishment		
	9	2
	12	5

Quotation Examples:

QP7: The solemnity and rituals observed at mass has always brought me a sense of peace, particularly when troubled.

QP3: Going to Mass helps me feel grounded and connected to God. When I miss Mass, I just don't feel whole until I can go to Mass again. It's probably the only time all week that I can fully focus on healing.

QP36: I think stained-glass is beautiful and comforting when I see it at church.

P6: There's a small round-stained-glass window ...and it speaks to me. Whenever I am at church, that is the spot where my eyes go to. It reminds me to pray to the Holy Spirit, to imbue my spirit with a sense of calm, with a sense of trust. With a sense of kindness.

P19: It's a moment where you pause and are reminded, it gives you a chance to reflect. Church bells are oftentimes used for warnings or, the call that mass is going to begin. They are there, as much for communication as for somebody to stop and perhaps reflect and communicate with God.

P20: With Communion, I feel just like completeness or oneness or a reaffirming your relationship with Christ.

D. Discussion

A growing body of literature has shown that religiosity is associated with overall well-being and life satisfaction across life domains. Additionally, far less was known about how devout Catholics described the use of religious symbols and religious teachings to help them cope in times of personal challenges. Therefore, the primary focus of this qualitative descriptive study was to extend the existing literature and develop a deeper understanding of this phenomenon. The descriptive findings and qualitative results of this study supported the problem space in the literature and the

theoretical foundation, Symbolic Interactionism Theory (SIT). The theoretical foundation for the study was based upon tenets of SIT that emphasized the sense of unity and coherence of sensory experiences that the symbolization processing and interaction through shared symbols established amongst individuals.

This study demonstrated that sacramentals or sacred objects such as the bible, the rosary, crucifixes, iconography, vigil candles, sacred bells, sacred music, incense, holy water, oil anointment, and the church as a site for worship, among other artifacts, facilitated interactions with the divine creating a trance sensation that encouraged a harmonious inner balance state. Additionally, the descriptive findings demonstrated how devout Catholics described using religious teachings such as the homily as a conduit to interpret and further understand how to proclaim the truth of God and thus help them cope with personal challenges. The descriptive data showed that some religious symbols and religious teachings were more relevant than others to help the participants cope in times of adversity. For example, concerning the use of the rosary as a religious symbol and the use of religious readings as a religious teaching, in both cases, 44% of the questionnaire participants described their use as very helpful to assist them in coping with adversity. Conversely, none of the questionnaire participants described using oil anointment as a religious symbol to help them cope in times of personal challenges. Additionally, only 8% of the questionnaire participants described using bible study groups as religious teaching to help them cope in times of personal challenges.

Interestingly, regarding the frequency of use of religious symbols, the findings showed different results depending on the time frame specified. For example, questionnaire participants who utilized a religious symbol two to three times per day in times of personal challenges, the crucifix was the most widely used symbol among 25% of the questionnaire participants. Additionally, the crucifix remained the most highly utilized symbol for the questionnaire participants when used once daily (50% of participants) and 2-3 times per week (61% of participants). However, when the frequency of use was once per week, the reception of communion was the most widely utilized symbol coming in at 94% of the questionnaire participants. This outlier is most likely tied to the fact that church services are usually offered on a weekly basis, whereas the faithful have easy access to the crucifix. The least frequently used symbols to help cope during times of adversity were the oil anointment and the incense, with 81% of questionnaire participants stating they never used oil anointment and 78% stating they never used incense. This outlier is linked to the fact that for some devout Catholics, oil anointment and incense can only be sacredly accessed with the aid of the clergy administering during specific clerical times.

Regarding the use of religious teachings to cope with personal challenges, religious readings were cited as being utilized the most regardless of whether this religious teaching was used 2-3 times daily (17% of participants), once per day (39% of participants), or 2-3 times per week (53% of participants). However, 94% of questionnaire participants cited the homily as the most frequent religious teaching when the timeframe was extended to once per week. Like the reception of communion administered at the church, the

homily is only accessible when the clergy delivers it during Mass services, thus reflecting the accessibility as a plausible explanation of the outlier. Finally, the least frequently used religious teaching by questionnaire participants was bible study groups, with 69% stating they never used this religious teaching. As expressed by the participants in this study, the outlier was explained by a weak consensus of how the bible study groups benefit them to better understand the Word of the Lord or cope with adversity.

Looking at the total responses, the findings suggested that the religious symbols used most frequently were not necessarily the most relevant or described as the most helpful by the questionnaire participants. For example, the crucifix was described as more frequently used daily. Yet, the rosary was the most relevant or helpful to most participants. The findings of the study answered both research questions and thus provided a better understanding of the phenomenon under study.

VI. THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

Mead's (1934) Symbolic Interactionism Theory (SIT) as a social-psychological theory provided a foundation to better understand how individuals described their religious practice and beliefs as sacred in this study. Furthermore, this theoretical framework helped explore the attitudes, motives, and behaviors of individuals' interpretations of experiences and events. Additionally, SIT offered insight into how individuals ascribed, defined, developed, and changed the meaning of objects, images, or symbols over time and how this process affected their psychological and social functioning by focusing on the meaning that emerged from their interactions in a social environment. Our research extended the foundation and further defined the theoretical framework of SIT by exploring its application in a novel research topic and area of inquiry.

Through the analysis of the tenets of the symbolic interactionism theory and the descriptions from the participants, we discovered how the participants ascribed meaning, interpreted their understanding and interacted with others when using religious symbols in teachings in times of personal challenges. The participants ascribed different meanings to the symbols. For example, for some, the crucifix meant life purpose; for others, the communion meant life source; for others, the communion meant the time to become one with Christ. The researcher also discovered that the participants interpreted the use of religious symbols and teachings differently according to their beliefs and thoughts or inner dialogue to help them cope in times of personal challenges. For example, some participants interpreted the sound of bells as a clock or timer inviting them to Mass or a reminder that other faithful were also engaged in prayer; others rejoiced in listening to the homilies due to the enhanced understanding of the Word of God through the Priest's interpretation of the sacred scriptures.

Finally, we discovered the meaning associated with social interactions between individuals, who negotiated reality through symbol manipulation by employing complex mental processes that integrated social information, imbued with personal meaning in shared symbols and experiences. For example, some participants described how receiving

communion with their families or church community brought them peace, comfort, and a sense of connection. Other participants pondered the significance of bible study groups in helping them cohort with people with shared values and expanding their mental horizons by embracing different perspectives, and meaning of their world through their interpretations of religious symbols and teachings in times of personal challenges.

VII. PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

The findings of the study could help solve significant problems when applied in professional practices that may benefit from understanding how the faithful use religious symbols and religious teachings to help them cope with personal challenges. For example, our findings provided evidence-based results founded upon the narrative descriptions of the 36 questionnaire participants and 25 interview participants contributing to the field of study of psychology. Hence, religious educators, such as catechists, clinicians with religious backgrounds, counselors, and researchers, may benefit from an increased and in-depth understanding of how using religious symbols and religious teachings helped devout Catholics to cope with adversity.

Furthermore, with an in-depth understanding of religiosity, this study may assist priests, clergy members of the church, chaplains, healthcare providers, and researchers in developing a more holistic person-centered approach in which an individual's religious background is incorporated into healthcare assessments, treatments, and interventions. Therefore, the practical implications of embracing the idea of using religious symbols and religious teachings in difficult times can provide practitioners, counselors, clinicians, educators, and researchers with invaluable and unprecedented resources to help the faithful cope better with personal challenges. In times of stress, tragedy, and mental, emotional, and physiological issues, furthering the understanding of how to help one cope and providing treatment using evidence-based methods is paramount to the health and well-being of such individuals.

VIII. RECOMMENDATIONS

A preliminary review of the literature identified the phenomenon that guided this study and identified the need for further research. Findings from this study highlighted the critical yet overlooked factor of religiosity to help the faithful cope in times of personal challenges. Based on the findings of our study, we identified the following recommendations for future research and future practice related to the use of religious symbols and religious teachings to help the faithful cope in times of personal challenges.

- The researchers concluded there was a need for further study to explore how the faithful use other religious symbols and other religious teachings, not identified in this study, to help them cope with adversity.
- Based on the outliers identified in the study, such as the frequent use of the rosary and crucifix, we recommend exploring the relationship between certain

religious symbols and religious teachings that affect coping or predict the influences of coping.

- Future researchers should consider investigating the use of religious symbols and religious teachings to help individuals cope with adversity for those who affiliate with a non-Catholic religion.
- Future researchers should consider exploring how different genders, races, and ethnicities describe the use of religious symbols and religious teachings to help them cope in times of adversity.
- Future studies should expound upon how using these or other religious symbols and religious teachings may help a more diverse population, such as business or academic communities cope better, which may generate new understanding.

The results of our study suggested that devout Catholics found an overall sense of well-being when using religious symbols and religious teaching in times of personal challenges. We also found that the use of religious symbols and religious teachings provided additional resources for individuals to cope with whether finding connections to His presence or comfort from a cohort of people with shared values. We suggest a need to do further research to expound on the innate need to feel the presence of God, find solace, and interact socially with the shared meaning of religious symbols and religious teachings to help individuals cope with personal challenges. Most importantly, the study showed a need to explore the overlooked role of religiosity in mental health and psychological well-being, especially in times of adversity. There is a need for deeper exploration, and we recommend a larger sample size to compare future studies with the findings of this research. The need to understand the psycho-social role of ritualized communication exists which aims to promote inner peace, build community, create a sense of belonging, strengthen trust, hope, and faith, and thus provide further resources to help the faithful cope in times of personal challenges when adversity strikes. Therefore, a recommendation for future practice further raises awareness of the positive effects of religious symbols and religious teachings on the psyches and mental well-being of individuals to help them cope with adversity.

Considering the multitude of questionnaire respondents who selected a myriad of religious symbols to help them cope during challenging times outside of church services, a further recommendation is for Catholic Priests to highlight the use of said symbols outside of church services as a means of coping in times of adversity. Finally, sizable empirical studies expounded on how anthropologists, neuroscientists, sociologists, and theologians have emphasized the positive effects that the use of religious symbols, rituals, and religious teachings have on the faithful' cognitive and behavioral functions. Therefore, practitioners such as social workers, behavioral counselors, clinicians, and other specialists in the medical and mental fields may incorporate a plan or strategy that facilitates the use of resources that includes the employment of religious symbols and religious teachings to help the individuals cope based upon their faith and spiritual beliefs.

IX. CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to understand how devout Catholics described how they used religious symbols and religious teachings to cope with personal challenges. Overall, the participants demonstrated the process of ascribing, understanding, and interpreting the meaning of using religious symbols and religious teachings. The results supported the theoretical foundation of Symbolic Interactionism Theory (Mead, 1934) and showed a significant positive impact that helped these individuals cope with personal challenges.

The participants described how and when they shared intimate moments with God using the sensory experiences that the religious symbols and teachings provoked, they felt the presence of God, which defined theme one. The narratives from the participants described how they found solace during times of personal challenges defined theme two. Stressful situations, tragedy, and mental, emotional, and physiological issues were included in their descriptions, with vivid narratives of how the use of religious symbols and teachings helped them cope. Theme three was defined by the participants' descriptions of how they acted towards religious symbols and teachings based on the meaning they ascribed, the social interactions with others using shared symbols and teachings, and the interpretation derived from their understanding. Finally, theme four was derived from the participants' descriptions of how feelings of faith emerged when using religious symbols and teachings in times of personal challenges. The study advanced the research on the topic by providing insights based on the participants' narrative descriptions. The study's results presented the factors that contributed to the description of the phenomenon and suggested further research was needed to expand on how religious symbols and teachings could help the faithful cope with personal challenges.

While we collected an abundant amount of descriptive data, that enriched the findings and provided further clarity to describe the phenomenon, the findings are not reflective of the larger population based on statistical grounds. The methodology and design of the study reflected only a targeted devout Catholic population. Thus, the challenge was a low representation of other major ethnic groups, age groups, and gender groups, resulting in difficulty in applying the results to a broader population. The current study may be expanded to other regions with vast demographic diversity and population sizes. The study may be repeated with a larger sample size of devout Catholic population, or the faithful of other denominations or religions for demographic diversity, which will allow for a further understanding of how religious symbols and religious teachings are used to cope during times of adversity challenges or in other circumstances.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Cristina Leira designed the research, conducted the data analysis, and wrote the paper. Dr. Frankie Lee supported the viability of the data sources, peer-reviewed the data analysis for credibility purposes, proofread, and provided a quality

review. James Smith consulted and reviewed the methodology and design of the study and findings. Jeff Quin consulted and reviewed the literature review and the findings. June Maul consulted and provided quality reviews of the study and its findings. All authors approved of the final version.

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