

The Religious Vocation Journey: Responses, Supports, Barriers and Coping Strategies—  
Stories of Chinese Priests, Religious Brothers and Religious Sisters in Hong Kong

by

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## STATEMENT OF ORIGINALITY

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## ABSTRACT

The study aimed to explore the stories of Hong Kong-born Catholics in choosing to lead religious life in the midst of the universal negative climate of decreasing numbers of individuals pursuing a religious vocation. It examined the trajectory of the religious vocation journey of a sample of 10 religious personnel and 4 laity by understanding the responses they made, discernments undergone, supports received, barriers encountered and coping strategies adopted. The study also took the group as a whole by looking at their perspectives on the declining trend of responses to a religious vocation and suggested measures to foster a religious vocation. This helped to address the issue of a declining population of religious personnel, despite an expansion of the Catholic lay population in Hong Kong. The primary data collection method used in this research was a qualitative approach by means of life history interviews with the 14 participants.

The individual narratives showed that the calling to a religious vocation for all participants came from God, who might have encountered the person directly, passed the messages through others and/or inspired one's inner desire. In the discernment process, three tools—companionship of spiritual directors, visiting religious institutes/attending come-and-see programmes and self-reflection—were identified as crucial factors in the participants' decision to lead a religious life; furthermore, three key factors—charisma/missionary work, community life and prayer/liturgical life—had been considered in selecting which religious institute to enter. In pursuing a religious vocation, the participants encountered difficulties at different times/stages, and community life was regarded as the most challenging barrier among all. The coping strategies broadly entailed looking upward to God through prayers and trust in Him, and going inward to oneself by improving oneself and/or accepting others. The sources of support were God from above,

individual self from within and encouragement from the environment, including family, friends, faith community and religious institutes.

On the macro level, the participants' perspectives showed that the declining trend of responses to a religious vocation could be attributed to four parties: religious personnel, religious institutes, family and youngsters. The religious personnel could not live up to God's image and, thus, failed to attract others to pursue religious life. The conservative rules/regulations and aging members posed hindrances to one's desire to enter the religious institutes concerned. A lack of support from families and the increase of broken families imposed challenges to individuals' responses to a religious vocation. Youngsters had immature attachments to the material world and had no close links with God.

On the measures fostering a religious vocation, the participants indicated that apart from the aforementioned four parties involved in the reasons for the declining responses to a religious vocation, five more parties—schools, Diocese of Hong Kong (DHK), parishes, Diocesan Vocation Commission (DVC) and social media—could be engaged in promoting a religious vocation in Hong Kong. The nine parties are categorised into five groups: family and schools; church communities (DHK, parishes and DVC); religious personnel and religious institutes; youngsters; and social media. Each party in the group has its own responsibilities to participate in fostering a religious vocation in their corner of the world.

The results of all the findings were integrated into an overall explanation, consisting of three clusters: cultivation cluster (comprising DHK, parishes and DVC); nurture cluster (comprising family, schools and youngsters); and inspiration cluster (comprising religious institutes, religious personnel and social media). The three clusters have respective roles to play by means of cultivating favourable soil for the growth of vocation seeds; nurturing the Christian faith with a view to seeking God's will in life; and inspiring the vocation seeds to open and respond to God's calling with courage and generosity. Through the dynamics of

inter-cluster coordination and cross-cluster interaction, these parties can make a concerted effort to foster a religious vocation while attempting to address the issue of the declining population of religious personnel, despite an expansion of the Catholic lay population in Hong Kong.

The study contributes to an in-depth understanding of a religious vocation as it enriches the elements/interpretation of a religious vocation (Rulla, 1971) and the dimensions of callings (Dik & Duffy, 2009; Hunter et al., 2010); unfolds the processes of discernment (Hankle, 2009) and the selection of religious institutes; and provides new insights into the aspects of supports, barriers and coping strategies associated with the religious vocation journey (Lent et al., 2002; Stark & Finke, 2000; Sunardi, 2014). Through an exploration of the possible reasons for the declining trend of responses to a religious vocation and the suggested measures to foster a religious vocation, the study offers valuable references to the parties engaged in the cultivation, nurturing as well as the promotion of a religious vocation.

In the study journey, the researcher experienced spiritual enlightenment, which is illustrated with a metaphor of a BIKE-FIT Cross. It reminds the researcher that in leading a Christian life, one has to maintain **B**alance of oneself and keep moving, uphold one's **I**dentify, be **K**ind when interacting with others and **E**ntrust to God after one has put all his/her efforts into the assignments. In all circumstances, one should have **F**aith in God, be the **I**mage of God and express **T**hanksgiving to God.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks to God! Thanks for entrusting me with this project and giving me abundant grace to move on until the finish. Praise to God! Praise to Him for sending me ABC—Angels, Bike and Comrades—throughout the journey.

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My bike was the one thing that accompanied me most during the study. I went riding for exercise as well as to reduce pressure at times when I felt tired of writing the thesis. I

found myself not only enjoying the silence and moments of solitude during the rides, but I also treasured the inspiration gained therefrom for thesis writing. The spirituality of the BIKE-FIT Cross as a kind of reflection was sparked by riding my little red bike.

The comrades I refer to are three saints, namely Blessed Mother Mary, St Teresa of Avila and St Cecilia. In the course of writing the thesis, I had a habit of placing the statues of these lady saints beside my computer to accompany me. They guided me to transmit God's love to mankind and taught me to give praise and thanksgiving to His Glory.

Though I worked alone on the study, I did not walk alone on the journey as God was with me and my ABC supported/accompanied me.



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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CARA	Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate
CCC	Catechism of the Catholic Church
DHK	Diocese of Hong Kong
DVC	Diocesan Vocation Commission
HKCCD	Hong Kong Catholic Church Directory
HKCDA	Hong Kong Catholic Diocesan Archives
HREC	Human Research Ethics Committee
HSS	Holy Spirit Seminary
HSSC	Holy Spirit Seminary College
KKP	Kung Kao Po
RSE	Religious Studies/Ethics
SDB	Salesian of Don Bosco
SJ	Society of Jesus
WYD	World Youth Day
YBP	Youth Boiling Point



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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

‘The harvest is abundant but the labourers are few’ (Luke 10:2) is a common description for the plight of the shortfall of priests, religious brothers and religious sisters (broadly called ‘religious personnel’) in the Roman Catholic Church (simply called the ‘Catholic Church’), which has persisted in the past decades until today. A rapid decline in Catholic religious vocations occurred in North America and most of Western Europe from the 1970s to year 2000 (Stark & Finke, 2000). The number of priests and religious in the United States also fell during these three decades (Schwietz, 2001). The statistics from the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA)<sup>1</sup> of the Vatican showed that the total number of Catholic priests and nuns<sup>2</sup> decreased from 1975 to 2012 (Figure 1). Nevertheless, the falling recruitment to the priesthood in Europe and North America was balanced by a rise in Africa and Asia, whereas the decline in female religious vocations was too steep for developing countries to offset.

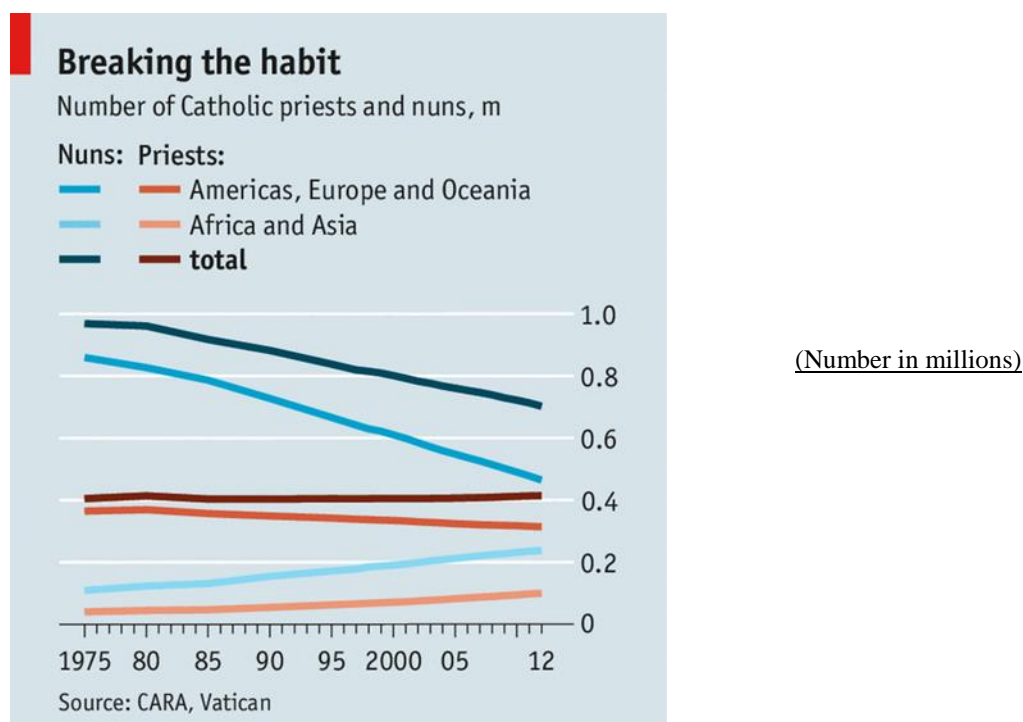
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<sup>1</sup> CARA was established in March 1965 to help find reasonably adequate answers to the urgent contemporary dilemmas facing Christian renewal (Gannon, 1967). It has selected highly professional staff as its Board of Directors, including bishops, major superiors of religious orders, representatives of church organisations and key lay leaders.

<sup>2</sup> The terms nuns or religious sisters are often used interchangeably nowadays when referring to women religious. Nuns historically take solemn vows and live a life of prayer and contemplation in a monastery or convent, while religious sisters take simple vows and live an active vocation of prayer and charitable works in areas such as education and healthcare (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nun>).

**Figure 1**

*Decreasing Number of Catholic Priests and Nuns (from 1975 to 2012)*



Source: Anonymous. (2014). *Fewer are called; Roman Catholic vocations.* *The Economist*. London, 411 (8887).

The Pontifical Yearbook 2017 and the *Annuarium Statisticum Ecclesiae* 2015, compiled and edited by the Central Office of Church Statistics (<https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2017/04/06/170406e.html>), showed that the total number of priests in the world in 2015 compared to 2010 increased by 0.83% (from 412,236 to 415,656). While Africa and Asia recorded a positive trend (+17.4% and +13.3%, respectively) with America remaining almost stationary (+0.35%), negative rates were registered for Europe (-0.58%) and Oceania (-2.0%). The statistics further indicate that the number of priests and religious in Asia in 2015 had been on a sustained upward trend, compared to their respective figures in 2010.

According to Barron (2015), the increase in the religious vocation in Africa may be because African Christianity puts powerful stress on the miraculous, eternal life, God's active

providence, healing grace and the divinity of Jesus. The African theology of the priesthood is unapologetically supernatural. The priests in Africa are, therefore, regarded as mystics, soul doctors, healers and stewards of the mysteries of God and, thus, present a compelling and attractive profile. Regarding the situation in Asia, literature and websites from the Philippines, Vietnam and South Korea only reveal the increase in terms of numbers without providing explanations for them.

In contrast to the continual decline of priesthood, the number of Catholics in the United States has gradually increased over time (Hoge & Wenger, 2003). Schwietz (2001) also indicated that the number of priests and religious was falling while the number of Catholics was increasing. In 1965, there were 46.4 million Catholics in the United States and the number increased to 62 million by 2001 (Schwietz, 2001). A rising trend in the number of Catholics was also recorded worldwide and in Hong Kong. The statistics of the Catholic Church show that the Catholic population rose from 1.285 billion in 2010 to 1.299 billion in 2016, representing an increase of 1.1% (Kung Kao Po [KKP] dated 24 June 2018). KKP is Hong Kong's Catholic Diocese weekly newspaper. According to the Hong Kong Catholic Diocesan Archives (HKCDA), Hong Kong's Catholic population increased from 501,000 in 2010 to 601,000 in 2016, representing an increase of 20%.

The Catholic Diocese of Hong Kong (simply named 'Diocese of Hong Kong' (DHK); 香港教區) is currently facing a decreasing number of Chinese priests, and religious brothers and sisters. The challenge becomes more acute in the face of a rising population of Catholic faithful local residents. Being a lay faithful, I appreciate very much the dedication and service rendered by religious personnel in the territory, but I worry about their wellbeing as their strength shrinks. I was baptised in my early thirties in 1999. Since then, I have come to know more about the universal Church and the DHK by pursuing a Bachelor of Arts in Religious Studies at the Holy Spirit Seminary College (HSSC) and participating in religious-related

activities in the parishes, such as teaching children in Sunday school, conducting catechesis classes for adults and serving in the lector group and choir.

My concern about the shortfall of religious personnel in Hong Kong has driven me to learn more about their religious vocation journeys by listening to their stories, reading books, navigating websites, etc. From there emerged a desire to find out what made a Chinese resident in Hong Kong decide to pursue a priestly/consecrated life (broadly named ‘religious life’), despite the implicit pressure of the downward trend in religious personnel in the territory. Where did this desire and the courage to head on in the face of all sorts of challenges originate from?

Everyone has their own trajectory in earthly life. Each follows their own path with different experiences during their upbringing and callings in their education, work and family roles. I am interested in learning about others’ stories, in particular their dreams and ideals that direct and lead them towards achieving a fulfilling life. To a great extent, young people’s choice of vocation projects their sense of purpose or meaning in life.

Driven by the issue of concern and personal interest, I deemed it worthwhile to undertake research concerning the unique calling of young people in Hong Kong who responded to a religious vocation by pursuing a religious life in the course of their choice of work. At this juncture, the thesis will first present the background of the DHK in terms of a brief history of the Catholic Church in Hong Kong and the different categories of religious personnel serving in the territory. The issue of the declining population of religious personnel, despite an expansion of the Catholic lay population in the DHK, will then be examined in detail. This introductory chapter concludes with an outline of the whole thesis.

### **Background of the Catholic Church in Hong Kong**

In the early 1840s, religious orders and missionary congregations from overseas started exploring the Catholic mission in China through Hong Kong, which served as a



stepping stone for such attempts. As a result, the history of the Catholic Church in Hong Kong is indissolubly connected with the religious orders and missionary congregations (Ha & Taveirne, 2009). The HKCDA records that Hong Kong was established as an Apostolic Prefecture on 22 April 1841, raised to Apostolic Vicariate on 17 November 1874, and subsequently to Diocese on 11 April 1946. The diocese has its own administrative structure while maintaining close links with the Pope and other Catholic communities around the world with which it shares the same creed, scripture, liturgy and organisations. Along with its apostolic work, one of the prime concerns of the diocese is the wellbeing of the community as a whole.

Against this background, in Hong Kong are religious personnel, including priests (also called ‘clergy’), and religious brothers and sisters from different religious institutes<sup>3</sup> (simply named ‘Institutes’; 修會團體) in addition to those from the DHK serving the Catholic faithful (also called ‘laity’). According to the Hong Kong Catholic Church Directory 2020 (data collected up to 31 August 2019), there are 13 men’s religious institutes and 27 women’s religious institutes, together with the diocesan priests, serving in the territory. Examples of institutes for men are the Society of Jesus (SJ; 耶穌會), founded in Rome, Italy in 1540 and starting its mission in Hong Kong in 1926; the Salesian of Don Bosco (SDB; 鮑思高慈幼會), founded in Turin, Italy in 1859 and starting its mission in Hong Kong in 1927; and the Order of Friars Minor in Hong Kong (方濟會), founded in Assisi, Italy in 1209 and starting its mission in Hong Kong in 1948. Examples of institutes for women are the Daughters of Charity of the Canossian Institute (Canossian Sisters; 嘉諾撒仁愛女修會), founded in Verona, Italy in 1808 and starting its mission in Hong Kong in 1860; the Sisters of St Paul De Chartres (St Paul Sisters; 沙爾德聖保祿女修會), founded in

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<sup>3</sup> Historically, religious institutes were distinguished as either religious orders (whose members took solemn vows) or religious congregations (whose members took simple vows). Since the 1983 Code of Canon Law, only the term “religious institute” is used ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religious\\_institute](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religious_institute)).

Levesville-la-Chenard, France in 1696 and starting its mission in Hong Kong in 1926; and The Congregation of the Sisters of the Precious Blood (耶穌寶血女修會), founded in Hong Kong in 1922.

Each religious institute canonically erected by the Church has its own distinguished form of consecrated life by its liturgical character, public profession of the evangelical counsels, fraternal life led in common, and witness given to the union of Christ with the Church (Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC) No. 925). Each has a unique charisma and vision in their missionary work. A charisma refers to the particular grace granted by God to religious founders and their organisations that distinguishes them from other organisations within the same Church and shapes their visions in missionary activities (Ha & Taveirne, 2009).

The charisma and missionary work of some religious institutes are quoted for illustration. SJ was founded by Ignatius of Loyola, who is remembered as a talented spiritual director and his method was recorded in a celebrated treatise called the *Spiritual Exercises*, a simple set of meditations, prayers and other mental exercises ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Society\\_of\\_Jesus](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Society_of_Jesus)). The SJ engages in education, research and giving retreats with the apostolic motto of *ad maiorem Dei gloriam*, ‘for the greater glory of God’ (Mooney, 2009). SDB was founded by John Bosco, an exceptional educator who had a system of education that developed the whole person—body, heart, mind and spirit. The method is known as the Preventive System, a holistic approach to education that seeks to prevent the need for punishment by placing the child in an environment in which they are encouraged to be the best one can be (<https://www.sdb.org/en>). The SDB aims at the salvation of the young, fighting all forms of poverty and taking as its own motto, ‘give me souls, take away the rest’.

Canossian Sisters was founded by Magdalene of Canossa, whose greatest desire was

to become ‘fine particles of dust’, spreading herself in all corners of the world to preach and to realise the unconditional love of Crucified Christ (Ha & Taveirne, 2009). The missionary work includes ministries of education and human promotion, evangelisation and faith formation, and pastoral care among the sufferings, holding the motto, ‘to make Jesus known and loved,’ especially to those most in need (<http://www.canossiansisters.org/>). St Paul Sisters was founded by Father Louis Chauvet, who was prompted by the words of St Paul, ‘I have become all things to all, to save at least some’ (1 Corinthians 9:22; Ha & Taveirne, 2009). The missionary work focuses on education and taking care of the sick with the aspiration of perfection of charity through union with God and service of neighbour ([http://www.srspc.org.hk/en/origin\\_hk.php](http://www.srspc.org.hk/en/origin_hk.php)).

### **Categories of Religious Personnel in Hong Kong**

The HKCDA classifies the religious personnel into four categories: diocesan clergy, priests of institutes, religious brothers and religious sisters. The diocesan clergy (also called ‘diocesan priests’) are priests who commit themselves to a certain geographical area and are ordained into the service of the citizens of a diocese, a church administrative region. They serve the everyday needs of the people in the parishes, but their activities are not limited to that of their parish ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Secular\\_clergy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Secular_clergy)). The priests of institutes (also called ‘religious priests’) are ordained but as members of religious institutes and follow a rule of life. They often live in religious communities and engage in a specialised form of ministry according to the charisma of the institute. Religious brothers are also members of religious institutes who live in religious communities and work in a ministry appropriate to their capabilities. They differ from religious priests in the sense that they are not ordained ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brother\\_\(Christian\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brother_(Christian))). Religious sisters are women who have taken vows in religious institutes dedicated to apostolic works ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religious\\_sister\\_\(Catholic\)\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religious_sister_(Catholic))).

The last three categories are called ‘religious’ because they are members of religious institutes and are committed to following Christ in consecrated life of the Church, taking the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience (also called ‘evangelical counsels’). A consecrated life is a life lived by a person who responds to God’s loving action and offers their life to God in a religious profession, and above all, makes an offering of life itself that their life might become a sign of the primacy of God, of a life only for Him, of the covenant, of the love of God for his people (Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, 2015).

Regarding the difference between diocesan priests and the religious in taking vows, I had an opportunity to meet with Bishop Joseph Ha of the DHK to enquire about the religious vocation on 11 January 2020 at the Holy Spirit Seminary (HSS). Bishop Ha indicated that diocesan priests were required to obey the bishop of the dioceses in which they served. According to church history, priests’ practice of chastity and celibacy was of much benefit to the faithful because of their dedicated service. Strictly speaking, diocesan priests were not bounded by the vow of poverty, though they were encouraged to lead a simple way of life.

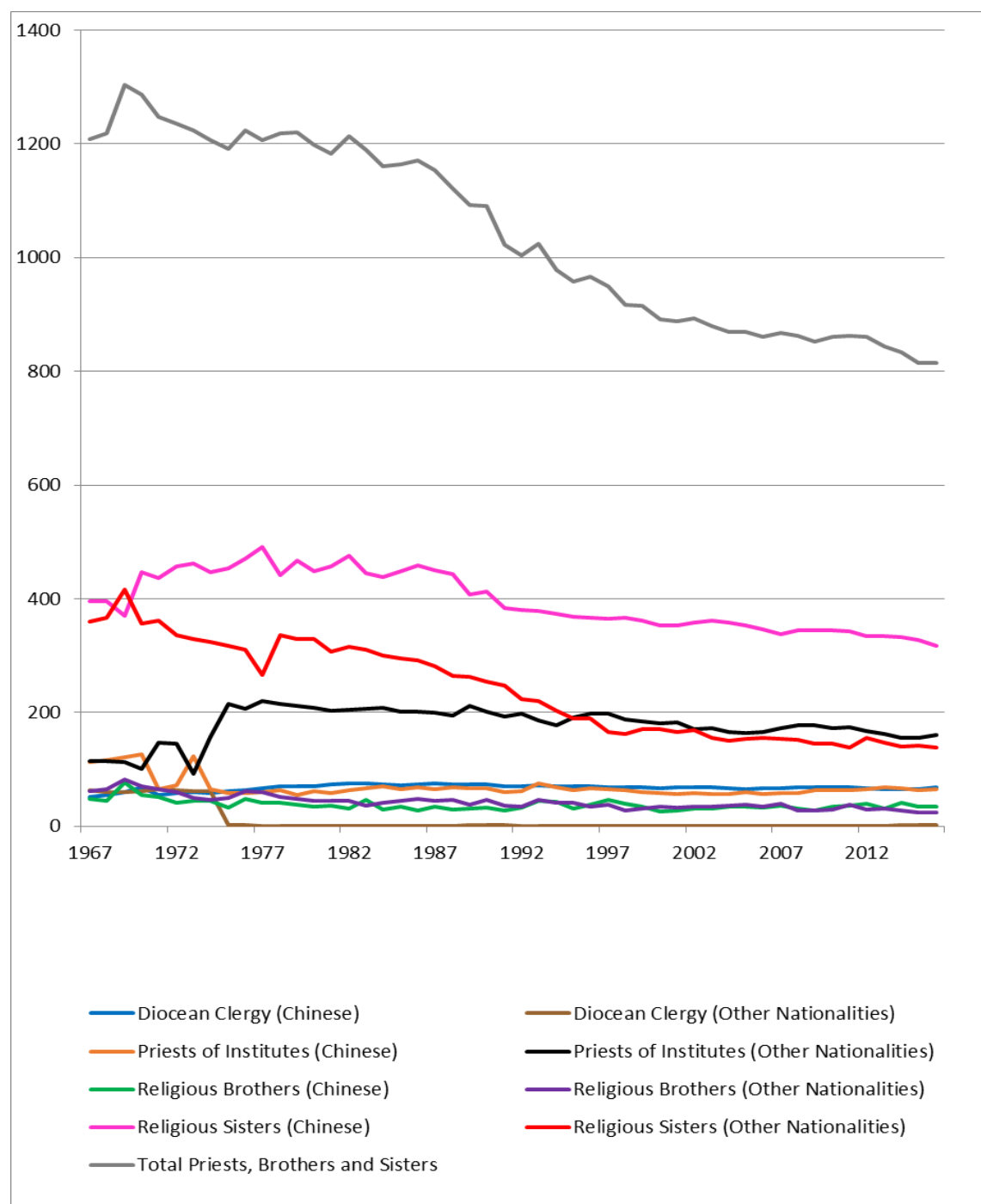
The HKCDA further divides these four categories of religious personnel into two types: Chinese and Other Nationalities, making a total of eight groups. It has recorded the number of these religious personnel since 1967. Figure 2 is a diagram showing the number and trend of these eight groups from 30 September 1967 to 2016 (up to 31 August 2017).<sup>4</sup> Detailed breakdown is given in Appendix A.

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<sup>4</sup> At the time of preparing the thesis proposal in mid-2018, the latest figure available from the statistics of the Diocese of Hong Kong was up to 31 August 2017. The relevant figures can be found in the website of the Hong Kong Catholic Diocesan Archives (<http://archives.catholic.org.hk>).

**Figure 2**

*Number and Trend of Religious Personnel in Hong Kong (from 1967 to 2016)*



Source: Hong Kong Catholic Diocesan Archives online (<http://archives.catholic.org.hk/>)

Using a similar year range as CARA (from 1975 to 2012 as shown in Figure 1), the religious personnel in Hong Kong also experienced a drop in number in the past four decades

(1977 to 2016), with the total number dropping from 1,207 in 1977 to 814 in 2016 for a decrease of 32.6%. A snapshot of the numbers of the eight groups of religious personnel in years 1977 and 2016 is captured in Table 1.

**Table 1**

*Number of Religious Personnel in Hong Kong (By Groups)*

Group	Year		Change in Number	Change in Percentage
	1977	2016		
Diocesan Clergy (Chinese)	67	68	+1	+1.5%
Priests of Institutes (Chinese)	60	66	+6	+10.0%
Religious Brothers (Chinese)	41	35	-6	-14.6%
Religious Sisters (Chinese)	491	318	-173	-35.2%
<i>Subtotal (Chinese)</i>	<i>659</i>	<i>487</i>	<i>-172</i>	<i>-26.1%</i>
Diocesan Clergy (Other Nationalities)	1	3	+2	+200%
Priests of Institutes (Other Nationalities )	220	161	-59	-26.8%
Religious Brothers (Other Nationalities )	60	25	-35	-58.3%
Religious Sisters (Other Nationalities )	267	138	-129	-48.3%
<i>Subtotal (Other Nationalities)</i>	<i>548</i>	<i>327</i>	<i>-221</i>	<i>-40.3%</i>
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,207</b>	<b>814</b>	<b>-393</b>	<b>-32.6%</b>

For the groups of Chinese, there was a slightly upward trend for the diocesan clergy and priests of institutes (1.5% and 10.0%, respectively) in the past four decades. However, the absolute numbers recorded of the increases were only one and six, respectively. The

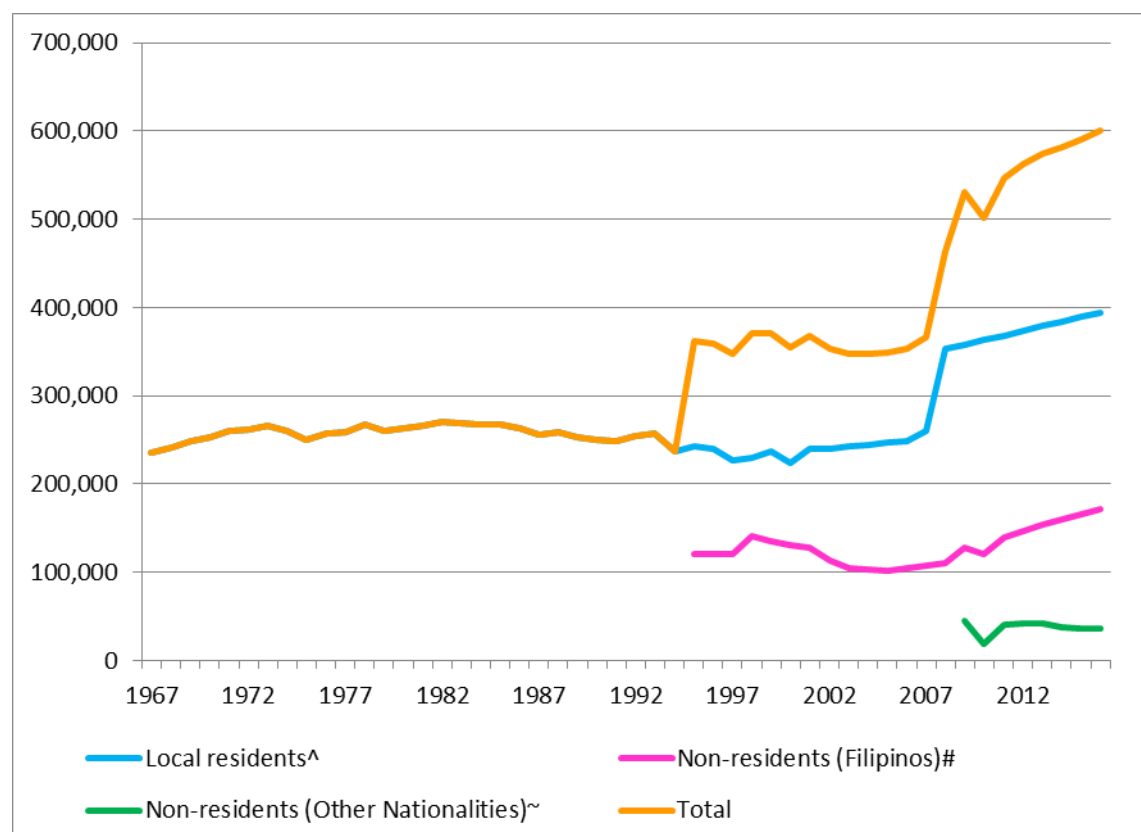
religious brothers and sisters both experienced great drops of about 14.6% and 35.2%, respectively, in the same period.

For the groups of Other Nationalities, the change for the diocesan clergy was not significant as the number of priests only varied from one to three throughout the period. The three other groups—priests of institutes, and religious brothers and sisters—all recorded significant drops of 26.8%, 58.3% and 48.3%, respectively.

The situation in Hong Kong largely echoes the worldwide phenomenon presented by CARA in Figure 1, except for the Chinese religious sisters who also recorded a decrease as in Europe and North America, unlike the rising trend in Asia. There is growing concern about the shortfall of religious personnel; thus, the lack of religious vocations has been a problem for over half a century in many places, including Hong Kong (Ha & Taveirne, 2009).

### **Issue of the Declining Population of Religious Personnel, despite an Expansion of the Catholic Lay Population in the Diocese of Hong Kong**

The Catholic populations recorded by the HKCDA in 1977 and 2016 were approximately 259,000 and 601,000, respectively (detailed figures are provided in Appendix B), indicating a sharp increase of over 132%. The HKCDA has started capturing the number of Filipino migrant workers (serving as domestic helpers) and other nationalities with Catholic faithful living in Hong Kong in addition to the local residents since 1995 and 2009, respectively. While the Catholic faithful increased over 132% in the past four decades, the number of religious personnel experienced a decrease of 32.6%. Therefore, a hot issue for the DHK is to address the pastoral need for the rising population of Catholic faithful. Figure 3 illustrates the number and trend of these three Catholic populations from 1967 to 2016.

**Figure 3***Catholic Population in Hong Kong (from 1967 to 2016)*

Source: Hong Kong Catholic Diocesan Archives online (<http://archives.catholic.org.hk/>)

**Note:**

<sup>^</sup> Data were available from year 1967. Non-resident Filipinos and other nationalities living in Hong Kong are excluded. Data captured before year 2007 were consolidated from the actual figures reported by the parishes, and data thereafter were captured in a computer record with projections mainly based on the number of baptisms performed each year.

<sup>#</sup> Data were available from year 1995; however, the number of Filipino migrant workers serving as domestic helpers was estimated. Owing to the difficulty of obtaining accurate statistics, the estimated figure is based on information supplied by the Government.

<sup>~</sup> Estimated data were available from year 2009.

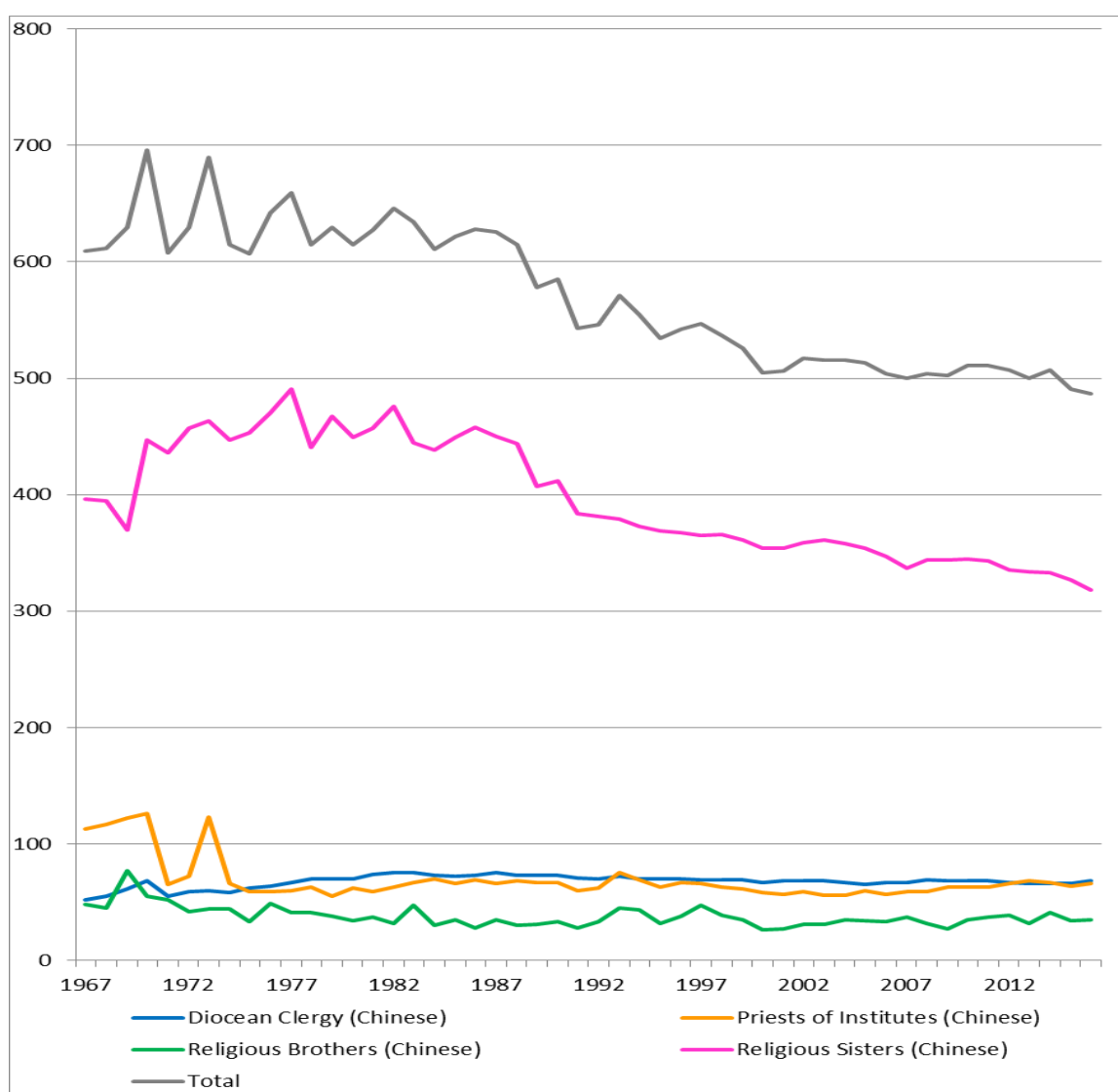
The DHK is the largest single Chinese-speaking diocese in the world (Ha & Taveirne, 2009). When excluding non-residents (including Filipino migrant workers and other nationalities), the total Catholic population in 2016 remained at 394,000. Compared to the figure of 259,000 in 1977, this is an increase of 52.1% in the past four decades. Similarly,



when excluding religious personnel of Other Nationalities, the number of Chinese religious personnel in Hong Kong in 1977 and 2016 was 659 and 487, respectively, representing a decrease of 26.1%. The numbers and trends of the Chinese religious personnel and local residents of the Catholic population from 1967 to 2016 are shown in Figure 4 and Figure 5, respectively.

**Figure 4**

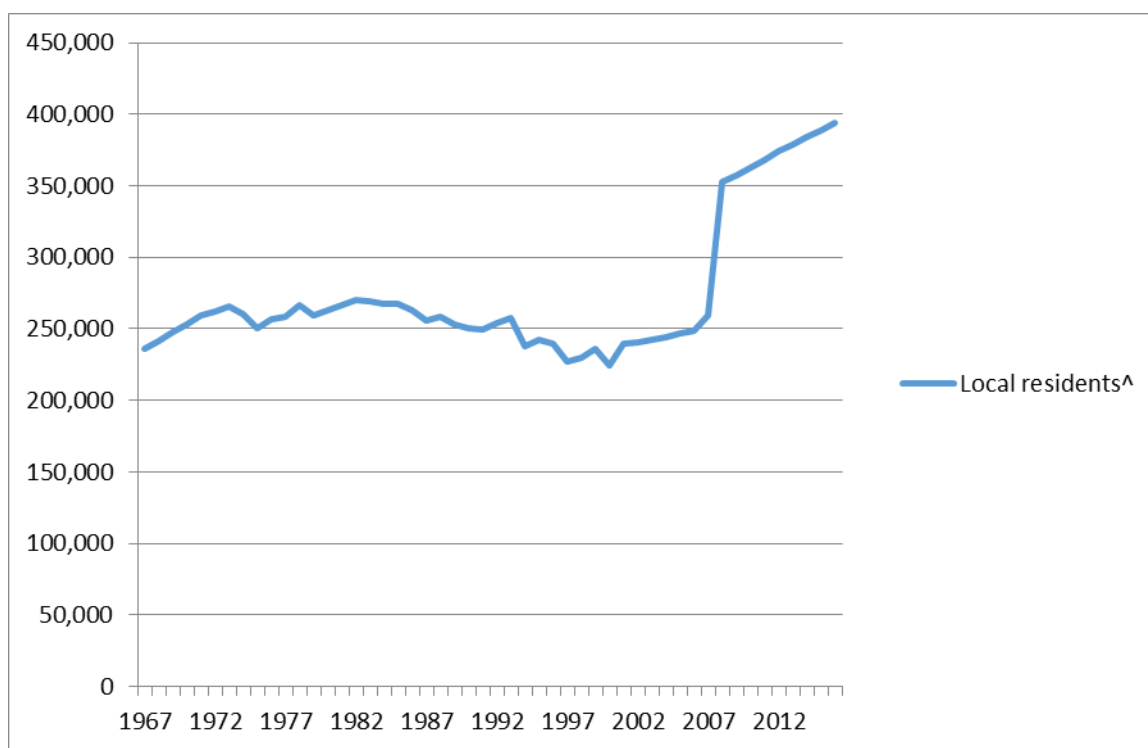
*Number and Trend of Religious Personnel (Chinese) in Hong Kong (from 1967 to 2016)*



Source: Hong Kong Catholic Diocesan Archives online (<http://archives.catholic.org.hk/>)

**Figure 5**

*Catholic Population (Local Residents) in Hong Kong (from 1967 to 2016)*



Source: Hong Kong Catholic Diocesan Archives online (<http://archives.catholic.org.hk/>)

**Note:**

<sup>^</sup> Data were available from year 1967. Non-resident Filipinos and other nationalities living in Hong Kong are excluded. Data captured before year 2007 were consolidated from actual figures reported by the parishes, and data thereafter were captured in a computer record with projections mainly based on the number of baptisms performed each year.

Apart from comparing the changes within the Catholic population in Hong Kong, it is worthwhile to look at the issue in the context of the local population in the territory during the said periods, namely 1977, 2010 and 2016. According to the Census and Statistics Department of the Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (<https://www.censtatd.gov.hk/home/index.jsp>), the total population in the territory was 4.632 million in 1977, 7.052 million in 2010 and 7.377 million in 2016, which shows increases of 4.6% (from 2010 to 2016) and 59.3% (from 1977 to 2016), respectively. When comparing the changes in the total Catholic population as percentages of the total local population, there is a

steady increase from 5.6% to 7.1% and 8.1% in the three different periods. Even if only local residents of the Catholic population are counted, there is still an increase of over 5% on average of the total local population in the periods, as shown in Table 2.

**Table 2**

*Comparison of Catholic Population to the Local Population in Hong Kong*

<b>Year</b>	<b>Total Catholic Population as a % of the Total Local Population</b>	<b>Local Residents of Catholic Population as a % of the Total Local Population</b>
<b>1977</b>	0.259 million/4.632 million (5.6%)	0.259 million/4.632 million (5.6%)
<b>2010</b>	0.501 million/7.052 million (7.1%)	0.363 million/7.052 million (5.1%)
<b>2016</b>	0.601 million/7.377 million (8.1%)	0.394 million/7.377 million (5.3%)

The above clearly shows a decline in the number of religious personnel worldwide and in Hong Kong, but at the same time, an increase in the Catholic population worldwide as well as in Hong Kong. Thus, the issue of a lack of people pursuing religious vocations emerges, despite an expansion of the Catholic lay population in Hong Kong. ‘The harvest is abundant but the labourers are few’ (Luke 10:2) best describes the present plight of Hong Kong, which has experienced a shortage of religious personnel and an expansion of the lay population simultaneously.

The alarming and significant nature of the problem has caused concern for religious institutes, religious personnel and the faithful. Religious institutes have to maintain the same operation with fewer members (Ha & Taveirne, 2009). Some of the members are even aged. As a result, religious personnel get fatigued, both mentally and physically, because of the need to take up more responsibilities/duties. Moreover, they cannot spare time for further studies, which not only enrich themselves personally but also equip them to better serve the

faithful. This is one of the known issues of the diocesan priests in the DHK. The huge increase in the number of lay Catholics, together with a declining population of religious personnel, means the pastoral needs of the faithful are greatly unmet or difficult to meet. The only way to meet their needs is to increase the number of religious personnel. For the sake of exploring ideas about how to do this in the context of Hong Kong, this research has been done to understand more deeply the actual pathway to becoming a priest, a religious brother and a religious sister.

The present research explores the religious vocation journeys of Chinese religious personnel in four groups, including diocesan clergy, priests of institutes, religious brothers and religious sisters. The reason is not only because they have a larger share of religious personnel (rising from 54.6% in 1977 to nearly 60% in 2016) than the Other Nationalities currently serving in the territory. More significantly, I am interested in knowing the stories of Hong Kong's young people who are pursuing religious life.

### **Research Problem, Purpose and Questions**

With this concern and motivation, the literature review has been navigated with the focus on young people's choice of vocation at work and their responses to Catholic religious vocations. The literature review shows extensive studies on the dimensions of young people's choice of vocation at work and their process in making their career choices. However, researches on people's discernment process in deciding to lead religious life and the challenges that religious personnel face in responding to religious vocations and staying on religious vocation journeys are limited. Under these circumstances, exploring these areas is imminent and worthwhile to address the situation in Hong Kong.

In the midst of the universal negative and/or challenging climate of decreasing Catholic religious vocations, the aim of this research is to understand the contrary positive responses to a religious vocation of some Hong Kong-born Catholics pursuing religious life,

and to identify the supports and barriers associated with their respective religious vocation journeys as well as their coping strategies to overcome the barriers therein. The study examines the religious vocation journeys of 10 religious personnel with the following two main research questions to fill the identified gaps in the literature:

- (1) What are the journeys that lead to a sample of Chinese priests, religious brothers and religious sisters to respond to the religious vocation and pursue priestly/consecrated life in the context of a declining population of religious personnel, despite an expansion of the Catholic lay population in Hong Kong?
- (2) What supports and barriers are associated with their religious vocation journeys, and what are their coping strategies to overcome the barriers therein?

For the sake of multiple data collection, I have included four laity in the study with the intention of looking for possible discrepant evidence, in particular, the parts related to the barriers encountered and the coping strategies adopted, in answering the research questions (Maxwell, 2013). These four lay participants (two men and two women) had once entered religious institutes but left them after undergoing formation. The research design chosen for this study is a qualitative approach with narrative research by means of life history interviews. It is expected that the researcher–participant interactions in the interviews can help prompt the latter’s reflections/inputs, which will differ from the information provided by the participants unilaterally through other means in telling their stories.

### **Significance of the Study**

The significance of the study is two-fold: micro and macro. On the micro perspective, in exploring the unique stories of the research subjects (10 religious personnel and 4 laity), this study can shed light on the trajectory of each individual’s religious vocation journey, including their responses made, supports received, barriers encountered, coping strategies adopted, discernment undergone and challenges faced. The responses can help us understand

the participants' concerns and feelings in reacting to God's invitation for their pursuit of religious life. The data on the aspects of supports, barriers and coping strategies can provide a comprehensive picture of the participants' religious vocation journeys.

The literature review shows that discernment is one of the mysteries, a black box that has seldom been explored. This study is targeted at identifying participants' tools of discernment in both leading religious life and selecting the religious institute. It can, therefore, help reveal the processes involved in participants' discernments. The research shows some generic challenges that religious personnel have faced in pursuing and staying in the religious life. This study will deduct the challenges from the personal experiences of 14 participants, which can contribute to the literature to some extent. Most importantly, synthesis of the participants' distinct stories in the micro level can provide some insights towards an overall understanding on the subject of religious vocation.

On the macro level, examining the participants' religious vocation stories is useful to identify the similarities and differences of their pathways in respect to their responses, discernment processes, barriers and supports experienced on their journeys. The information gathered, in terms of the knowledge gained and the lessons learned, can shed light on the issue of the declining population of religious personnel, despite an expansion of the Catholic lay population in Hong Kong. The findings of the participants' perspectives on the declining trend of responses to religious vocations and the measures to foster them may provide insights for the DHK and religious institutes to tackle the issue in the territory. Furthermore, the literature review shows that the studies on the areas related to this thesis are largely from the United States or Western Europe. It is hoped that this study can contribute to cross-national comparative studies related to religious vocations.

### **Information on the Catholic Faith and Key Terminologies**

This section provides some background information on the Catholic faith and brief

descriptions of key terminologies used in this thesis to facilitate readers' understandings of the subject of the research. The material is mainly drawn from the Sacred Scripture (or the Bible) and the books on catechism. First of all, to Christians, the Bible is not a book of old fables. It tells how much God loves human beings, and through its words, God directly speaks to mankind. It starts with the creation of the world; it tells us how people got to know God and ends with the coming of a new heaven and earth. Catechism builds on four pillars: the profession of faith, the sacraments of faith, the life of faith and Christian prayer (CCC No. 13).

### *The Profession of Faith and the People of God*

Regarding the profession of faith, the Christians believe in one God, one God in three persons. God is not lonely, He has communion in Himself: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We call this mystery the Trinity. The Father in heaven has power over everything and created the world. God loves all His creations and He entrusted the earth to man to cultivate and take care of it (Genesis 2:15). Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is the Saviour of the world. He became man and shared the joy and misery of this earth with human beings. He died for us on the cross, was buried and raised on the third day after death. Holy Spirit gives life to all and lives in our hearts. He brings the divine into the Church and inspires us with good ideas and urges us to carry them out. He spreads His seven gifts: Wisdom, Understanding, Counsel, Fortitude, Knowledge, Piety and Fear of Lord (Isaiah 11:2) across the world and gives mankind nine fruits: Love, Joy, Peace, Patience, Kindness, Goodness, Trustfulness, Gentleness and Self-control (Galatians 5:22-23) for transformation.

The Holy Catholic Church is the community of all those who belong to Christ. The Church is holy because God works in her. The Church is Catholic, which means universal, sent to all. The Church is apostolic because she is built on the foundation of the apostles. The bishops are the successors of the apostles and Jesus's representative for His territory, which is

called a diocese. The pope is the bishop of the diocese of Rome as well as the successor of St Peter. The bishop is the leader of his people and is their most important teacher.

The Christian faithful through Baptism have been constituted as the people of God and become sharers in Christ's priestly, prophetic and royal office in their own manner (CCC No. 871). All of them are truly equal with regard to dignity and cooperate in the building up of the Body of Christ in accord with each one's own condition and function (CCC No. 872). All the faithful are called laity except those in Holy Orders (they are the priests) and those who belong to a religious state (they are the religious) approved by the Church (CCC No. 897).

Priests are made in the likeness of Christ the Priest by the Sacrament of Holy Orders. They are consecrated by the anointing of the Holy Spirit and sent by Christ to bring God to people and people to God. They proclaim God's word, minister holy sacraments and are entrusted with the office of teaching, sanctifying and governing in the name and power of Christ to shepherd the People of God (CCC No. 873).

The religious are people who choose the life of evangelical counsels by giving up secular values and seek to imitate Christ in his way of living through realising the religious values of poverty, chastity and obedience (Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, 2015). They consecrate themselves to the service of the Church; they are obliged in a special manner to engage in missionary work in accord with the character of their respective religious institutes.

Both priests and the religious choose to pursue priestly/consecrated life in the Church, involving diversity of ministry but unity of salvific mission, which God has entrusted to the Church to fulfil the world, in accord with the condition proper to each one (CCC Nos. 871 to 873). The priests and the religious perform the respective roles of the co-workers and collaborators of the diocesan bishop in his pastoral duty.



### *The Seven Sacraments of the Church*

There are seven sacraments instituted by Christ in providing the meeting points where God himself is present to bless and lead His people deeper into the community of the Church. The sacraments touch all the stages and all important moments of Christian life (CCC No. 1210). They can be divided into three categories: Sacraments of Christian Initiation (Baptism, Confirmation and the Eucharist); Sacraments of Healing (Penance and Anointing of the Sick); and Sacraments at the Service of Communion (Holy Orders and Matrimony).

The Sacraments of Christian Initiation lay the foundations of every Christian life (CCC No. 1212). Baptism is the meeting point at which Christ frees a person from original sin/personal sins and incorporates the person for their whole life into communion with Him and the whole Church. Confirmation is the meeting point from which God makes a person strong through His Holy Spirit and become a witness of Christ so as to serve the Kingdom of God. The Eucharist is the meeting point where God gives Himself to a person as food; the person receives the Body of Christ and becomes part of his Body, the Church. Apart from receiving the Eucharist as food, the Eucharist can be exposed and placed on the altar or kept in an enclosed tabernacle in the church for the adoration of the faithful. In addition, every Christian has the mission of evangelisation by going to the whole world and proclaiming the gospel to every creature (Mark 16:15) and making disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to observe all that Jesus has commanded (Matthew 28:19-20).

The Sacraments of Healing cure the souls of the Christians as well as restore them to bodily health (CCC No. 1421). The Penance, confession, is the meeting point where God forgives a person for all of their sins and reconciles them with the community as the sins damage a person's relationship with God. The Anointing of the Sick is the meeting point where God comes to the aid of those who are sick and who have lost their strength or those

who are about to depart from their earthly lives. The sacrament gives one comfort, peace and strength.

The Sacraments at the Service of Communion are directed towards the salvation of others (CCC No. 1534). The Holy Orders is the meeting point at which God equips men, like the apostles, with authority and sends them. In ordination, men, who are chosen by God and by the Church, are given the authority to act in Jesus's name in the midst of the community and to do his service to people. Matrimony is the meeting point when God unites the love of man and woman with His love. Getting married means that a man and a woman decide to stay together for their whole life, in good times and in bad times.

### *Christian Life and Christian Prayer*

God gave the people of Israel the Ten Commandments as rules for their living together well. In response to the question posed by a scholar of the law who asked which commandment was the greatest, Jesus said that the greatest and the first commandment was: You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. He added that the second one was: You shall love your neighbour as yourself (Matthew 22:35-39). In short, Christians have to love God and others in their daily life.

God is abstract and invisible. Christians have to stay connected to God through prayers. Praying means talking to God, giving our heart to God, becoming quiet, listening to God, thanking Him, asking Him and telling Him all of our worries, our fears and our happiness. Praying also means accepting sadness and asking God to also enter into our difficulties. However, we cannot hear God as we hear people or the sounds around us. He speaks to us very silently, in a secret language, the language of the heart. Therefore, we have to switch our heart to 'receive'. Sometimes we can hear His voice in us, sometimes through the Bible and sometimes through other people.

## Highlights of the Forthcoming Chapters

The next chapter records a review of literature to find people's responses to Catholic religious vocations and the supports, barriers and coping strategies associated with the religious vocation journeys. It first explains its turn to literature on work/career for insights into understanding people's responses to the calling to lead a religious life and to identify the supports, barriers and coping strategies they experienced in their religious vocation journeys. It also presents studies on the discernments of religious personnel upon entering a religious vocation and highlights the challenges they encountered in pursuing and staying in religious life. Finally, the analytical framework guiding the study is introduced.

Chapter 3 discusses the research design and provides the rationale for using a qualitative approach with narrative research by means of life history interviews. Then, it describes the processes of sampling and recruiting the research participants in detail. Thereafter, it sets out the data collection procedure, the data analysis process and measures to address the validity and ethical issues of this study.

Chapters 4, 5 and 6 report and analyse the data collected in the research. Chapter 4 presents the responses of the 14 participants to the religious vocation and their discernment processes in pursuing religious life and entering particular religious institutes. The focus of the responses is on the major events that triggered the participants' search for a religious vocation. Chapter 5 identifies the barriers faced by the participants in pursuing religious life, the strategies they used to cope with the difficulties encountered and the supports they received, which provided them with strength and courage to continue on their journeys. Chapter 6 discusses the participants' perspectives on the reasons for the declining trend of responses to religious vocations by Hong Kong people and measures to foster religious vocations in the territory.

Chapter 7 provides a critical discussion of the findings of the previous three chapters

and constructs an overview on the religious vocation journey of the religious personnel and laity who participated in this study. In integrating the findings and insights gained from the discussion, it offers an attempt to address the issue of the declining population of religious personnel, despite an expansion of the Catholic lay population in Hong Kong.

Chapter 8 shares the fruits that the researcher has borne by undergoing a wonderful spiritual journey, as inspired from the interactions/sharing with the participants during the interviews and, thereafter, the self-reflections. It also illustrates a metaphor of a BIKE-FIT Cross, resulting from the experiences of the researcher's spiritual enlightenment as well as transformation.

Chapter 9 concludes the thesis. It concisely recaps the key findings and discoveries of the study. The contribution to the literature and insights for possible future research are also highlighted.

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

With the research questions set for the study, a review of the literature was directed to two areas: (a) responses to Catholic religious vocations and (b) supports and barriers associated with the religious vocation journeys and the coping strategies to overcome the barriers therein. It was, however, found that the existing literature on the development of trajectories/pathways of Catholics who become religious personnel is relatively sparse and insufficiently informative. Therefore, the researcher looked into related literature for possible insights into understanding the two areas.

Regarding (a), a religious vocation is a particular form of life consecrated to God, witnessing His love for the salvation of mankind. Pursuit of a religious vocation should not be treated merely as work. Nevertheless, using the entry point of ‘work’ is considered appropriate, as it is the starting point at which students finish school and turn to a new chapter in their life. Similarly, in leading a religious life, the religious personnel will enter a journey different from their previous secular way of living. The exploration of the work domain opened a new horizon for career and calling, which showed a close link with vocation. The present study reviewed the literature on work/career as a next-best tool to understand religious personnel’s decisions in responding to a religious vocation/calling.

Regarding (b), there was no systematic research on the supports received, barriers encountered and coping strategies adopted by the religious personnel in their religious vocation journeys. The drilling of the literature on career found that its development process could offer some insights into these three aspects. The study made use of the insights as a framework to identify the supports, barriers and coping strategies associated with the religious vocation journeys of the religious personnel. The findings of the aforementioned literature review are presented in this chapter.

## **Orientations Towards Work**

In general, there are three distinct relationships people can have with their work: as jobs, as careers and as callings. People who treat their work as a job are only focusing on the material benefits derived from it, so as to acquire resources and to get enjoyment away from the job. They express no great interests and ambitions through the work, which is not an end in itself. People who regard their work as a career have a deeper personal investment in their work and mark their achievements not only through monetary gain, but by means of advancement within the occupational structure. They count higher social standing, hierarchical position and self-esteem as successful indicators of advancement. People who view their work as a calling enjoy the fulfilment that doing the work brings to them. They find their work inseparable from their life (Wrzesniewski et al., 1997). In short, people hold different attitudes towards work: as payment for a job performed; as advancement in a lifelong career; and as special meaning for the life they were called to do (Davidson & Caddell, 1994).

With these different orientations towards work, one study of employees ( $n = 109$ ) at a small Catholic university (Ponton et al., 2014) explored the purpose and meaning of one's work. The study examined the variables in the perception of vocation within the aspects of influence (what persons/experience), career trajectory, prosocial motivation, purpose in work and transcendent calling. The findings showed that most people focus on their career to fulfil their life's meaning. An insight gleaned from this study is that purposeful work does not only refer to the suitability of a person's talent/character for the work; it also involves personal growth, which is not confined to work but extends to the individual's role in life.

Other researchers also correlated callings with vocational development, great career maturity, career commitment, work meaning, job satisfaction, life meaning and life satisfaction (Duffy et al., 2011; Duffy & Dik, 2013). In view of the diverse benefits that a

calling can be linked to, it would be very wise for people's wellbeing not to have a calling but to live a calling (Duffy et al., 2013). It is also believed that a strong calling will totally envelop a person's life and bring them lifelong passion. As a result, when someone finds a calling at the work, it will lead to extraordinary positive outcomes in life for them (Dobrow & Kharas, 2011).

With the belief that young people's choice of vocation at work projects their sense of purpose or meaning in life, the orientation of work towards a calling is adopted in the present research. As there is no universal agreement over the definition, origin or developmental trajectory of a career calling (Hall & Chandler, 2005; Praskova et al., 2015), I have looked into the dimensions and nature of a calling to know more about the subject.

### **Dimensions of Calling**

Typically, the terms calling and vocation are closely linked and are used to refer to a sense of purpose or direction that leads an individual towards some kind of personally fulfilling and/or socially significant engagement within their work, sometimes with reference to God/the divine or to a sense of passion/giftedness (Dik & Duffy, 2009). Dik and Duffy reviewed interdisciplinary literature on calling and vocation, and constructed the following definition of calling:

A calling is a transcendent summons, experienced as originating beyond the self, to approach a particular life role in a manner oriented toward demonstrating or deriving a sense of purpose or meaningfulness and that holds other-oriented values and goals as primary sources of motivation. (Dik & Duffy, 2009, p. 427)

The first dimension of the definition of a calling suggests that individuals perceive their motivation within a particular life role as coming from an *external source*, which may range from God to the needs of society or serendipitous fate (Dik & Duffy, 2009). Some

individuals may cite this guiding force from a combination of multiple sources, including to act on God's will/plan, to fulfil one's destiny, to achieve a unique purpose in life, etc. (Hunter et al., 2010). In China, less emphasis is placed on religion and spirituality; however, greater emphasis is on a sense of duty and family expectations. The calling in the career domain, therefore, tends to be more secular in China (Zhang et al., 2015).

Dik and Duffy described the second dimension of the calling as:

The second dimension involves being mindful of the purpose and meaningfulness of one's activity within a particular life role and how one's effort may fit into a broader framework of purpose and meaning in life. This process is believed to help people find stability and coherence in life. (Dik & Duffy, 2009, p. 427)

The calling is thus focused on a sense of meaning and purpose for the *self*, in which personal fit/eudemonic wellbeing is obtained. The individuals would find enjoyment and happiness through pursuing interests, talents or meaning in their respective lives (Hunter et al., 2010).

The third dimension draws from historic meanings of assuming 'that the purpose and meaningfulness of activity within a particular life role is to contribute (directly or indirectly) in some positive way to "the common good" or well-being of society' (Dik & Duffy, 2009, p. 427). This dimension points to '*other-oriented*' or prosocial motives, implying that a calling is for the pursuit of altruism with a positive impact on and outcome for others (Hunter et al., 2010).

In a qualitative analysis performed by Hunter et al. (2010), the construct of the calling is under the dimensions of the guiding force, personal fit/wellbeing/meaning and altruism. Results indicate that college students under a study regarding a definition on the construct of calling perceive a calling as originating from guiding forces, co-occurring with unique fit and wellbeing, having altruistic features and extending to multiple life roles.



In the multidimensional Calling and Vocation Questionnaire (CVQ; Dik et al., 2012), the three dimensions of calling are named as transcendent summons, purposeful work and prosocial orientation, respectively. Hagmaier and Abele (2012) further came up with five core categories of the experience of calling. They are transcendent guiding force, person-environmental-fit, value-driven behaviour, identification with one's work and sense and meaning. The first three categories resemble the three dimensions in the CVQ, as introduced by Dik et al., while the remaining two enrich the content of the purposeful work of the individuals.

The findings show that the names and categories of the dimensions of calling may vary. They nevertheless can be broadly categorised into three dimensions: from external sources, from self and for others. In constructing the conceptualisation of calling, these three broad dimensions are used as the basis for gauging the views of the research subjects in this study.

### **Nature of Calling**

Historically, calling has been regarded as a religious experience. Modern researchers frequently adopt a more expansive and secular conceptualisation of calling with the emphasis on the meaning and personal fulfilment in work (Steger et al., 2010) or an active search for personal and professional development (Hall & Chandler, 2005). Calling can, therefore, be religious/sacred or secular in nature (Hall & Chandler, 2005; Steger et al., 2010).

A secular calling is considered to originate within the individual (Hall & Chandler, 2005; Praskova et al., 2015) and is central to one's identity and unique talents. The individual identifies the calling through career self-exploration involving reflection, meditation and discussion with family members or friends (Hall & Chandler, 2005). Moreover, the individual

will focus on personal fulfilment and meaning (Hall & Chandler, 2005; Steger et al., 2010), and report more positive psychological and positive work attitudes (Steger et al., 2010).

For a calling in the religious/sacred sense, intrinsic religiosity and spirituality awareness have been associated with career considerations and bringing about religious experiences of work (Steger et al., 2010). It is usually defined as an invitation from God to a vocation, through which God's will is done (Rosso et al., 2010), and a person has to identify the calling through the process of discernment, so as to live up to its meaning by enacting God's larger plan for one's life (Hall & Chandler, 2005). The calling is often tied to the belief that an individual is chosen by God for a specific role or task in life and that one's life is blessed for some special but unknown future purpose (Dalton, 2001). The pursuit of the calling imbues work with both meaning and meaningfulness through the sense that one is serving God and meeting the needs of the larger community.

### **Definition of Vocation and Religious Vocation**

There is considerable overlap between calling and vocation. Apart from constructing the definition of calling, Dik and Duffy also attempted to provide a definition for a vocation as "an approach to a particular life role that is oriented toward demonstrating or deriving a sense of purpose or meaningfulness and that holds other-oriented values and goals as primary sources of motivation" (Dik & Duffy, 2009, p. 428).

According to Dik and Duffy, individuals with callings and vocations connect their work to an overall sense of purpose and meaningfulness towards other-oriented ends, but only individuals with callings perceive the impetus to approach work in this manner as originating from a source external to self. In other words, vocation by itself is neutral and may not carry the elements of transcendent summons nor experience it as originating beyond the self when compared to calling.

According to the Salesian Vocation Office (China Province) (<http://www.sdb.org.hk/vocation>), ‘vocation’ comes from the Latin word ‘vocare’, meaning ‘call’. The Christian meaning of calling is discussed here. The calling has three levels. The first level is a calling of life. Every human is called to enter this earthly world to become not only a person but also a good person by developing one’s talent and cooperating with others to live up to the meaning of one’s life. On the second level, God calls a person to be a Christian, an enthusiastic Christian upholding Christian identity and values in daily life as well as in one’s occupation in walking the road to perfection. The third level refers to the calling to pursue a marriage life, a celibate life or special vocation. Entrance to priesthood and religious institutes are examples of special vocation.

For the Christian, a vocation is a response not to internal desire, but rather to divine promptings. The vocation in this spiritual tradition is something finding its source in God (Bannon, 1998). To Hankle (2009), the Christians have three distinct but related senses of vocation. Firstly, there is a common vocation received by baptism and strengthened in confirmation to love and serve God above all else and then to love one’s neighbour. Secondly, vocation refers to a state of life, for instance a call to live a married life or the life of a cleric such as a priest. And lastly, there is the idea of a personal call, a unique mission each individual has and exercises to fulfil the life God wants for that person regardless of one’s state in life. Vocation, therefore, entails a spiritualised ideal of not only what a person will do and how to best match one’s personality and abilities to these tasks, but also what a person is and becomes. Vocation in the Catholic sense thus involves a great deal concerning ‘being’ manifesting itself in ‘doing’.

There is no consistent definition of ‘vocation’ across Dik and Duffy (2009), the Salesian Vocation Office (China Province) and Hankle (2009). One point common among them is that ‘vocation’ is not confined to becoming priests, religious brothers or religious

sisters. When the word ‘religious’ is added to define the nature of the vocation and term it as a ‘religious vocation’, its meaning will carry three elements. In the first place, a religious vocation is primarily an invitation by God:

A religious vocation is an internal grace by which God calls, invites a person to consecrate himself either to the mission of a priest (in the priesthood) or to the life of the evangelical counsels, through the three vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience (in the religious life). (Rulla, 1971, p. 24)

Secondly, religious vocation lays a claim upon the total existence of the one called. Thirdly, religious vocation entails a new obligation involving the permanent choice of a particular form of life in the Church. It involves the total devotion, dedication and consecration of an individual and requires their total commitment to live with a particular form of life not merely as that of a career or occupation.

As revealed in the literature review, from the tripartite model of work orientation to the dimensions/nature and origin of calling, the spectrum of calling is very broad to the extent that it is not limited to work or career but enlarged to embrace the life of a person as a whole. Hence, the young people’s choice of work is so important that it may have impact on their pursuit of a unique way of life with meaning and destination.

There are studies in Western societies on the choice of students to work in the medical (Duffy et al., 2011) and pharmaceutical (Firmin et al., 2014) professions, and life as a Catholic priest (Hankle, 2009). In Hong Kong, there has been no systematic studies detailing how religious personnel found their vocation and responded to the calling. Only short articles of this nature were published in KKP when the priests received the ordination and the religious proclaimed their final vows. In view of the limitations in the existing literature in terms of addressing this study’s research questions, this project serves as additional research to answer the questions.

To answer the questions, it is necessary to understand the process in which religious personnel are being called and enter a vocation. The process can be treated as a kind of vocational development. Owing to the comparatively little literature specifically on this vocational development of religious personnel, the researcher has looked at the broader literature on the career development process for insights. This is because career always correlates with vocation, and the two are sometimes used interchangeably in the work context. The literature from the field of career development helps provide direction to my study in understanding religious personnel's choice of entering a religious vocation.

### **Career/Vocational Development Process**

According to Osipow (1990), there are three approaches in the career choice process: developmental, trait-oriented and social learning theory-oriented. On the developmental approach, Super's (1963) theory of career development model proposed five stages in the process, including growth, exploratory, establishment, maintenance and decline. In the model, Super also indicated the importance of the individual's personality, interests, ability, competencies and vocational preferences in making career choices.

In the trait-oriented approach, Dawis and Lofquist's (1984) theory of work adjustment focused mainly on the congruence of individual differences in personalities and abilities towards different occupations/vocational interests. The matches between occupation and individual are optimised when individuals are satisfied in terms of their own fulfilment, i.e. the job matches self-perceptions of needs.

In the social learning theory approach, career choice is examined on the basis of person–environmental interactions and their influences on career decision-making (Krumboltz et al., 1976). Bandura's concept of self-efficacy (1977) has been incorporated into the social learning theory perspectives of career choices. Though the three approaches differ in focus, each of them has its purpose in the prediction of person–occupation fit

(Ackerman & Beier, 2003).

There are also researches in the domains of intelligence, personality and interest in the career choice process (Ackerman & Beier, 2003). Traditionally, the domains of cognitive (ability), affective (personality) and conative (motivation and interest) traits have been considered in isolation and rarely as integrated parts of the individuals (Ackerman & Beier, 2003). However, work is a major determinant of a person's overall identity. The degree of meaningfulness that a person achieves in life would be highly or at least somewhat correlated with their experiences in work (Hall et al., 2013). The coexistence of the two meta-competencies—self-awareness (referring to one's personal identity) and adaptability (referring to one's capacity to change)—is critical because finding meaningful work requires paying attention to both internal (personal) and external (environmental and contextual) factors (Briscoe & Hall, 2003).

In workplace research, religiosity has been tied to factors such as workplace ethics and values and career decision-making and, more importantly, calling (Steger et al., 2010). Allport and Ross (1967) differentiated between extrinsic religiosity, in which one's religion is instrumental to the achievement of one's goals, i.e. religion is a means to an end, and intrinsic religiosity, in which satisfaction and meaning are directly derived from religious participation, i.e. religion is the end. It has been found that individuals with greater intrinsic religiosity may place more weight on extra-work goals, not necessarily to satisfy particular needs (extrinsic religiosity), but as an outward manifestation of religious ideals, e.g. participation in worship, helping the poor (Horvath, 2015).

Different models focus on different domains or traits of an individual (such as personalities, interests, abilities or achievements in life) in the career choice process. The social learning theory is considered comparatively comprehensive, as it is not confined to the individual but also involves their interactions with the environment in their career

decision-making. It provides a wider perspective to explore how people's career choices are made. I have, therefore, adopted this approach for my study, while tailoring it to specific questions about young people's pursuit of a religious vocation.

### *Personal and Contextual Influences on Career/Vocational Development*

Among the social learning theories, the social cognitive career theory introduced by Lent et al. (1994, 2000) provides a good framework for my study of the vocational development of religious personnel in their choice of leading a religious life, as it covers the dynamic interaction of the individual and the contextual influences involved. According to Lent et al. (2000), the cognitive-person variables of the individual (self-efficacy, outcome expectations and personal goals) play important roles in people's career choices and enables them to exercise personal control over their own career development.

Self-efficacy refers to people's judgements of their capabilities to organise and execute courses of action to attain designated types of performance (Bandura, 1986). With the experience of the effects of past behaviours, people would have self-efficacy expectations in their abilities to perform particular behaviours (Bandura, 1997). Outcome expectations mean personal beliefs about probable response outcomes involving the imagined consequences of performing particular behaviours. Career goals refer to occupational aspirations for which people help to organise and guide their behaviours by setting goals, to sustain it over long periods of time even in the absence of external reinforcement, and to increase the likelihood that desired outcomes will be attained (Lent et al., 1994).

On the contextual influences, Lent et al. (1994) broadly categorised them as environment and life events. On the part of environment, it is divided into two basic categories: distal and proximal, according to their relative proximity to the career choice-making process (Lent et al., 1994). The distal background contextual factors refer to those that affect the learning experiences of the individuals through which their

career-relevant self-efficacy and outcome expectations are developed. Examples include the types of career role models to which one is exposed and the sort of support or discouragement one receives for engaging in particular academic or extracurricular activities. The proximal contextual influences are those elements which are particularly important during the active phases of educational or career decision-making of the individual. Examples include career network contacts or external barriers.

Another way to conceive the idea of the environment is to view it as a series of embedded layers or concentric circles. The person can be envisioned as residing in the innermost circle, surrounded by their immediate environment, e.g. family, friends, financial conditions, which is, in turn, encircled by the larger societal context, e.g. social, economic and cultural variables (Lent et al., 2000).

On the part of life events, they can be interpreted as some events/incidents in an individual's life that have been found to play a critical role in the development of their vocational interests and in the decision process of choosing a religious life. The events may come from some religious experiences, such as serving at the altar, being inspired by a homily or joining a pilgrimage, or solely from life incidents, such as encountering illness, departure of family members, thinking about the meaning of life triggered by some social issues or reading books, etc.

Apart from the personal and contextual influences, religious socialisation may also have an impact on a person's vocational development. Cornwall (1988) found that the family has a particularly important influence on personal religiosity, and church and peer socialisation have significant impacts on adult religiosity as well. Thus, she named the family, church and peers as the three agents of religious socialisation. Stott (1988) also considered family as a primary force in shaping the values and attitudes of its members, especially its young members. Children are typically socialised (or indoctrinated) by the religious beliefs



and practices of their parents. He further supported the belief that parents play a dominant role in the religious socialisation of their offspring, as the children's religious involvement definitely tends to mirror their parents' religious involvement.

In answering the first research question on religious personnel's response to the religious vocation, the discernment they underwent to enter the vocation and select a religious institute formed part of the process and should, therefore, be examined as well. The literature review covering the ideas of discernment, studies on discerning a religious vocation in the United States and religious vocation stories in Hong Kong is presented here.

### **Discernment of Religious Personnel in Response to a Religious Vocation**

In response to a religious vocation, a man or woman has to first discern whether they really have the calling to pursue a religious life (this is the first calling). Thereafter, the person would have to decide which diocese or religious institute (for a man) and which religious institute (for a woman) to enter to lead such a life (this is the calling within the calling). Discernment is the art of discovering God's will for a person in the concrete circumstances of their life (Fagin, 2013). It may not necessarily be God's will but God's hopes and dreams for a person who usually discovers His hopes in conversation with Him (Fagin, 2013). It is said that the choices a person makes in the discernment process are often beyond the merely rational or reasonable but are navigated by their heart, which has been schooled by Christ (Fleming, 2008). Nevertheless, discernment guides a person to decisions that will join them ever more closely with Christ and work with Christ in the world (Fleming, 2008).

Hankle (2009) defines discernment as the process an individual undergoes to decide the course of action God desires them to undertake. The idea of discernment as an integral part of Christian life that assists a person with understanding the will of God has been a spiritual practice for a millennium. It involves evaluating feelings, such as consoling thoughts

as well as desolations. Historically, the process of discernment has been called the discernment of spirits, because it is a process by which the discernor attempts to understand if the impressions and feelings they are receiving come from God, their own mind or what has been called Satan.

On the arena of discernment, Christians would quickly associate with the Spiritual Exercises introduced by St Ignatius of Loyola (c.1491–1556), founder of the Society of Jesus. The Principle and Foundation No. 23 of the Exercises says that human beings are created to praise, reverence and serve God our Lord, by means of doing this to save their souls (Ganss, 1992). The other things on the face of the earth are created for human beings to help them in the pursuit of the end for which they are created. Following this flow, mankind should use those things to the extent that they help them towards their end, and free themselves from them to the extent that they hinder them from it. To attain this, it is necessary to make ourselves indifferent to all created things, in regard to everything which is left to our free will and is not forbidden. Consequently, on our own part, we should not seek health rather than sickness, wealth rather than poverty, honour rather than dishonour, a long life rather than a short one and so on in all other matters. Rather, we should desire and choose only that which is more conducive to the end for which we are created. The concept of discernment is thus complex and multifaceted.

In the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* issued on 24 November 2013, Pope Francis points out that in an exercise of evangelical discernment, the consecrated men and women are called by God to obey His call to go forth from their own comfort zone in order to reach all “peripheries” in need of the light of the Gospel (p. 20). In the Apostolic Letter to all consecrated people on the occasion of the Year of Consecrated Life issued on 21 November 2014, Pope Francis insists that consecrated life is called to exercise in the Church for the good of all humanity.

*Studies on Discerning a Religious Vocation in the United States*

There are three studies on discerning a religious vocation in the United States, one by Hankle (2009) and two by the team of Maddi and Rulla (1972; Rulla & Maddi, 1972). Hankle (2009) conducted a qualitative study on the psychological processes of discerning a vocation in the Catholic priesthood by interviewing a total of nine priests with different backgrounds from one single seminary. By the time of the interviews, the priests had spent 5 to 6 years of their lives discerning their vocation to be priests and had already made the decision to proceed to ordination. A total of 25 initial categories were discovered from the interviews and five themes emerged after comparing and contrasting. The five themes were: (a) acquisition of the idea of sense of self as a priest; (b) alternative sense of self tested; (c) transformation of identity of self to priesthood; (d) affirmation of sense of self as a priest; and (e) persistent dispositions of discernment.

The first four themes appeared to follow somewhat sequentially for the participants in discerning their vocation to the priesthood. For (e), the participants felt personal insufficiencies when identifying themselves as priests. The participants believed they lacked the abilities to fulfil what they perceived as a very lofty role among their faith community, and they continued to report this belief as they moved into ordination. The five themes revealed that identity and a sense of self were important factors in discerning the vocation to priesthood. It was also found that a man choosing to become a priest was not necessarily determining first and foremost what he would ‘do’ but rather what he was ‘becoming’ (Hankle, 2009).

Early in the 1970s, Rulla and Maddi conducted two quantitative studies in the form of a largescale, longitudinal programme concerning persons training to become Catholic priests and religious sisters, with the aim of identifying the personality factors influencing the initial choice of a religious vocation. The studies found a contrast between two kinds of personality

information: (a) the direct, highly conscious material obtained when individuals know they are describing themselves and their world; and (b) the indirect, relatively unconscious material they disclose when their task is to fantasise about fictional people (Maddi & Rulla, 1972; Rulla & Maddi, 1972). At the conscious level, the focus was on the person's characterisation of their self-concept (the traits expressed in their perceived present behaviour), self-ideal (the traits they value) and institutional-ideal (their perception of the traits their educational institution values for its trainees). At the relatively unconscious level, the person's traits were also focused upon, but this time they were revealed in their fantasies, which provided supplementary information about their emotional styles, defences and underlying conflicts (Maddi & Rulla, 1972; Rulla & Maddi, 1972).

In the study of the female entrants (Maddi & Rulla, 1972), data from 126 subjects were involved in the analysis. It was found that female entrants into the religious vocation showed considerable agreement between self-concepts, self-ideals and perceived institutional-ideals. There were, however, large discrepancies between the participants' self-descriptions and the selves they revealed in the fantasy tests. Thus, the study suggested that choosing a religious vocation might not only be a means to implement the self-ideal, but also an expression of a defensive reaction against underlying conflicts (Rulla & Maddi, 1972).

In the study of the male entrants (Rulla & Maddi, 1972), data from 82 religious and 45 seminarians were involved in the analysis. First, it was found that the self-ideal of the subjects was closer to the content of the institutional-ideal than the self-concept. Second, the content of both self- and institutional-ideals were made up of ethical norms to a greater extent than the self-concept. Third, it was contended that, similar to the female entrants, choosing a religious vocation might be part of some males' expression of a defensive attempt to cope with conflicts.

A comparison of the two groups showed that the main conflict for males was

autonomy versus shame and doubt, whereas it was initiative versus guilty functioning for females (Rulla & Maddi, 1972). The males were concerned about whether they should or could be free and independent rather than obedient and dependent. The female conflict implied an uncertain sexual identity and uncertainty as to whether they should be assertive and take the lead or not.

These three studies provided insights into individuals' psychological processes or personality factors in discerning or choosing to enter a religious vocation; the importance of one's identity and sense of self in the discernment process; and gender differences over conflicts. However, they only touched upon the personal perspective without identifying the contextual influences that might have impact on an individual's pursuit of religious life. Moreover, the studies only focused on the early stage of the religious life (i.e. in discerning and deciding to pursue religious vocation) without exploring further the pathway thereafter. This research is going to examine the vocation journey of the religious personnel in a comprehensive way by studying the contextual influences as well as the supports, barriers and coping strategies associated with the journey.

### *Religious Vocation Stories in Hong Kong*

Apart from KKP, four books, namely 《百力支》 (2000), 《百力支II》 (2002), 《我的天使 · 我的Teens》 (2018) and 《猜 · 情 · 尋》 (2011), have captured a collection of religious vocation journeys from a total of approximately 110 religious personnel who had been or are serving in Hong Kong. The first three books were issued by the Diocesan Vocation Commission (DVC) and the last one was written by a group of eight lay women. In the books, the priests and the religious shared the persons or critical events that had an impact on their responding to the call and their decision to lead a religious life. However, the articles of their stories were very short without detailing the discernment process as well as the ups and downs of their vocational journeys.

On top of these written works, two radio programmes with a series of 23 episodes each were broadcast at 2300 hours on the Metro Radio of Hong Kong (for a duration of 5 minutes) on weekdays in 2017 and 2018, respectively. The one launched in 2017 captured the stories of 22 religious personnel, including 5 diocesan priests, 6 institute priests, 1 religious brother and 10 religious sisters.<sup>5</sup> The one broadcasted in August 2018 provided a detailed account of the vocational journey of a young priest of the Salesian of Don Bosco.<sup>6</sup>

In both the books and the radio programmes, the religious personnel named some people who acted as angels, giving them enlightenment and support in their religious vocation journeys, and quoted some events that had an impact on their decision to lead a consecrated life. The review of their stories provided some insights into factors affecting their choice of pursuing a religious life as well as the supports received, barriers encountered and coping strategies adopted in their religious vocation journeys.

Nevertheless, the writing/broadcasting materials only recorded the religious personnel's self-recollections of their religious vocation without systemic research in the area. Furthermore, the study of their discernment processes was limited. The discernment process usually identifies some critical events through which a person will ascertain it is God's calling for them to pursue a religious life. It is believed that further research is needed to rigorously study these issues through interactions in semi-structured interviews with prompts, which will unfold more details on the unique calling, and in particular, the discernment process of religious personnel.

In addressing the second research question, the literature on the career development process in terms of supports, barriers and coping strategies provided insights into religious personnel's experiences with the three aspects. The framework of the career development

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<sup>5</sup> The radio programme was sponsored by the Living Spring Foundation Ltd. and can be accessed through this link: <http://www.livingspringfoundation.com.hk/web2.0/modules/tinyd0/index.php?id=310>.

<sup>6</sup> The radio programme was sponsored by the Living Spring Foundation Ltd. and can be accessed through this link: <http://www.livingspringfoundation.com.hk/web2.0/modules/tinyd7/index.php?id=545>.

process in this regard is used to help identify the vocational development of religious personnel in respect of the supports, barriers and coping strategies associated with their religious vocation journeys, since no systematic studies can be located in this field.

### **Supports, Barriers and Coping Strategies**

In the career development process, supportive influences are mainly from social groups, including family, teachers and peers. Barriers can be intrapersonal and/or come from the environment, bearing the definition “events or conditions, either within the person or in his or her environment, those make career progress difficult” (Swanson & Woitke, 1997, p. 434). Coping strategies refer to a variety of ways that people use to overcome the barriers they have encountered in implementing their choices (Lent et al., 2002). Using personal methods or seeking social support are often regarded as coping options.

Super’s (1957) self-concept theory posits that career choices are implementations of attempts to actualise the skills, talents and interests reflective of one’s self-concept and are based on the completion of developmentally appropriate vocational tasks between the ages of 15 and 25 years. According to Super, parents serve as children’s first important reference group when considering career possibilities; as development progresses, their reference group tends to shift to peers and, eventually, to professionals in their career of interest. Hence, certain environmental events may also exert direct, potent effects on choice formation and implementation (Lent et al., 1994). The environmental influences can certainly be affected adversely or beneficially by events that are beyond the individual’s control or awareness. Non-support of significant others or work/family conflicts may also be viewed as barriers to an individual’s progress.

Support and barrier perceptions are inversely related, reflecting opposite poles on a positive–negative continuum (Lent et al., 2000). Hence, the generation of beneficial environmental factors, e.g. ample support, fewer barriers, or cultivating environmentally

favourable conditions or resources will provide support for the choice of one career over another. Coping efficacy is belief in one's capabilities to negotiate particular environmental obstacles (Lent et al., 2000). It is believed that people with coping efficacy may be more likely to persevere towards their goals in the midst of obstacles, than those who view themselves as less able to manage anticipated obstacles or to assemble necessary coping resources to overcome difficulties. There is increasing emphasis on the importance of people's perceptions about their ability to handle particular barriers or obstacles (Bandura, 1977).

Lent et al. (2002) conducted a qualitative research to examine the perceived influences on college students' career choices and implementation. Students from two universities participated in structured interviews, examining (a) factors that had affected their choice of occupational field, (b) supports and barriers to pursuing their choices, and (c) methods they used to cope with choice barriers. The qualitative method was used because it offered a flexible approach to examine events and experiences that the students had encountered in their career selection. In the career choice, the factors of interest, values, i.e. expected outcomes and working conditions, and abilities were important considerations. Career exploration activities, e.g. job shadowing and internships, enabled them to clarify their interests, values and skills in relation to a particular occupational field and work tasks (Lent et al., 2002).

On barriers to pursuing a career choice, financial concerns, personal difficulties, e.g. adjusting to college, problems of time management or academic progress, and negative social/family influences were regarded as three frequent choice impediments. On supports for pursuing a career choice, social support or encouragement, e.g. from friends and family members, is ranked as a critical support factor. For barrier coping strategies, the participants used problem-focused methods, i.e. direct efforts to solve the problem, such as increasing



effort or taking fewer credits, and social support-seeking.

In Hong Kong, a quantitative research was conducted on the impact of career exploration on career development among Chinese university students (Cheung & Arnold, 2014). The findings showed that career exploration is linked to the amount of career information, such as the jobs and organisations involved, and career decision self-efficacy, meaning that the person believes they are able to successfully complete the tasks necessary for career decision-making.

Apart from examining the impact of career exploration, three other quantitative studies have looked into other factors affecting the career choices of Hong Kong youth with a cross-cultural comparison. The first study compared the patterns of the relationships among personality traits, vocational interests and career exploration within an integrated framework between university students in the United States and Hong Kong (Fan et al., 2012). The second study examined the contributions of perceived family intrusiveness to career decision-making difficulties and the mediating effect of family orientation as a personality trait in the cultural settings of the two same places (Fan et al., 2014). The third study extended the concept of collective efficacy to supplement the variables of career self-efficacy to predict vocational exploration and commitment among adolescents with student samples from Hong Kong, Shanghai and the United States (Cheung et al., 2013).

The aforementioned researches provide a good foundation for studying influences/factors affecting career development. Nevertheless, they place great emphasis on aspects of self-efficacy and little attention to the areas of contextual influences. Additionally, supports, barriers and coping strategies are only briefly addressed. In addition, the researches on the career development process are mainly quantitative in nature. Taking into account these inadequacies in the current literature, my study on the vocational development of the sample religious personnel will use a qualitative approach, placing a balanced focus on the

personal and contextual influences with a close look at the supports, barriers and coping strategies to address the second research question.

The literature review shows no systematic researches pointing directly to supports, barriers and coping strategies that religious personnel experienced in their religious vocation journeys. Nevertheless, there are some studies on the challenges religious personnel face in pursuing and staying in religious life. They are of some reference value to my study in the aspects of barriers and coping strategies, as outlined below.

### **Challenges of Religious Personnel in Pursuing and Staying in Religious Life**

Pope John XXIII convened the Vatican Council II (the Council; 1962–1965) in Rome to reassess and restructure doctrine and practice with the intention of opening the Catholic Church to new ideas and influences. The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*Lumen Gentium*)<sup>7</sup> declared that all Christians were called ‘to holiness’ simply by having been baptised, and those who pursued a religious vocation could no longer aspire to a superior state of holiness (Stark & Finke, 2000). This initiative of the Council withdrew the superiority of religious life and equated the holiness of the religious and the laity (Stark & Finke, 2000). Before the Council, priests were named the cultic ministry as they are providers of sacraments, and this sacred role underlined the distinctive lifestyle of priests (Hoge & Wenger, 2003). Priests were viewed as a link to God and, thus, were of a very high status in society. As mentioned by Father John Cioppa of the Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers in 《百力支 II》 (2002), the three most respected professions in the 1950s were in the order of priesthood, medicine and law. After the Council, priests were regarded as the servant-leader model. Hence, priesthood is a call to service, rather than a status (Rodimer, 2001). It was thus said that the diminishing role of the exalted status of clerical personages had a negative

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<sup>7</sup> The document issued by the Vatican Council II (*Lumen Gentium*, Latin for ‘Light of the Nations’) treats the nature of the Church in itself. It also recognises and encourages the role of the laity in the life of the Church in the world. It was promulgated on 21 November 1964.

impact on the attraction of this ministry (Doyle, 2003). Allegations of sexual misconduct by clergy and child-abuse scandals had further adversely affected recruitment to the priesthood (Anonymous, 2014; Hoge & Wenger 2003).

Another popular explanation for the loss of vocations blames the refusal of the Church hierarchy to respond to new generations of Catholics' unwillingness to accept the traditional sacrifices required of priests and the religious, chief among these being vows of celibacy, obedience, and in the case of those entering orders, poverty (Stark & Finke, 2000). A number of studies conducted during the late 1960s and the 1970s found celibacy to be the most common cause given by ex-priests for having defected. Loneliness and the lack of fraternisation were also regarded as important factors contributing to recruitment difficulties of religious personnel. It is acknowledged that many in the Church today believe that celibacy should be optional as a way to ameliorate the problem of the shortage of priests. On the aspect of the vow of obedience, the bishops have been blamed for responding traditionally, sternly and in a disciplinarian manner, thereby reaffirming the traditional demand for obedience, rather than allowing the religious greater participation in decision-making.

Regarding the situation of religious sisters, it has been said that secular social changes have reduced the attractiveness of this as a career option for young Catholic women (Stark & Finke, 2000). These losses came without any offsetting decreases in the costs of religious life, in terms of the profession of the three vows, or any increase in its secular rewards. The Council is, therefore, often regarded as the watershed for the decline of religious vocations, resulting in the decrease of religious personnel in the Catholic Church. It has been said that the vocations of priesthood and religious brotherhood and sisterhood have been in a continual downward spiral since the end of the Council.

*The Religious Life and Its Ongoing Challenges Since Vatican Council II*

Early in the Vatican Council II, as stated in the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et Spes*),<sup>8</sup> the Council Fathers related the practical realm to the insights of theoretical inquiry by recommending that in pastoral care, sufficient use must be made not only of theological principles but also the findings of the secular sciences, especially psychology and sociology, so that the faithful may be brought to a more adequate and mature life of faith. Clearly, the Council generated interest among church leaders and organisations with regard to the importance of research for pastoral work (Gannon, 1967). There was an urgent need to provide bishops, heads of religious institutes and lay organisation leaders with guidelines for apostolic action based on sound resources.

With this background, CARA was established in March 1965 to help find reasonably adequate answers to the urgent contemporary dilemmas facing Christian renewal (Gannon, 1967). CARA has selected highly professional staff as its Board of Directors, including bishops, major superiors of religious institutes, representatives of church organisations and key lay leaders. One of CARA's most central and pressing research focuses is church vocation in view of the apparent rate of decline in vocations to religious life (Gannon, 1967). It was found that there is a worldwide vocation shortage, and vocations throughout the world are falling behind actual needs.

Consecrated life has normally, even if not always, willingly embraced the risks of this new adventure of openness; listening and service were pushed to the forefront to explore the coordinates of a new Church–world relationship (Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, 2017). It was found that “special attention had to be paid to two more topics that are of a sensitive nature in the consecrated life: formation and the communion of goods” (Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, 2017, p. 15). Continuously, high numbers of people abandon the religious life

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<sup>8</sup> The document issued by the Vatican Council II (*Gaudium et Spes*, Latin for ‘Joy and Hope’) which treats the mission of the Church in the world. It was promulgated on 7 December 1965.

both after the early stages of formation (profession, ordination) and at an advanced age.

Emotional crises are often the result of some remote disappointment caused by an inauthentic community life (Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, 2017).

Separately, young people are open to transcendence and are capable of becoming passionate about causes of solidarity, justice and freedom. The possible excessive apprehension over managing works makes the religious life run the risk of not intercepting the deepest desire of young people. This creates a gap that renders generational exchange even more difficult and the necessary intergenerational dialogue too hard (Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, 2017). There is an impression that the formation process is more informative than it is performative and does not seem to reach and truly transform the heart of people.

### *Commitment to Stay in Religious Life*

One quantitative study focused on the predictive factors of commitment to the priestly vocation, with a sample of 120 priests and 52 seminarians in the United States (Sunardi, 2014). The study examined factors for priestly commitment and the relationship between priestly commitment and the wellbeing of Catholic priests and seminarians. It was found that affective commitment was positively correlated with affective balance, psychological wellbeing, e.g. defensiveness and loneliness, and religious wellbeing, e.g. religious orientation, religious coping and spiritual support. This echoes Pope Francis's advice of the need for consecrated men and women to have a new aspiration to holiness. Pope Francis further pointed out that we could live the Gospel to the fullest with not only a joyous heart but also a renewed one (Pope Francis's morning meditation in the Chapel of the *Domus Sanctae Marthae* on 5 September 2014).

In facing the challenges of the time, the Council called for a spirit of renewal in religious life journeys by learning from Lord Jesus's word: new wine in fresh skins (Mark 2:22) as the colour and flavour of a new wine may risk tearing the old wineskins. This image illustrates that institutional, religious and symbolic forms must always be gaining flexibility. Without the necessary flexibility, no institutional form, no matter how venerable, can withstand the tensions of life or respond to the appeal of history (Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, 2017).

It is noted that great effort was put forth by each religious family in rereading and interpreting the "original spirit of the institutes" (The Decree on the Adaptation and Renewal of Religious Life [*Perfectae Caritatis*]<sup>9</sup>, p. 2). As pointed out by Pope John Paul II in the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata* issued on 25 March 1996, this work has two main purposes: to faithfully guard "the mind and designs of the founders" and "to propose anew the enterprising initiative, creativity and holiness of their founders and foundresses in respect to the signs of the times emerging in today's world" (p. 37). Hence, there is a demand to revise the identity, lifestyle and relative ecclesial mission to find new formative itineraries that would be suitable for the nature and charisma of each religious family (Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, 2017).

In Hong Kong, the HSS is responsible for providing formation to men and preparing them for the ordained ministry in the DHK. It was shown in a public talk on the 'History of the Catholic Church in Hong Kong in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century' held on August 2019<sup>10</sup> that there were 34 male entrants to the HSS for the priesthood between 1993 and 2003 and 11

<sup>9</sup> The document issued by the Vatican Council II (*Perfectae Caritatis*, Latin for 'Perfect Charity') deals specifically with the institutes of consecrated life in the Catholic Church. It was promulgated on 28 October 1965.

<sup>10</sup> The public talk was co-organised by the Centre for Catholic Studies under the Department of Cultural and Religious Studies of The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Kung Kuo Po and the Hong Kong Catholic Diocesan Archives.

seminarians left during the formation in the same period, resulting in a dropout rate of approximately one-third. The public talk did not provide any reasons for the seminarians leaving their religious vocation journeys.

The declining response to religious vocations is considered a universal phenomenon and has raised concerns about the challenges faced by religious personnel as well as their commitment to stay in religious life. The literature review shows little discussion on the areas and no systemic research in the territory. This study is going to explore, among other things, the reasons for the declining responses to religious vocations in Hong Kong.

### **Relation of the Literature Review to the Research Questions**

In the midst of the universal negative climate of decreasing Catholic religious vocations, the aim of this research is to understand the responses, including discernments undergone, of young people in Hong Kong to a religious vocation and pursuing a religious life, and to identify the supports and barriers associated with their respective religious vocation journeys together with coping strategies to overcome the barriers therein. The literature review shows that there are some limitations/weaknesses in the existing literature in answering the research questions, and this study is therefore initiated to bridge the identified gaps.

On the first research question, people will first experience some major events that trigger their desire to lead a religious life. In response to a religious vocation, people have to discern which diocese or religious institute to enter to practise their religious life. In this regard, this study will find out the participants' dimensions of their calling in response to a religious vocation by identifying if they are solely following the transcendental guiding forces from above, the personal fit/wellbeing from within, for altruism/prosocial orientation from outside, or a combination of these; and understand the participants' discernments for choosing a particular diocese or religious institute for their pursuit of a religious life.

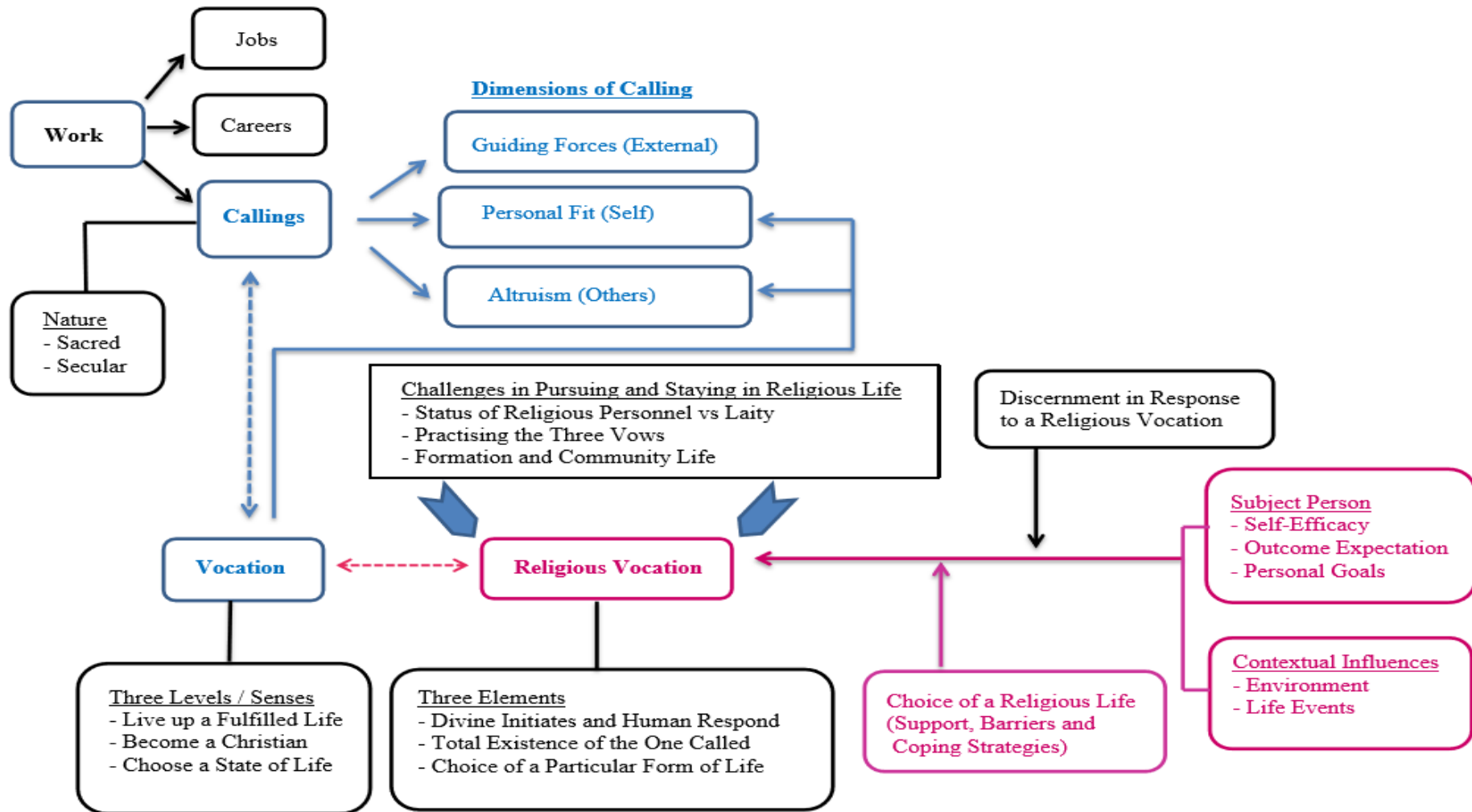
On the second research question, religious personnel will have moments of joy and delight in the pursuit of religious life, but they will also experience struggles and challenges. These elements can feature as contributing factors and deterrents associated with their religious vocation journeys. This study will delve deeply to identify the supports and barriers that people received/encountered and their coping strategies to overcome the barriers. To explore these areas of interest, this research will adopt an integrated approach to study the role of three factors, namely subject persons, environment and life events, in facilitating and/or hindering the participants' religious vocation journeys. Environment may include influences and interactions with God, family members, classmates, friends, religious personnel and colleagues as well as social media and social situations. Events refer to those special events that happen in life and are important/crucial to the participants' responses to a religious vocation. This research will also solicit the participants' views in addressing the challenges, e.g. factors such as professing the three vows and/or the nature of religious life in terms of formation and community life, and upholding their commitment to their respective ends.

Based on the insights gained and integration made from the literature review, an analytical framework has been constructed for the study with a view to answering the two research questions. The interplay of the conceptual framework from responses to pursue religious life with the contextual supports and barriers to vocational development in the religious vocation journeys is illustrated in Figure 6.



**Figure 6**

*Analytical Framework of Responses to Pursue Religious Life and Vocational Development in the Religious Vocation Journey*



After reviewing the literature and introducing the analytical framework, the next step is to present the research methodology of this study. The next chapter will discuss in detail the rationale for adopting a qualitative approach with narrative research by means of life history interviews for the study. The sampling and recruitment of the research participants, data collection procedure, data analysis process, validity and ethical issues relating to the study will also be covered.



### CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This chapter consists of six sections, setting out in detail the methodology used in this research. The first section restates the purpose and research questions of the study. The second section describes the research design, providing the rationale for using a qualitative approach with narrative research by means of life history interviews and the sampling as well as the recruitment of the research participants. The third section records the data collection procedure, covering the construction of the interview protocol, the application for ethical review, the conduct of the interviews and the measures to ensure data accuracy. The fourth section details the steps taken in the data analysis process. The fifth section presents the possible validity threats to this research and the strategies adopted to deal with them. The last section covers the ethical issues of the study.

#### **Purpose of the Study and the Research Questions**

The purpose of this study was to explore the religious vocation journeys of a sample of Hong Kong-born Chinese priests, religious brothers and religious sisters in the context of a declining population of religious personnel, despite an expansion of the Catholic lay population in the territory. Its focus was on examining the responses of these religious personnel to the calling for pursuing priestly/consecrated life and identifying the supports and barriers associated with their respective vocation journeys as well as their coping strategies to overcome the barriers therein. On the basis of this purpose, two research questions were developed:

- (1) What are the journeys that lead to a sample of Chinese priests, religious brothers and religious sisters to respond to the religious vocation and pursue priestly/consecrated life in the context of a declining population of religious personnel, despite an expansion of the Catholic lay population in Hong Kong?

- (2) What supports and barriers are associated with their religious vocation journeys, and what are their coping strategies to overcome the barriers therein?

## **Research Design**

### *Rationale for a Qualitative Approach*

In the research arena, there are two main approaches to conduct research, namely quantitative and qualitative. According to Picciano (2004), quantitative types of research include descriptive studies, correlational research, causal comparative research and experimental studies. Establishing causality is one of the primary preoccupations of quantitative research (Bryman, 1988). The purposes of the studies are generalising findings, deduction, theory or hypothesis testing and verification. The researcher takes on an outsider's perspective, with little involvement with the research subjects (Fairbrother, 2007).

In contrast, the fundamental purpose of qualitative research is to capture the research subjects' perspectives and views of values, actions, processes and events (Creswell, 2013). In-depth unstructured interviews, semi-structured interviews and detailed participants' observations are normally used to collect data for the research subject. Qualitative research presents the insider's perspective, empathising with the research subjects (Fairbrother, 2007). Compared to quantitative research, the qualitative approach can be characterised as inductive and exploratory, rather than deductive and confirmatory (Fairbrother, 2007).

In this study, the qualitative approach is used as it provides the most appropriate way to address the purposes and questions of the research. First, the qualitative approach is particularly suitable for exploring social processes and how events unfold over time and connect with each other (Bryman, 2004; Maxwell, 2013; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Miles and Huberman (1994, p. 1) also indicated that "with qualitative data one can preserve chronological flow, see precisely which events led to which consequences, and derive fruitful explanations". In this study, the research subjects' religious vocation journeys touched a

number of sequential events and involved interactions with a variety of parties. The qualitative approach is, therefore, considered most suitable for exploring complex processes over a timeline.

Second, the strength of the qualitative approach lies in its emphasis on the perspectives of the participants (Merriam, 2002). The method focuses on how the participants interpret, provide meaning and make sense of the social world (Berg, 2009; Bryman, 2004; Creswell, 2013; Maxwell, 2013). In this study, exploration is made of the participants' decisions to pursue religious life and their experiences on the supports received, barriers encountered and coping strategies adopted. A qualitative approach was deemed appropriate to collect the data from the participants, as all these aspects involved their personal interpretations.

Third, this is an exploratory research on the religious vocations of a sample of Chinese priests/religious, a rarely studied topic in the local literature. The researcher aims to identify patterns and themes from the data collected from the participants with a view to generating findings that will be of use to the DHK and religious institutes serving in the territory. A qualitative approach fits well with this objective of the study, as the researcher is neither bound by a prescribed analytical framework nor a pre-set hypothesis for confirmation (Creswell, 2013).

Lastly, qualitative research offers the researcher a spiritual journey, who will go through a spiritual transformation, self-transcendence and spiritual growth (Rosenblatt, 2001). The spiritual growth Rosenblatt experienced was because of the ways the people he interviewed collaborated with him in constructing his identity, values and sense of self. I am interested in studying the life stories of others, and I firmly believe that the research subjects will enlighten me and lead me on a wonderful spiritual journey. A qualitative approach is therefore adopted for this study.

*The Choice of Narrative Research By Means of Life History Interviews*

According to Creswell (2013), there are five major approaches in qualitative research including narrative research, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography and case studies. The features of narrative research are most suitable for the present study for three reasons. First, “narrative is understood as a spoken or written text giving an account of an event/action or series of events/actions, chronologically connected” (Czarniawska, 2004, p. 171), and “narrative inquiry is stories lived and told” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 20). It is best for capturing the detailed stories or life experiences of a single life or the lives of a small number of individuals by means of in-depth interviews, journals, diaries, photographs and other personal–family–social artefacts.

Second, a narrative is a story of events and individual experiences, told most often in a chronological fashion for the purpose of understanding, conveying and creating the meaning of experience. Narration is the forward movement of a description of actions and events that makes the backward action of self-understanding possible. The study of multiple stories allows for discovering connections that link people together and account for the differences between people (Stuhlmiller, 2001). In the end, the narrative study tells the stories of individuals unfolding in a chronology of their experiences, set within their personal, social and historical contexts, and includes the important common themes among those lived experiences.

Third, narrative inquirers do not claim that the insights gained from their research are conclusive or universal; rather, they set out on the journey of unravelling the puzzles faced by all human beings in ways that are plausible, creative, accessible and rigorous. The narrative inquiry has significant value in investigating the complex, lived experiences that occur in every contexts (Trahar & Yu, 2015) and uncovering the ‘figure under the carpet’ that explains the multilayered context of a life.

These features of narrative inquiry concepts and practices fit well with my current research on the grounds that (a) it focuses on the unique stories of a sampled group of people and looks for the commonalities as well as differences among them, but does not describe a holistic perspective of them from the individual narratives; (b) it is not to establish a grounded theory to explain a process, action or interaction shaped by the views of a large number of participants or a case study to understand a problem/issue within a bounded system; and (c) it is my great personal interest to analyse the participants' stories, then 're-story' them into a framework that makes sense, with the belief that everyone's life story is unique and needs to be treasured as they are full of smiles and tears, wisdom and lessons. As asserted by Gilbert (2001, p. 64), "we live in stories, not statistics", which is totally echoed by me, a person of passion in stories listened and reconstructed to reflect the meaning of footprints left in life encounters.

In capturing the life experiences of the research subjects in this study, the method of life history interview is used. Life histories can be long or short. A long history is the full-length account of one person's life, whereas short life histories tend to be more focused (Plummer, 2001). A life history can also be complete or topical. A complete one covers all aspects of a person's entire life, whereas a topical one focuses only on a specific phase or aspect deemed relevant by the researcher on the basis of the research objectives (Denzin, 1989; Dimmock & O'Donoghue, 1997; Plummer, 2001; Ward, 2003). As this study aims to examine the religious vocation journeys of the participants, a short and topical life history approach is adopted.

### *Sampling of the Participants*

Sampling refers to the choice of particular persons, places or cases for specific data collection and is crucial for later analysis (Maxwell, 2013; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Qualitative samples tend to be purposive rather than random (Miles & Huberman, 1994;

Patton & Patton, 2002) with a deliberate selection of a sample that meets certain criteria (Goodson & Sikes, 2001; Maxwell, 2013). The research subjects are, thus, purposefully selected to provide information that is particularly relevant to the questions and goals of the research (Light et al., 1990).

This study has adopted a qualitative approach with a narrative method, aimed at having an in-depth understanding of a sample of participants' religious vocation journeys. The purposive sampling method is deemed appropriate for selecting the samples for this study. The target of the study is religious personnel including priests, religious brothers and religious sisters. In selecting the research participants, preference has been given to those who are junior in terms of their years of service in the priesthood, religious brotherhood and religious sisterhood, so that their experiences are more recent and, thus, of more reference value to the present situation. The priests and religious who have been ordained or proclaimed their final vows in recent years, after 2010, were therefore approached for the interviews.

At the time of preparing the thesis proposal in mid-2018, the statistics of the DHK showed that as of 31 August 2017, the total number of the Chinese religious personnel was 487, comprising 68 diocesan clergy (14.0%), 66 priests of institutes (13.5%), 35 religious brothers (7.2%) and 318 religious sisters (65.3%)<sup>11</sup>. To fully cover Chinese religious personnel, all four of these groups of religious personnel became the target population of this study. In order to determine the number of these potential target participants, I searched the Hong Kong Catholic Church Directory (HKCCD) of the DHK and relevant websites of religious institutes as well as contacted some religious personnel for information. In doing so, 26 Chinese priests/religious who had been ordained or proclaimed their final vows after 2010

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<sup>11</sup> By mid-2018, the latest figure available from the statistics of the Diocese of Hong Kong was as of 31 August 2017. The relevant figures can be found on the website of the Hong Kong Catholic Diocesan Archives (<http://archives.catholic.org.hk>).



were identified.

I tried to locate these 26 religious personnel to contact by looking up their names in the HKCCD from where I could get most of the telephone numbers of their respective religious institutes or workplaces, such as schools and parishes. I found that seven of these religious personnel (four studying abroad and three serving overseas) were not in Hong Kong. I, therefore, planned to contact and secure agreements from the remaining 19 religious personnel for interviews relating to the research.

It is believed that, as explained in Chapter 1, every religious institute has its own vision and unique charisma. In order to gauge the views from diverse sources, priests and religious of different institutes were selected. To maximise the information obtained and to demonstrate individual uniqueness in the responding process, two from each of the groups of priests, religious brothers and religious sisters of the same diocese/religious institute would deliberately be invited. The purpose was to understand the desires of the priests and the religious to ascertain whether they had the same reasons for choosing the diocese/institute that they were serving. This was aimed at adequately capturing the heterogeneity in the population so as to provide the ‘maximum variation’ sampling (Maxwell, 2013).

### *Recruiting the Participants*

After setting the sampling criteria, I phoned the target participants in July and August 2018. I first approached those from religious institutes with a relatively long history serving in Hong Kong, as there would be comparatively more religious personnel from these institutes and the possibility of securing their agreement to participate in the study might be higher. The priests or religious sister therein, however, declined my invitation as the research might be perceived as somewhat sensitive or personal, which contributed to their decision not to participate. In addition, I was surprised to know that since 2010 one of the institutes had failed to recruit Hong Kong-born females to become religious sisters and proclaim final vows.

Some of the religious personnel could not be contacted. One participant introduced to me by my friend gave me the mobile phone number of a research subject to initiate an invitation.

If the respondents accepted the invitation, I sent them an email with some more background information about myself, the research topic, the selection criteria of the target participants, the scope of the interviews and tentative interview arrangements. Prior to the thesis proposal presentation, 10 respondents (4 priests, 2 religious brothers and 4 religious sisters), matched with my initial mix, initially agreed to participate in the study.

Having finished the thesis proposal presentation and completed the rebuttal process, I issued a letter (Chinese Original at Appendix C and English version at Appendix D) to those religious personnel in February 2019 to fix the dates of the interviews. Some of them, however, had changed their minds and turned down my requests. In order to get sufficient data for the analysis, I tried very hard to invite some other religious personnel to participate and, eventually, again made up a total of 10 (3 priests, 2 religious brothers and 5 religious sisters), a slight variation from the initial mix (see Table 3 for the composition).

**Table 3**

*Composition of the 10 Religious Personnel Participants*

Group	Total No.	No. Agreed to Participate (%)
Diocesan Clergy (Chinese)	6	2 (33.3%) <sup>Note 1</sup>
Priests of Institutes (Chinese)	6	1 (16.7%) <sup>Note 2</sup>
Religious Brothers (Chinese)	2	2 (100%) <sup>Note 3</sup>
Religious Sisters (Chinese)	12	5 (41.7%) <sup>Note 4</sup>
<b>Total:</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>10 (38.5%)</b>

Remarks

Note 1: All six clergy were from the Diocese of Hong Kong with two participating.

Note 2: The six priests were from four institutes with one from one institute participating.

Note 3: The two religious brothers were from the same institute as there were no eligible candidates in others.

Note 4: The 12 religious sisters were from seven institutes. Five participants were from four institutes.

The researcher originally wished to invite all 26 religious personnel of the target pool to participate in this study but was only able to secure the agreement of 10. Sixteen of them could not take part in the study for several reasons. Among these, contact information for three could not be found in the Hong Kong Catholic Church Directory; four were studying abroad; three were serving overseas; one immediately declined the invitation; three initially accepted the invitations but changed their minds and eventually turned down the requests; and two could not be contacted.

During the thesis proposal presentation, I received a query from the floor asking why the study did not include those who had once chosen religious life but later quit, as they might provide valuable inputs to the research questions on the parts relating to barriers encountered and coping strategies adopted. These dropouts would provide a wider data source and might give discrepant evidence for my study, as they were not ordained or proclaimed final vows in the course of responding to a religious vocation (Maxwell, 2013). I found it difficult to recruit them, sensing that they might feel uncomfortable or embarrassed in sharing their past religious vocation journeys with me. I subsequently obtained generous agreement from two males (introduced to me by my friends) and two females (because of personal knowledge) to participate in my study. These four laity had once entered religious institutes but left after undergoing formation, ranging from 6 months to more than 9 years.

For the purpose of multiple data collection, I contacted some veteran religious personnel (one priest and two religious sisters), who had been involved in the formation of seminarians and novices for years, to serve as informants, providing the secondary source of data on the reasons why priests-to-be or religious-to-be leave the institutes. They all had reservations about providing me with the information and unanimously indicated that such ‘stories’ should be told by the subject people instead of a third party. Moreover, the priest remarked that the circle of the religious personnel in Hong Kong was very close and the

identity of such people could be easily recognised when their stories were touched upon. I did appreciate their concerns on the confidentiality and privacy of those religious personnel-to-be. I, therefore, gave up the idea of gathering data from these veteran religious personnel for the study.

As a result, a total of 14 participants (7 males and 7 females), comprising 10 religious personnel (3 priests, 2 religious brothers and 5 religious sisters) and 4 laity (2 men and 2 women) were successfully recruited to participate in this study. Information on these research participants, involving nine religious institutes (including the DHK), is detailed in Table 4.

**Table 4***Information of the 14 Research Participants***Information about the Ten Religious Personnel**

Participants (Pseudonym)	Religious Institute#	Age of Baptism	Age of Entering Religious Institute	Years of Formation	Age of Ordination / Profession of Final Vows	Year after Ordination / Profession of Final Vows <sup>^</sup>
Father Abraham	A	Child	20	10	30	4
Father Benedict	B	15	35	10	45	4
Father Christopher	A	34	38	10	48	2
Brother David	C	22	38	7	45	7
Brother Emmanuel	C	17	49	7	56	4
Sister Faith	D	7	27	9	36	7
Sister Grace	E	12	28	8	36	2
Sister Humble	F	Child	31	9	40	7
Sister Icon	F	35	37	9	46	3
Sister Joy	G	Child	40	10	50	4

**Information about the Four Laity**

Participants (Pseudonym)	Religious Institute#	Age of Baptism	Age of Entering Religious Institute	Years of Formation	Age of Leaving Religious Institute	Year after Leaving Religious Institute <sup>^</sup>
Mr King	A	Child	25	0.5	25	9
Mr Luke	A	18	26	7	33	26
Miss Mary	H	15	36	9	45	4
Miss Noel	I	17	46	2	48	3

# including the Diocese of Hong Kong of which the seminarians receive training in the Holy Spirit Seminary

<sup>^</sup> as at the time of interviews conducted between March to September 2019

In retrospect, the recruitment process was full of challenges. I had to face the religious personnel's turning down my invitations, make efforts to recruit some other potential targets for interviews and identify those dropouts from the religious vocation to participate in the research so as to get good coverage of data for analysis. In the process, I have learnt to be patient, persistent, open and sincere. These attributes have given me the fuel to sail along my study journey. Nevertheless, credit should definitely be given to God's blessings and the generosity of all participants' sincere sharing.

## Data Collection Procedure

### *Interview Protocol and Pilot Interview*

In order to encourage open-ended responses from the participants and allow flexibility for the researcher to note and collect data on unexpected dimensions of topics, semi-structured interviews were used (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). An interview protocol/framework of questions was required to facilitate participants' answering the questions, covering the same range of topics in the interviews for subsequent data analysis and comparison (della Porta, 1992). The interview protocol for this study was developed in four steps. First, I produced a draft protocol on the basis of the purpose and research questions of the study as well as references to the framework/ideas from the literature review. Second, I sought advice from my two thesis supervisors, who are specialists in qualitative research, on the draft. Third, I forwarded the draft to four veteran religious personnel (two priests and two religious sisters), who had been involved in accompanying young people in discerning their religious callings and/or subsequent formation work, for comments. One priest (the head of the seminary of the DHK responsible for promoting religious vocation and seminarian formation) and one religious sister (the then Executive Secretary for the Diocesan Vocation Commission in Hong Kong) provided feedback, which was incorporated in the interview protocol. Lastly, I conducted a pilot interview in early March 2019 with a religious sister, who had rich experience in novice formation, and further fine-tuned the interview protocol with insights from the interview.

The finalised interview protocol is mainly comprised of four parts. The first part collects participants' unique experiences in responding to the religious vocation with the focus on the dimension/nature/content of the calling and the discernment processes involved. The second part covers the supports that the respondents received throughout their journeys and their perceived measures in fostering a religious vocation. The third part identifies the

barriers, focusing on those that the participants encountered in pursuing their religious vocation (before as well as after deciding to respond to the religious vocation and/or entering the vocation). The last part gathers information on the participants' coping strategies to overcome the related barriers and the parties concerned in addressing the issue of the declining number of religious personnel. In asking questions in parts 2 to 4, exploration was made of the impacts on the research subjects and contextual influences: environment (God, family, schools, friends/peers, church, religious formation, social situation, social media, etc.) and crucial life events. A copy of the interview protocol is provided in Appendix E.

### *Ethical Review*

In order to kick start the interviews with the participants soon after the presentation of the thesis proposal scheduled for mid-January 2019, I submitted an application for ethical review to the Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC)<sup>12</sup> for approval in early January 2019, as data collection of the study could only commence after its approval was obtained. In the application, I had to include a copy of the research proposal, the interview protocol, an informed consent form and an information sheet of the project, which would be sent to each participant before the interview. A copy of both the Chinese and English versions of these documents, except the research proposal, is provided in Appendices E to J. HREC approved my application in late January 2019.

### *Conducting the Life History Interviews*

This research tried to triangulate the data collection by means of interviews and reviews of documents and/or masterpieces of the religious personnel, if any, for a comprehensive picture of the target participants (Maxwell, 2013). The documents referred to the information available from the sources of KKP, parish newsletters, institute websites,

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<sup>12</sup> The official website of the Education University of Hong Kong's Human Research Ethics Committee is at (<http://www.eduhk.hk/rdo/human.html>).

Facebook or other media, etc. The masterpieces included articles or artefacts written by the participants and published in books, church newspapers, institute websites, etc. The multiple data collection methods help provide a comprehensive story for each participant to ensure that all aspects of their experiences are considered in analysis. More importantly, these can help view the participants' stories in a three-dimensional manner, because the plot, or storyline, may include three-dimensional narrative inquiry space: the personal and social (the interaction); the past, present and future (continuity); and the place (situation) (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Before conducting the interviews, I read these materials, which not only helped me familiarise myself with both the participants and their institutes, but it also allowed me to think of the prompt questions for the upcoming interviews. An information sheet containing the details of the study (aims, research method, procedure and scope of the interview, rights of the participants, etc.) was sent to each participant before the interviews to increase the transparency of the study and enhance the trust of the participants (Knox, 2001).

The interview venues were selected by the participants. For the religious personnel, the interviews were conducted in the chapel/guest room of their convents or their workplaces, such as parish offices and school classrooms. Regarding the lay participants, the interviews took place at the residences of the participants/researcher or a meeting room in a clubhouse. Before each interview, I clearly explained to the participant the purpose of the study and the usage of the data being collected. I then asked the participant to sign the consent form and made an opening prayer to begin the interview. The participant was invited to lead the closing prayer at the end of the interview.

In carrying out the interview, a 'sandwich' approach (黃瑞琴, 1991) was adopted. In this approach, the researcher conducted two semi-structured interviews with each religious personnel participant. In the first interview, I asked them a set of questions from the interview



protocol with a view to obtaining information in answer to the two research questions. The flow of the interviews was flexibly adjusted to suit the interactions between the participants and the researcher. The second interview mainly focused on clarifying and/or examining the points of enquiries/interests raised in relation to the first interview and following up on any outstanding questions of the interview protocol that had not been asked in the first interview. In order not to inconvenience the lay participants too much and anticipating that one interview would be sufficient to collect data from them for analysis, the four laity were each interviewed once. I had also sought clarifications and supplementary information from certain religious personnel/lay participants after my last interview with them through emails or WhatsApp.

A total of 24 interviews, equalling approximately 46 hours, were conducted for the 14 participants from March to September 2019. The interviews were held on both weekdays and weekends, according to the availability and convenience of the participants. The earliest interview started at 0900 hours while the latest one was conducted at 1940 hours. The duration of the interviews ranged from 50 minutes to 155 minutes, with an average of about 2 hours each.

All the interviews were conducted in Cantonese, the mother tongue of the participants, and recorded with their consent. I used two iPhones (one acted as a fallback) with a recorder function to record the interviews. Each recorded interview was transcribed verbatim in Chinese and sent to the respective participants for review and confirmation. A total of 24 pieces of transcripts were produced, capturing over 635,500 Chinese characters with an average of 26,480 characters per piece. A record detailing the dates, times, duration and transcript information of the interviews is in Table 5.

**Table 5***Record of Transcript Information of the Interviews*

No.	Participant (Pseudonym)	Date of Interview (Year/Month/Day)	Start to End Time (in 2400 Hours)	Duration (Minutes)	No. of Characters (in Interview Transcript)
1	Father Abraham	20190713	1335 - 1500	85	19,049
2		20190915	1500 - 1550	50	12,296
3	Father Benedict	20190730	1940 - 2120	100	20,215
4		20190811	1145 - 1335	110	25,415
5	Father Christopher	20190321	1930 - 2120	110	24,205
6		20190531	1930 - 2050	80	24,813
7	Brother David	20190310	1200 - 1410	130	27,601
8		20190331	1100 - 1300	120	21,452
9	Brother Emmanuel	20190530	1400 - 1620	140	24,724
10		20190625	1430 - 1700	150	32,853
11	Sister Faith	20190718	1410 - 1645	155	31,652
12		20190928	1540 - 1740	120	22,407
13	Sister Grace	20190315	1530 - 1800	150	38,743
14		20190413	1330 - 1500	90	24,241
15	Sister Humble	20190402	1550 - 1750	120	28,804
16		20190503	1540 - 1750	130	34,998
17	Sister Icon	20190727	0915 - 1105	110	24,797
18		20190804	0935 - 1100	85	21,706
19	Sister Joy	20190806	0900 - 1040	100	22,204
20		20190930	1000 - 1150	110	21,562
21	Mr King	20190511	1415 - 1620	125	38,203
22	Mr Luke	20190330	0935 - 1100	85	24,922
23	Miss Mary	20190602	1305 - 1525	140	35,632
24	Miss Noel	20190601	1045 - 1305	140	33,024
<b>Total:</b>				<b>2,735</b>	<b>635,518</b>
<b>Average / 24:</b>				<b>114</b>	<b>26,480</b>

**Total: 45.58 hours (say 46 hours)**

**Average 114 minutes per interview (say about 2 hours)**

*Measures to Enhance Accuracy of Interview Data*

There is a concern about the accuracy of data collected through life history interviews as they are retrospective accounts of the research subjects (Blee & Taylor, 2002). I adopted two strategies to enhance the factual accuracy of the interview data. First, I familiarised myself with the profiles of the participants in terms of their family background, occupation

before leading religious life and the year of ordination or profession of final vows by consulting relevant materials before conducting the interviews (Andrew, 1991; Klatch, 1999). In case the information provided by the participants fell into these areas, I could crosscheck the interview data with other sources in the public domain, such as HKCCD, historical events from KKP and relevant websites.

Second, I used my eyes and ears as tools to gather information (Maxwell, 2013). The observations included the settings of the interview places, and the attitude and passion the participants displayed. I recalled that a religious personnel participant had expressed his admiration of three saints for they had preserved his religious vocation from temptations and helped him become a good priest to save the souls of the faithful. During my interview with this participant, I found that the statues of these three saints were placed in his parish office. Similarly, a lay participant used a book titled *Falling Upward* to describe her pursuit of the religious vocation, as its content best echoed her experiences on her journey. Then I discovered that the display of the bookshelf in her home looked like the one presented on that book's cover. The researcher's observations had confirmed what these two participants had said.

### **Data Analysis Process**

Having completed all the life history interviews, I proceeded to the data analysis stage of the study, which involved six steps: (1) transcribing the interview recordings; (2) reading and rereading the transcripts; (3) developing a conceptual framework; (4) coding and sorting the interview data; (5) conducting data comparison and integration; and (6) developing typologies related to the research findings. These steps are detailed in the following paragraphs.

First, each interview was recorded and transcribed verbatim. Initially, I intended to transcribe all the interview recordings myself, as the process helped me recap the participants'

epiphanies, which facilitated detecting emergent themes and patterns from the data (Goodson & Choi, 2008; Goodson & Sikes, 2001). I, however, had to seek assistance from my niece and a friend to do the transcriptions, as it was time consuming to complete the task on my own. My interviews with the 14 participants were conducted from March to September 2019, and the transcriptions were done in parallel with all transcripts completed in November 2019. I emailed the transcripts to the participants for member checks to ensure accuracy before they were finalised and for subsequent coding (Weston et al., 2001). Most of the participants gave me replies and some of them proposed corrections and amendments. A portion of a sample transcript is shown in Appendix K.

Second, I followed Plummer's (2001) suggestion for analysing the participants' life stories through the process of reading and rereading the transcripts, making notes and pondering. I then underwent "bathing in the data" (Goodson & Choi, 2008, p. 40). In the course of 'bathing', I kept thinking of the participants' words and jotted down ideas that were unique to the research subject as well as those that were common to some others. After 'taking the bath', I wrote down initial thoughts, reviewed the notes and reflected on some of the data collected in light of the research questions.

Based on the interview protocol and careful reading of the transcripts, I began to draw up some themes and subthemes from the data and develop a conceptual framework (Spencer et al., 2003). The framework is like a codebook, listing the themes and patterns making the analysis more open-minded and more context-sensitive (Miles & Huberman, 1994). After several rounds of review and refinements, I came up with a framework consisting of four themes and 61 subthemes. The four main themes were 'responses to the calling and discernment process', 'barriers, coping strategies and supports on the journey', 'perceived reasons for the declining trend of responses to religious vocations' and 'perceived measures to foster religious vocations'. The coding scheme was closely connected to the research

questions of the study. A copy of the conceptual framework is in Appendix L.

Fourth, I started to use the themes and subthemes derived in the framework to code the interview transcripts. In the process, NVivo (version Pro 12), a type of qualitative data analysis software, was used as it was helpful for storing and retrieving large amounts of data for coding and sorting purposes. When the interview transcripts were imported into NVivo, I looked for data in the text that were related to the research questions. Samples extracted from two interview transcripts are in Appendix M for illustration. During coding and establishing a coding hierarchy, the data collected went through the processes of mix and match, and compare and contrast in order to identify any common themes and patterns across some or all of the interviews (Gibbs, 2007). I had further created a subhierarchy through detailed data analysis by panning out and zooming in on the data again and again (Creswell, 2013). NVivo also helped me sort the data by grouping according to the themes and subthemes of the framework and, thus, facilitated my conducting cross-case analyses/comparisons. I had to bear in mind the unbiased selection of coding, which was essential for subsequent valid and thorough data analysis (Maxwell, 2013). New themes were discovered, common themes were combined and the framework was refined accordingly. The codes relating to the two research questions created in NVivo are in Appendix N for reference.

Once the thematic coding had evolved, I compared and contrasted the life experiences of the 14 participants on their religious vocation journeys through integration and articulation. In the process of comparison and integration, I observed that emergent patterns and themes resulted, even though some of the messages had not been very clear during the interviews. I realised that the point of data saturation had been reached when analysing the interviews of the 12<sup>th</sup> or 13<sup>th</sup> participant, as the data gathered were neither offering much additional insights into my questions nor generating any new additional codes. Many discoveries were made, exemplifying that the narrator helps make sense of the lives of the participants in telling their

stories (Chamberlain & Thompson, 1998) and acknowledges lessons learnt ‘from life’ of the participants (Eisner, 1991).

LeCompte (2000) indicated that when focusing on the data details and thematic coding, the holistic view of the research should not be neglected. In the last step of the data analysis, I tried to develop typologies from the findings in relation to the study. After examining the participants’ religious vocation journeys, I identified nine catalysts for fostering religious vocation in addressing the declining trend of responses to religious vocations. Based on their unique nature and respective functions in fostering religious vocations, I developed a typology to categorise these nine catalysts (or components) into three clusters with three each. The inter-cluster coordination of each component and cross-cluster interactions among individual components is discussed in detail in Chapter 7. In the process, I experienced and fully agreed that transforming data into research results was like reassembling the puzzle, as this step enabled me to have a holistic view of the division of work among the nine catalysts (LeCompte, 2000).

## **Validity**

According to Maxwell (2013), researcher bias and reactivity are two broad types of threats to validity that are often raised in relation to qualitative studies. In this section, I share my experiences in coming across these two aspects and the measures taken to deal with them. I had deployed some additional strategies, including triangulation, searching for discrepant evidence and respondent validation to minimise, if not eliminate, the threats and make the findings of the study possess the elements of trustworthiness, authenticity and quality (Maxwell, 2013).

### *Researcher Bias*

Researcher bias exists if the conclusions involved selecting data that fitted the researcher’s existing theory, goals or preconceptions (Miles & Huberman, 1994), or the

researcher's values and expectations may have influenced the conduct and conclusions of the study (Maxwell, 2013). I must admit that I did have some preconceptions/expectations of the role played by the religious institutes' charisma on the participants' religious vocation journeys. First, I used to have a preference for religious over diocesan clergy because the vision and charisma of every religious institute is, to me, very specific and definite, whereas the latter did not seem so. Therefore, candidates of the former had a very specific direction, developing their talents in line with the charisma of the respective institutes, while the latter did not have one to look upon. Second, I expected that the charisma of the institutes was one of the key considerations for people in selecting a particular one to pursue a religious life. The data collected from the participants in these two aspects, however, were not aligned with my preconceptions/expectations.

Being a researcher, I had taken two steps to minimise the possible bias that I might have in the data collection process. First, I had alerted myself to remain neutral and non-judgmental during the interviews, so as to keep myself analytically honest and free from bias to the findings that might be against my expectations (Miles & Huberman, 1994). With an open mind to receive the participants' views, I found my horizon widened and experienced great discoveries. Second, when facing possible contradictions to my already-held conceptual framework/assumptions, instead of controlling the participants' responses, I acknowledged the differences and tried to understand them as well as use them productively. I had to appreciate that the validity in the qualitative result was not the result of the indifference but of integrity (Maxwell, 2013). I had, therefore, kept an open heart and a critical mind to these surprises or unexpected insights identified throughout the project (Maxwell, 2013).

### *Reactivity*

Reactivity refers to the influence of the researcher on the setting or individual studied (Maxwell, 2013). I had applied two measures in the interviews to avoid exerting unnecessary

influences on the informants. First, all the questions asked in the semi-structured interviews were open-ended in nature, as leading questions might limit the participants' responses. Second, I had invited the participants to lead the closing prayers at the end of each interview. In the session, the participants had absolute freedom to express whatever ideas/views they wished, unbounded by the interview protocol.

The content of the closing prayers was very rich, broadly covering intentions on three dimensions: (a) the participants themselves; (b) the religious personnel and religious vocation; and (c) this project as well as the researcher. Regarding (a), the majority of the participants thanked me for conducting this project, which provided golden opportunities for them to review their religious vocation journeys. They were grateful for God's love and guidance throughout their journeys. Given God's graces and caring, they had faith and strength to continue in their respective ways ahead. Some participants indicated that the questions I asked had led them to deep reflection, which enlightened them. The participants' responses reflected that the life history interviews and the questions in the interview protocol were valid instruments to facilitate their inputs to the research questions.

Regarding (b), the participants prayed for all religious personnel, wishing them to remain faithful to God's callings and live out their passion so as to attract others to choose a religious life. They also prayed for young people to respond to God's call with courage and for Christians as a whole to realise their own religious vocation and live the fullness of the call to life.

Regarding (c), the participants prayed for the project and entrusted it to Mother Mary, making more people understand a religious vocation and have the capacity to respond. The participants also prayed for the leap of my faith with God's lead and presence throughout the project. I was deeply touched listening to all the heartfelt closing prayers. I considered that the interviews had been conducted in an interactive manner with benefits and worthwhile



experiences generated for both the participants and the researcher in their respective discovery journeys (Maxwell, 2013). The one on the researcher's journey is shared in detail in Chapter 8.

Apart from these two measures, I had used the strategies of triangulation, discrepant evidence and respondent validation to enhance the validity of the findings of the study.

Triangulation of the data collection was mentioned under conducting the life history interviews. I also attempted to collect some additional data to enrich and triangulate the life histories of the religious personnel participants by attending the masses celebrated by the priests and the talks/seminars delivered by the priests and religious sisters in relation to promoting religious vocations in the diocese. My strategies to search for discrepant evidence and seek respondent validation are highlighted below.

#### *Discrepant Evidence*

In the initial design, the study only aimed at recruiting religious personnel. With an idea triggered from the thesis proposal presentation, I had also recruited four laity (who had once entered religious institutes for formation but later left) in addition to the 10 religious personnel participants. It was thought that these laity might provide discrepant evidence to my study by giving valuable inputs on the areas of barriers encountered and coping strategies adopted, in particular. The inclusion of them as research subjects made the original group of religious personnel less homogeneous and, thus, provided variety for data analysis and comparison.

#### *Respondent Validation*

To minimise my misinterpretation of the meanings expressed by the participants, I clarified any uncertain points from them right at the interviews or during the second interviews in respect of religious personnel participants or through emails/WhatsApp for the lay participants. I also conducted member checks by sending the transcripts of the interviews

to the participants for verification, so as to rule out the possibility of misinterpreting the meaning of what the participants said and did and their perspectives (Maxwell, 2013). The transcripts would then become “a base for shared reflection” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 276).

### **Ethical Issues**

The study touches on the life experiences of the participants and may pose some potential risks. Also, the primary research method is life history interviews, which involves personal, private and sensitive matters of the participants, thereby increasing the potential for harm (Goodson & Sikes, 2001). The researcher must maintain high ethical standards throughout the research process. I adopted three measures by means of informed consent, confidentiality of the participants and confidentiality of the research data to minimise the potential risks or inconvenience to the participants of the study.

#### *Informed Consent*

Informed consent means that the informants’ participation in the research was voluntary, and they were fully aware of the details of the research, their rights as participants and the potential risks of the research. They had the right to refuse to participate or withdraw from the study at any time without negative consequences (Berg, 2009; Merrill & West, 2009; Plummer, 2001). All researchers should respect the rights of the respondents and treat them properly and morally (Goodson & Choi, 2008). I, therefore, had to obtain the informed consent of the participants before conducting the interviews. I understood that some of the religious personnel participants had sought agreement from their superiors of their respective institutes before formally accepting my invitation for interviews.

The consent form contains an information sheet detailing the aims of the project, the scope and procedure of the interviews, and the participants’ rights and potential risks. Both the consent form and information sheet should provide research subjects with sufficient and

clear information, facilitating them to make informed consent to participate in the study. At the start of the first interview, I clearly explained the form to my participants before asking them to sign. Each form was dated and signed by both the participant and the researcher (Berg, 2009).

### *Confidentiality of the Participants*

In order to maintain the confidentiality of the participants as much as possible, I changed the real name of the respondents to a pseudonym when reporting data (Berg, 2009). Nevertheless, the recognition of their identities could be possible despite the measure taken, as the number of religious personnel who had been ordained or professed their final vows after 2010 was small. I clearly and honestly explained the risks to my participants before conducting the interviews. I deeply appreciated their generosity in terms of the time and effort involved in participating in the research, particularly, the four laity who had left the institutes and had once felt embarrassed.

Apart from me, two other people (my niece and a friend) had handled the data once when assisting with transcribing the interview recordings. Upon securing their agreement to assist, I had requested them to keep participants' information strictly confidential and not release it to anyone. They had deleted both the voice messages of the interview recordings and the transcripts after finishing the transcription.

### *Confidentiality of the Research Data*

The signed informed consent forms and the collected data, including field notes, recordings, interview transcripts and relevant documents, have been kept strictly confidential at my home. Soft copies of the data are saved in my personal computer with restricted access and hard copies are stored in my study room. Only I have the right to access the data files for analysis purposes. Both the soft and hard copies of the data will be kept for a period that is consistent with the policies of the University.

In this chapter, I discussed a range of methodological decisions, followed by detailing the procedures and processes that I had gone through in the study. First, I justified the use of the qualitative approach with narrative research by means of life history interviews, as they were ideal for exploring the processes, events and perspectives of the participants with a view to addressing the research questions. Second, I explained why purposive sampling was adopted to select the participants, detailed the procedure to recruit them and shared the challenges involved. Third, I discussed how I collected the data, constructed the interview protocol, applied for the ethical review, conducted the interviews and took measures to ensure the data accuracy. Fourth, I detailed the six steps that I had taken in the data analysis process. Fifth, I described the strategies to deal with the validity threats of this study. Finally, I presented the ways to address the ethical issues in this research.

In the next three chapters, I discuss the findings to address the two research questions by examining the participants' stories of their religious vocation journeys, covering their responses, discernment processes, supports received, barriers encountered and coping strategies adopted therein. The participants' perspectives on the reasons for the declining trend of responses to religious vocations in Hong Kong and measures to foster religious vocations in the territory will also be analysed.

## **CHAPTER 4: RESPONSES TO THE RELIGIOUS VOCATION AND DISCERNMENT PROCESS**

This chapter and the subsequent two chapters report and analyse the data collected from my interviews with the 14 participants. The coverage includes (a) participants' responses and discernment processes in pursuing religious life and entering particular religious institutes; (b) barriers they faced in their religious vocation journeys and the strategies they used to cope with the difficulties encountered as well as the supports they received for moving on; and (c) possible reasons for the declining trend of responses to religious vocations and suggestions to foster religious vocations in the Church.

This chapter describes the responses of the 14 participants to their religious vocations and their discernment processes therein. The focus of the responses is on the major events the participants encountered in life that triggered their search for the religious vocation. Regarding the discernment processes, I unfold the reasons for their individual choice of a particular religious institute, including the DHK, for their pursuit of a religious life.

As 'religious vocation' is a key term for the participants to kick start their journeys of pursuing a religious life, it is desirable to have a better understanding of the term before proceeding with the descriptions of their responses. Therefore, I will recap the meaning of vocation for Christians in general, followed by highlighting the elements and types of religious vocations, in particular, and then listing the participants' interpretations as shared in the interviews.

### **Christian Meaning of Vocation and Elements/Types of Religious Vocations**

As mentioned in the literature review chapter, the Christian meaning of calling/vocation provided by the Salesian Vocation Office (China Province) (<http://www.sdb.org.hk/vocation>) and Hankle (2009) are not confined to becoming priests, religious brothers or religious sisters. The Salesian Vocation Office classified calling into

three levels: living out a meaningful life; becoming a Christian; and pursuing a state of life (can be a marriage life, a celibate life or a religious life). Hankle categorised vocation into three senses: performing baptism to love God and others; choosing a state of life (a married life or a religious life); and fulfilling one's unique mission in life.

According to Rulla (1971), a religious vocation is God's invitation to a person, carrying three elements: for consecrating oneself to a religious life; laying claim upon the total existence of the one called; and involving the permanent choice of a particular form of life in the Church. In a book called 《獻》 (means 'Consecration' in English) issued by the DVC (1993), there are four types of religious vocations for Christians, namely laity, religious, priests and missionaries. For missionaries, it can also be the vocation for laity, religious and priests called to perform the role of evangelisation and establishing church abroad.

### **Interpretation of Religious Vocation by the Participants**

The aforementioned findings indicate that the definition and focus of a vocation as well as a religious vocation vary in different contexts. I, therefore, asked the participants during the interviews about their understanding and interpretation of the term as experienced by them on their religious vocation journey. From the participants' sharing, a religious vocation comprises four characteristics.

First, religious vocation is a gift from the Creator of the universe to His creatures on earth. The chosen one can at most seek grace for receiving the gift, which cannot be created by mankind. Human beings, however, can only help create an environment in which the callings from God can be heard much easier.

Second, it is God who calls each one personally and entrusts one with a unique mission on their earthly journey, entailing a particular form of life in the Church. God will grant one with grace and provide green light on the way. God will never abandon a person once called or allow him to escape. God will definitely wait.

On the side of man, a person is required to have the capacity of perseverance on the journey. The journey is a continuous process of deforming, reforming and transforming oneself in the face of human weaknesses. However, the willingness of oneself to face one's weaknesses and strengthen oneself for self-improvement as well as personal growth is equally crucial. Hence, it is a matter of choice for an individual to decide whether to prune their branches with pain to bear more fruits.

Third, a religious vocation is God's attraction to mankind, inviting the latter to enter an intimate relationship with Him. It has been said that no one can interrupt this God-human relationship and no one can win from God's hand. Nevertheless, God leaves man the freedom to choose whether to enter religious life or married life. To go for a religious life, the individual will fulfil the calling to serve with meaningful sacrifice, but they must surrender the desire to bear children in the form of a family. They will be compensated or invited to be spiritual fathers or mothers of their faithful in the Church. It is no wonder that only a few choose God and even fewer choose to follow God on the religious vocation journey.

Fourth, Mr King reflected that 'sometimes the calling may not be a one-off occasion and cannot be proven objectively. The genuineness of whether one is really called by God may be viewed from a retrospective angle after looking back at one's history years later. God, however, may take one on a detour journey.' The participants shared that there were some indicators in the processes. In the first place, even though the person has already been heavily committed to church activities or is successfully engaged in their career, they still feel unsatisfied or lacking something. Miss Noel described her feelings: 'I feel an urge to respond to God's invitation and find I am restless if the call remains unanswered.' The last yet the most significant aspect is that the person is full of joy, which is the very nature of religious personnel. Sister Humble had experienced such joy and said 'though I have been fully aware of following Jesus to pursue religious life, meaning walking the Way of the Cross, I still have

the courage to surrender and answer “Yes, I do” to Jesus’s invitation, as the joy has outweighed the bitterness that I anticipate ahead.’ Sister Grace made a concluding remark that a ‘religious vocation is always a mystery’.

Among the participants, Sister Joy comparatively adopted a wide angle on the religious vocation, saying she had walked through the discernment process with the companionship of the spiritual directors. A person can pursue a religious life by means of missionary work or monastic prayers. A person can choose to go for a celibate life by living simply, sharing their wealth with others and consecrating themselves to God wholeheartedly. A person can get married by living out God’s blessing of being fertile and multiplying, filling the earth and subduing it (Genesis 1:28) by loving one another and nurturing their own children on earth.

Sister Joy considered that no one form of vocation is superior to the other. She elaborated:

If you believe that the religious life will live out the image that God has created for you, you should pursue such form of life. Or, if you find that a married life or a celibate life enables you to have communion with God, you should head for it. The benchmark of a religious vocation is subject to one’s looking upward towards God, desiring communion with Him and pursuing the glory of God as the ultimate goal in life.

The participants’ interpretations of a religious vocation entailed the components of the vocation for Christians, in general, and elements of a religious vocation, in particular. Most importantly, the participants’ solid life experiences enriched the meaning of a religious vocation by pointing out it is a gift from God, who provides mankind grace and joy to embrace the journey and engage in the mystery.

### **Life Events in the Responses to a Religious Vocation**



As discussed in the literature review chapter, one of the focuses of this study is to identify the major events that triggered the participants' responses to a religious vocation, and examine if they are from the guiding force, the individual self, the intention for others' good or a combination of these. In analysing the data, the participants' responses can broadly be grouped into the following four dimensions, in accordance with the feelings they experienced most strongly:

- (a) Personal encounter with God;
- (b) God's invitation through messengers;
- (c) Desire from individual self; and
- (d) Intention for others' good.

Personal encounter with God refers to the participants' direct experience with God. God's invitation through messengers indicates that the participants received God's calling from others indirectly. Desire from individual self implies that the participants' responses originated from themselves with no explicit invitation from God or messages relayed by others. Intention for others' good points out that the participants considered others' benefits in making the choice to pursue religious life.

During the interviews, each participant shared their wonderful and unique journeys, in which God led and guided them. The purpose of the study is to analyse the similarities and differences of their pathways in a synthesis manner, instead of portraying each of them in detail. As a result, I have reluctantly cut their stories short by outlining the most substantial events that the participants encountered on their journeys for illustration.

#### *Personal Encounter with God*

The stories of six participants (Father Benedict, Sister Faith, Sister Grace, Sister Humble, Sister Icon and Sister Joy) can exemplify this theme. The channels of their experiences of personal encounters with God varied, ranging from personal prayer at home

(Sister Icon) or in retreat (Father Benedict), receiving Holy Communion at mass (Sister Joy), attending Eucharistic Adoration (Sister Grace), joining a pilgrimage (Sister Humble) or participating in World Youth Day (WYD; Sister Faith). Apart from a personal encounter, some also had the dimensions of God's invitation through messengers (Father Benedict and Sister Joy); self-desire (Sister Humble, Sister Icon and Sister Joy); and/or for others' good (Sister Icon). As the personal encounter with God played the dominant role in motivating them to start their religious vocation journeys, their stories are presented under this theme.

Father Benedict received God's calling by seeing a vision during his prayer in a retreat. In the vision, God asked him to come to His side. He described:

I did jump to God's side and experienced His hug, which touched me so much and gave me a lot of consolation. As I was not sure if I was called to be a priest or a religious brother, I began to discern God's will on me. Prior to this vision, I thought that God might have sent two religious sisters as messengers, indicating to me that I had a religious vocation. I considered them too pushy, since I did not have much personal experiences by then.

However, he recalled that the seed of religious vocation was first sown in him in his primary school years when he said the Lord's Prayer. The primary school was run by Religious Institute B.

When she was an undergraduate attending a WYD in France in 1997, Sister Faith was in a basilica and heard a man's voice saying, 'Come and Follow Me'. When she looked up, she saw a mural with Jesus's face. WYD is a worldwide encounter with the Pope, initiated by the late Pope John Paul II in the 1980s and celebrated every 2–3 years in different countries. The event is an opportunity for young people to experience the universality of the Catholic Church and to share with the whole world their hope of committing themselves to Christ and others. Typical programmes during the week include holy masses, catechetical sessions,

music, prayers and reconciliation opportunities.

Sister Faith recalled:

The experience in the basilica was shocking as I had never thought of entering religious life. I was baptised at the age of seven when studying in a convent primary school. I considered my relationship with God then was attending Sunday masses and joining the church choir but nothing else. In reflecting on the experience, I was certain that God did call me, but for doing what remained a question mark . . .

Since then, she began attending some activities organised by the DVC to know more about religious vocations and to start the long searching journey.

Sister Grace shared that God required her to consecrate herself to Him as a religious. She got this very clear message during the Eucharistic Adoration in a youth camp. She could neither deny the certainty of this message nor explain rationally to others about this personal experience. Sister Grace was grateful to her parish priests, who had provided a very good formation for the youth, requesting them to be attentive to God's calling on oneself no matter whether it was married life or religious life and to do God's will accordingly.

Sister Humble indicated that her personal encounter with God was on her pilgrimage to South Korea. When visiting one of the famous martyr sites, Sister Humble felt the presence of Jesus and heard a voice saying, 'Are you willing to change your present way of life for me?' Apart from this experience, she had a belief that her life would be different from others at the age of six. She recollected that once in her primary school years, she saw some religious sisters at the Mission Sunday organised by the DHK. The goal of Mission Sunday is to foster awareness of the faithful's baptismal call to be a missionary by proclaiming the gospel to all creations. She began to think that she should also lead this form of life when she grew up, despite the fact that she had no idea of what religious sisters were by then. With the message received on the pilgrimage, Sister Humble became more attentive to God's

invitation.

God's calling caught Sister Icon by surprise one night in her prayer at home. She was a catechumen at that time. After God said to her, 'To become a religious sister', she immediately responded that she had shortcomings and was poor in health; thus, she was not suitable for religious life. However, there was a turning point when she received a phone call from her sister one afternoon a month later. She stated:

In that afternoon, my sister telephoned me saying that she was not happy with her marriage and work. I then shared with her about my joy and reliance on God. She, however, remarked, "Yes, I can see that you are joyful, but you are the only one who experiences that joy." With her remark, I promised God that I would become a religious sister to bring and share my joy of experiencing His love with others.

After making such a decision, Sister Icon recalled writing about her desire to become a religious sister when she was in Grade 6 and Form 3/Form 4. However, she had not met any religious sisters by then. She added that she was completely clueless about the coming of such a desire and its significance at that stage.

Sister Joy said that God called her in person when she received Holy Communion during mass at a retreat. Prior to this shocking experience, she had once felt that it was good to serve God wholeheartedly after her lay missionary service abroad years ago. Some colleagues (both religious and laity) in different workplaces also mentioned that she possessed the qualities of a religious sister and invited her to think about consecrated life. Sister Joy responded that she always had a very strong desire for married life with her own children nurtured in the context of a Christian family. She, therefore, intended not to pursue a religious life. Being touched and moved by God's love-filled invitation through Holy Communion, she began to surrender, let go of her self-desire and ponder God's calling on her. Regarding her response to the religious vocation, Sister Joy concluded:

To me, I experienced a personal encounter with God, His invitation through other messengers as well as self-desire at different stages of my life. I, however, considered God's personal calling as fundamentally moving me to decide to enter a religious life.

### *God's Invitation Through Messengers*

Apart from encountering an individual personally, God may sometimes call a person through an invitation relayed by others who are regarded as messengers. In this theme, God sent His invitation through messengers to four participants (Father Abraham, Father Christopher, Brother David and Brother Emmanuel) by addressing or prompting them individually. The parish priests, the religious and the student that the participants had encountered acted as their messengers. The venues in which the messengers appeared to trigger their thoughts to respond to a religious vocation were parishes (Father Abraham and Brother David), during liturgy (mass celebration; Father Christopher and Brother Emmanuel) and international events (WYD; Father Abraham and Father Christopher). In the case of Father Christopher, he had also thought for others' good when considering pursuing a religious life.

On a summer holiday at the age of 18, Father Abraham made a confession to a diocesan clergy. During the confession, the clergy gave him advice and asked him if he would consider becoming a priest. Because of this suggestion, Father Abraham began to ponder over the clergy's words and recollected his mother mentioning his wish to become a priest when he was two. Two years later, in 2005, he participated in the WYD in Germany and was impressed by a talk given by a bishop. Father Abraham recapped:

The bishop encouraged us, the youngsters, to consecrate lives to God. He used a metaphor of an orange, saying that one should give an orange to others for consumption when it was most fresh and juicy. Youngsters, as we were, should therefore consider a religious vocation and have the courage to respond to God's

invitation. His advice did strengthen my determination to pursue a religious vocation.

Father Christopher had been a teacher in a secondary school run by religious brothers. When accompanying students to participate in WYD in Rome in the summer of 2000, he was touched by the passion of the participants as well as the programmes. Once back in Hong Kong, he attended catechesis class and was baptised afterwards.

Once while attending a mass celebrating the jubilee year of the religious professions and entrance of an institute, he noticed the aging issue of the religious and priests present therein and was worried about the future of the Church. He, therefore, prayed for a religious vocation without thinking of himself as a respondent. Later, on another occasion, a student shared with him his desire of becoming a priest. As usual, Father Christopher gave him encouragement and assured him that he would pray for him. Soon after he had said it, he felt so touched from within and then heard a voice asking, ‘How about you?’ He then started to explore more about religious vocations. Father Christopher had also thought of others’ good in considering his pursuit of a religious vocation. He said:

Compared to a teacher working in a school, I believed that the scope and number of people benefitting from the service and sacrifice offered by a priest should be greater. I, therefore, decided to give up the teaching profession, which I loved so much, and head for priesthood life.

Brother David considered himself an observer and slow to interact with others. As he was active in parish activities, a missionary priest working therein became his mentor and, eventually, a good companion to him. As the priest noticed that he visited a religious institute frequently, he enquired if he had a religious vocation in this regard. Brother David, therefore, pondered whether God had called him to enter religious life and started his journey.

Among the various incidents that triggered Brother Emmanuel’s consideration of a religious vocation, he revealed that the message by a religious sister delivered at her

profession of final vows was, comparatively speaking, the most direct. In the mass, the religious sister shared that one should be attentive to God's calling and respond generously without hesitation. Brother Emmanuel then examined his situation and found that he was not satisfied with his 'comfortable' livelihood. Struck by the message, he decided to give himself a try at pursuing a religious life and started the exploration journey through a religious brother, who had previously enquired if he had such a calling.

### *Desire from Individual Self*

Sometimes, the calling to lead a religious life may not be so direct from God above or from messengers outside, but rather the desire of a person from within. This is regarded as desire from the individual self. The stories of the four participants (Mr King, Mr Luke, Miss Mary and Miss Noel) showed that their own desire was the key motive for their pursuit of a religious life. Among them, the desires were particularly strong for Mr Luke and Miss Mary, as they both intended to try to consecrate their lives as responses to God's love for them. In addition to self-desire from within, Mr King and Miss Noel expressed that they had a feeling of God's invitation but were not certain if the calling was genuinely from Him. As they both merely had a 'feeling' and were not certain if God had really called them, I have grouped them in this theme, rather than putting them under personal encounter with God or His invitation through messengers.

Mr King always considered baptism a very significant event in one's life. After attending a friend's baptism at Easter while studying at university, he asked himself what God wanted him to be. He immediately felt that God invited him to go further, to do something by exploring the priestly vocation. Since then, Mr King thought about the religious vocation and was motivated to learn more about Christianity and to reflect about his relationship with God/faith in God. He, however, did not come across a one-off event in life that made him feel as though God had called him to religious life.

Mr Luke came from a family of six siblings and he was the fifth. He admitted that he did not experience parental love during childhood. Baptised at the age of 18, he felt loved and cared for in the church community and experienced long desired feelings of joy. In the parish, he found a sense of belonging and joined the youth group. Six years later, his good friend in the group entered a religious institute. This move prompted him to think that the priesthood could be a viable as well as a natural way for him to respond to God's love. Mr Luke considered that he could try this form of life, though he was neither certain nor had experienced God calling him to become a priest.

Upon baptism at the age of 15, Miss Mary had been very active in parish activities. She pointed out:

No matter how many services I was involved in, I still found them not enough and had a desire to do more for God or the Church. I, therefore, thought that only becoming a religious sister would help me consecrate myself totally. Such a desire remained when I turned 30. Nevertheless, I could not distinguish if the desire came from God or from myself. But one thing I felt certain about was that if I did not try, I would regret it my whole life. I decided to let myself try.

As Miss Noel did not think she possessed the qualities to become a religious sister, she thought consecrating her life as a lay missionary suited her better. She quit her job, served as a lay missionary for four years and did some spiritual formation overseas before coming back to work in Hong Kong. She later discovered that she loved silence, and through reflection, she felt that it might be God's invitation for her to enter a deeper relationship with Him. She also shared the feeling of St Augustine of Hippo in his Confessions, 'And restless our hearts until in Thee they find their ease'. With the introduction of a friend, Miss Noel entered a religious institute of a monastic nature to start her journey in search of God's will, so as to identify her deepest desire and address the restlessness in her heart.



The story outlines show that some of the participants did not have one single type of signal for their calling. There is a combination of experiences in (a) personal encounter with God; (b) God's invitation through messengers; (c) desire from individual self; and (d) for others' good. Some participants who had personal encounters with God also experienced God's invitation through messengers (Father Benedict and Sister Joy), self-desire (Sister Humble, Sister Icon and Sister Joy) and/or for others' good (Sister Icon). In receiving God's invitation through messengers, Father Christopher had also considered others' good in entering religious life. Similarly, some participants who were driven by self-desire might also have felt God's invitation (Mr King and Miss Noel).

It is worth noting that Sister Icon and Father Christopher had some thoughts for others' good when considering pursuing a religious life. Nevertheless, the dominant force motivating them to think about a religious vocation is either a personal encounter with God or through messengers. As the grouping of the participants is to show the feeling that was comparatively stronger in triggering their responses to a religious vocation, the theme of for others' good has been subsumed under (a) the personal encounter with God (Sister Icon) and (b) God's invitation through messengers (Father Christopher).

For the remaining participants, they seemed to have received a signal in one of the following dimensions: (a) personal encounter with God (Sister Faith and Sister Grace); (b) God's invitation through messengers (Father Abraham, Brother David and Brother Emmanuel); and (c) desire from individual self (Mr Luke and Miss Mary).

The participants' experiences, to a certain extent, echoed Father Abraham's saying of 'regarding the calling of a religious vocation, it must come from God who may be through others or by means of the person oneself', and Father Benedict's sharing of 'only the calling one received from God is the genuine one.'

A mapping of the participants with the life event(s) that triggered their responses to

the religious vocation journey is shown in Table 6.



**Table 6***Life Events that Triggered the Participants' Responses to a Religious Vocation*

<b>Dimension</b>	<b>Participant</b>	<b>Life Event(s)</b>
Personal Encounter with God	Father Benedict	Saw vision during prayer in retreat; messages from two religious sisters.
	Sister Faith	Heard voice in basilica during WYD in France.
	Sister Grace	Received message during Eucharistic Adoration in youth camp.
	Sister Humble	Heard a voice during pilgrimage in South Korea; self-desire of becoming a religious sister at 6 years of age.
	Sister Icon	Heard a voice during night prayer at home; desire of becoming a religious sister in schools; for others' good.
	Sister Joy	Received message during Holy Communion at mass in retreat; self-desire; messengers at workplaces.
God's Invitation through Messengers	Father Abraham	Prompted by a priest during confession; inspiration from bishop's talk at WYD in Germany.
	Father Christopher	Touched by the aging religious; prompted by a student's sharing of a religious vocation; for others' good.
	Brother David	Prompted by a missionary priest in the parish.
	Brother Emmanuel	Triggered by a message from a religious sister in professing her final vows; prompted by a religious brother.
Desire from Individual Self	Mr King	Prompted by a friend's baptism at Easter and feeling God's invitation for him to explore the priestly vocation.
	Mr Luke	Thought priesthood was a viable way to respond to God's love.
	Miss Mary	Thought becoming a religious sister was the only way to consecrate oneself totally to God.
	Miss Noel	Felt restless and thought God invited her to enter into a deeper relationship with Him.



## **Discernment Process and Selection of Religious Institute**

As highlighted in the literature review chapter, discernment is the foremost process to understand God's will for oneself, so as to decide the action to take in response to His calling. In fact, discernment is complex and multifaceted; most people will request the companionship of one or more than one spiritual director. Priests and religious are usually entrusted with this role. However, veteran laity as spiritual directors are another option.

Apart from receiving direction or companionship from spiritual directors, people usually visit religious institutes and/or attend come-and-see programmes, in which they have opportunities to participate in the daily life of the religious institutes through prayers and liturgical activities. This allows them to discern if it is God's will that they pursue a religious life.

The companionship of spiritual directors, visiting religious institutes and/or attending come-and-see programmes are useful tools, as they provide inspiration and personal experiences of community life, thereby facilitating an individual's consideration of their suitability for pursuing a religious life and entering a particular institute. Nevertheless, self-reflection is indispensable in the discernment process. Self-reflection here means that a person examines their decision to lead a religious life, and they select a religious institute by means of prayers, meditation and/or after serious thought. A person will deem the decision on the right track if they experience inner peace and see green lights to move on.

In discerning whether to pursue the religious life, half of the participants had the companionship of spiritual director(s) prior to their admission to their respective religious institutes. In deciding which institute to enter, the number of institute(s) that the participants approached varied from one to five. The stories of the participants in this regard are unfolded in two groups: (a) with companionship of spiritual directors, and (b) without companionship of spiritual directors.

### *With Companionship of Spiritual Directors*

Seven participants (Father Abraham, Brother David, Brother Emmanuel, Sister Faith, Sister Grace, Sister Icon and Sister Joy) are in this group, and their spiritual directors came on the scene at different moments prior to their admission to their respective religious institutes.

Brother David and Sister Grace had their parish priests as spiritual directors. These priests were familiar with them and gave them guidance on the Christian faith well before they thought of pursuing a religious vocation. Sister Faith was acquainted with a religious sister through her participation in the monthly retreat on religious vocations organised by the DVC, and the latter had provided her with occasional spiritual direction since then. Father Abraham, Sister Icon and Sister Joy proactively approached spiritual directors for assistance with discerning if God had called them to lead a religious life. Father Abraham requested a religious priest, whom he became acquainted with during his service as an altar boy in the church. Sister Icon's spiritual director was also a religious priest, introduced to her by a religious sister working in the parish. Sister Joy had invited three spiritual directors (one religious sister and two priests), whom she knew from attending church activities, to give her direction and guidance in the discernment process. Brother Emmanuel regarded the priest who led the come-and-see programme for him as his spiritual director, as he had helped him affirm God's calling to him to pursue a religious life.

#### Father Abraham

Father Abraham's search for a religious vocation was motivated by a diocesan clergy while his discernment was led by a religious priest. In the process of discerning God's will, Father Abraham attended monthly spiritual direction conducted by the priest, made efforts to study the Bible and 'talked' to God in silence. He remarked that he had not heard from God, but he felt in the prayers that he was increasingly attracted by God's love. The attraction of God's love gave rise to a strong desire and willingness to return his love to God unreservedly,

placing himself in the hands of God even into the unknown future. He added that when he was a youth, he would go for whatever he considered right at all cost.

In the prayers, Father Abraham said that God had not given him a clear indication to serve a particular group or engage in a specific service. To him, he genuinely wished to consecrate himself totally for the disposal of Jesus Christ. Both the spiritual director and he considered that God might call him to become a priest, who would serve laity from all walks of life in the parish. As the seminarians of Religious Institute A would be sent to serve in parishes after ordination, Father Abraham chose to enter that institute in his pursuit of a religious vocation.

### Brother David

Brother David had approached two religious institutes before making his final decision. He got to know the first religious institute after a retreat in the convent and was attracted by its characteristic of silence. He later began to visit the religious institute frequently through doing volunteer services there on weekends. His parish priest who acted as his spiritual director noticed his motivation and enquired if he was thinking of being a religious. Brother David then paid attention to this, but his discernment discontinued after experiencing a very unhappy encounter with the priest-in-charge of that religious institute.

Frustrated by the unhappy experience, the desire to seek a religious vocation subsided for some time. With the encouragement of a priest of Religious Institute C, Brother David joined its come-and-see programme. Under the spiritual direction of that priest, Brother David began to pray and connect with God again. He later engaged in the community life of the institute to discern if it suited him. Having learnt about the patron saint and its charisma, Brother David appreciated the human nature of the institute and felt comfortable living in the community. Having considered his desire for fraternal communion and service, rather than that of ministerial priesthood, he chose to become a religious brother in Religious Institute C.

Brother David shared that the companionship of spiritual directors was very important in his discernment process.

### Brother Emmanuel

When approaching a religious brother of Religious Institute C to know more about a religious vocation, Brother Emmanuel was invited to join its come-and-see programme. The spiritual director who led the programme asked him to examine his life and to identify the events that related him with God. He recalled:

After the review, I realised that all my past experiences were preparing me for the religious life. The inner peace that I experienced during the discernment process was, to me, another obvious sign from God. Yet, I wondered if God had called me to be a priest or a religious brother. To me, it was not the position in the Church hierarchy that mattered, but the mission that God wished to entrust to me that counted.

In looking back, Brother Emmanuel remarked that entering Religious Institute C was God's plan but not his choice, as he had graduated from a secondary school run by religious brothers. Moreover, he did not know any other religious institutes other than Religious Institute C. After entering Religious Institute C, Brother Emmanuel found that his character and experience aligned closely with the values of the institute. After taking his age into account, the superiors there thought that he was better suited to pursue the vocation of a religious brother in the community, rather than a priest. Brother Emmanuel listened to his superiors' views and, thus, consecrated his life to God as a religious brother in Religious Institute C.

### Sister Faith

With God's calling in mind, Sister Faith began to participate in the monthly retreat on religious vocations organised by the DVC. Soon after her graduation from university, she entered the religious institute running the schools in which she had been studying from

kindergarten till secondary level. She taught in the convent school and stayed with the community after work to see if her calling was there. She, however, found the way of life in that institute boring and rigid and, eventually, left after six months.

After leaving that religious institute and the teaching job, Sister Faith chose to pursue further studies and became actively involved in volunteer services for youth at the diocesan level in parallel. She thought that there might be many options to serve God, other than being a religious sister, and she kept on exploring other possibilities. Nevertheless, she found herself still not satisfied, even when she became a staff member of a diocesan organisation after finishing her studies.

Sister Faith was acquainted with a religious sister of Religious Institute D, who was one of the committee members of the DVC as well as her colleague in the diocesan organisation. She had provided occasional spiritual direction to Sister Faith, since her participation in the monthly retreat on religious vocations. With the invitation from this religious sister, Sister Faith started to explore whether the community life of Religious Institute D suited her. Other than Religious Institute D, Sister Faith also visited Religious Institute F a couple of times, but she found her calling was not there. She considered her interactions with the members of Religious Institute D natural and comfortable. She felt very much at home. What attracted her most was the prayer life, which was full of humanity, simplicity and happiness. She also appreciated and shared the sacrifice spirit of its foundress. This explained why it took her 7 years from the time she first heard God's calling in France to actually entering religious life.

### Sister Grace

Among all the participants, the discernment of Sister Grace could be regarded as the most straightforward. After receiving God's invitation during the Eucharistic Adoration, she approached a parish priest who was her spiritual director. The spiritual director asked her



some questions and assured her that God's calling was so clear that there was no need for any further discernment. As a result, Sister Grace did not seem to undergo a 'formal' discernment process.

Regarding the selection of religious institute, Sister Grace indicated that she did not participate in any come-and-see programmes. She stated:

I remembered that when I told a religious sister at Religious Institute E of my decision to pursue religious life on that day, the latter was very happy and touched, saying that I belonged to her institute right away. In fact, I only knew Religious Institute E by then. In comparison with those women who had painful experiences in both the discernment process and the selection of religious institute, I considered my simple experience a grace.

Looking back, Sister Grace was grateful to have entered Religious Institute E, as her character/personality was very closely aligned with that of the Institute, which was full of joy and humour.

### Sister Icon

Like Brother Emmanuel and Sister Grace, Sister Icon claimed that she had no ideas about any religious institutes before the discernment and selection processes. As a result, she was initially under the companionship of a priest, who was introduced to her by a religious sister working in the parish. Sister Icon visited this priest once a month to discern if God had called her to be a religious sister.

At the same time, she joined the daily routines of the parish's religious sisters' institute. However, she did not feel that her religious vocation was there. She later went to two come-and-see programmes and felt at home in Religious Institute F. Sister Icon admitted that she did not know what missionary services Religious Institute F provided at the time of selection. She chose it because she was very comfortable in it, and she believed she would be

a lifelong member of the community. Looking back, Sister Icon felt she made the appropriate choice and that she shared the charisma of the Institute.

### Sister Joy

Compared to all of the other participants, Sister Joy's discernment process involved the highest number of spiritual directors and religious institutes. She opined that the decision to become a religious sister was very important and the process should not be rushed. It took her about 3 years to make the decision. In the first place, with the spiritual direction of a religious sister, Sister Joy understood the meaning of a religious vocation and opened herself to see if she had such a calling. She was then actively engaged in spiritual direction, personal prayers and monthly gatherings organised by the DVC. Having been a lay missionary and studied a Bible course, Sister Joy was acquainted with two priests, who also gave her spiritual direction in the discernment process.

Regarding her experiences on the come-and-see programmes, Sister Joy said:

I visited a total of five religious institutes in Hong Kong and Macau, with both missionary work and monastic in nature, and participated in their come-and-see programmes. I regarded the experiences extremely helpful. I finally entered Religious Institute G because I was attracted by its diversity in charisma and services, compared to others.

### *Without Companionship of Spiritual Directors*

The remaining seven participants (Father Benedict, Father Christopher, Sister Humble, Mr King, Mr Luke, Miss Mary and Miss Noel) are in this group, and they did not have the companionship of spiritual directors before their admission to their respective religious institutes. The role of spiritual directors began to emerge only after they entered the religious institutes. Without guidance from spiritual directors, these participants' discernment of pursuing a religious life and selecting a religious institute was mainly derived by

self-reflection, charisma or feelings about the institute and/or God's enlightenment.

The participants made use of prayers, meditation, inner peace and a sense of satisfaction to reflect if the decision was on the right track. Some of them indicated that the charisma and home feeling of the institute had been useful in discerning whether they should stay with that particular religious institute. Others considered that if it was God's calling for them to lead a religious life, they would see green lights to proceed on the religious vocation journey.

### Father Benedict

Father Benedict's vision during the retreat confirmed for him that he should pursue religious life; however, it gave him no clear indication whether to become a priest or a religious brother. He first contacted the rector of Religious Institute A. Receiving no response, he guessed it might be due to his age as he was in his thirties by then. He was inclined not to approach Religious Institute B, as its priests were very knowledgeable, and he did not consider himself to be of a high enough calibre. Also, he did not want to study further because of his age. He, therefore, thought that his vocation might be as a religious brother and, subsequently, applied to an overseas religious institute for formation. His move received great resistance from his parents. To tackle the situation, he said:

In order to avoid direct confrontation with my parents, I went abroad to help my father handle some financial matters. During that time, I attended masses in a nearby seminary run by Religious Institute B. A priest in the seminary noticed that I had been coming there for some time. One day, he talked to me and I told him about my case. He frankly advised me not to look for what I wanted but what God wanted.

Upon returning to Hong Kong, Father Benedict applied to Religious Institute B for admission. The vocation promoter accompanied him in the discernment process, and the institute accepted his application 6 months later. He then told his father, who surprisingly

showed no objection and asked him not to worry as he and his younger brother would take care of the family. All these green lights affirmed that his choice of Religious Institute B was according to God's will. Nevertheless, he remarked that he could not be 100% certain which was God's will and which was not. He admitted that following God's will require absolute surrender and faith in God alone. That is why, he commented, the religious are considered 'great' in the eyes of others. In Father Benedict's case, self-reflection and sensitivity to God's messages relayed by others were important tools in his discernment.

### Father Christopher

Father Christopher chose to leave his beloved teaching profession and pursue the priestly vocation, because he believed that the level of services and the scope of people that a priest could assist would be greater than those of a teacher and not confined to academic aspects.

Regarding the selection, Father Christopher personally preferred religious institutes to a diocese, as he had a passion for the brotherhood of community life. However, he might have been sent overseas by the institute for service. He considered that his parents would likely accept his choice of priesthood in Hong Kong. He, therefore, chose to enter Religious Institute A to pursue the religious vocation as a priest, since he could stay in Hong Kong for service. As a result, Father Christopher's discernment in terms of his decision to pursue religious life and choice of religious institute were largely attributed to his self-reflection and determination.

### Sister Humble

Exposed to the form of life in serving God, Sister Humble did not go for religious life in the early beginning. She described her discernment process:

I taught in a convent school and tried to participate in the Legion of Mary and youth committee in the parish after work, but it was in vain as I was neither available for the

service nor satisfied with the activities. In addition, I was entangled by the image of the crucifix after my pilgrimage to South Korea. I later felt that I was falling in love with Jesus Christ and had an intimate relationship with Him. Once I decided to pursue a religious life, it was surprising to note that the image of the crucifix did not appear to me anymore. All these helped me discern that my pursuit of a religious life was right to fulfil God's calling on me.

Two religious sisters from different religious institutes, one running the school Sister Humble was teaching in and another running the school she went to, invited her to the come-and-see programmes. Sister Humble did not feel that God had called her to the one she was working in. Her experience at the come-and-see programme of the other religious institute was good, but she noticed some problems in it. However, her struggles were later removed after she met the Superior General. She felt happy and decided to pursue a religious life in the latter institute. Yet, she was overwhelmed by sadness and frustration at the time of novitiate, as she was still discerning whether she should stay or go to another one. Her puzzle was finally addressed by Jesus, who asked her whether she loved that religious institute more than Him. Afterwards, she stayed in Religious Institute F to live up to her religious vocation. The whole discernment process was derived by her own feelings and God's enlightenment.

### Miss Noel

Miss Noel had undergone a very long journey of continuous discernment. Well before her choice to be a lay missionary, she had joined a come-and-see programme of a religious institute. She later found her desire to serve the Church as a lay missionary. Upon her return from lay missionary service, she had a preference for silence and, subsequently, entered Religious Institute I, an institute of a monastic nature. The choice of the institute was mainly by means of her self-reflection. Miss Noel elaborated:

On the one hand, the Mother-in-charge of Religious Institute I accepted me for a trial

to see if I would fit in. On the other hand, I felt that the door of that institute was open for me and, therefore, gave myself a try. I considered that discernment was a non-stop process, and one could advance so far as the headlight showing the way forward was possible.

Miss Noel's metaphor of a headlight in this regard was very impressive.

### Mr King

With the idea of seeking a religious vocation, Mr King approached a parish priest for advice, as he had no idea of any religious institutes. The priest came from a missionary institute and introduced him to contact Religious Institute A to examine his calling. Mr King then joined the monthly gatherings of a religious vocation group organised by the DVC and was later admitted to Religious Institute A. Mr King had a girlfriend, and once he decided to enter the institute, he broke his relationship with her. The priests and spiritual director therein as well as he considered his pursuit of a religious vocation viable, and there was nothing to rebut his heading in this direction. Mr King indicated that the more he learnt about the faith and its liturgical life during the formation, the more fulfilling he found his spiritual life becoming. Therefore, the discernment of pursuing religious life for Mr King was quite straightforward.

### Mr Luke

To return God's great love, Mr Luke decided to lead a priesthood life. In the selection of religious institute, Mr Luke merely followed the path of his friend and entered Religious Institute A. Although he knew some other religious institutes, he had no idea of their respective admission requirements and formalities. Seeing his friend enter Religious Institute A, he also considered it a feasible option. Thus, he simply followed suit.

### Miss Mary

Driven by a desire to enter religious life, Miss Mary was advised by a priest to find

out the missionary work and charisma of religious institutes by reading their directories and identify the ones she found attractive. With this advice, she came up with three possible institutes. She was most attracted by one that focused on youth work. However, she did not approach it, as she considered the institute very unlikely to accept her due to her age. For the second one, she thought it too luxurious to match her personal values. For the third one, she had a feeling that the religious sisters were not very considerate. As a result, she contacted a religious sister at Religious Institute H, instead of one from those that attracted her most. The reason for such a decision was partly due to Miss Mary's personality. She admitted that she was an introvert. Yet, she became acquainted with that religious sister during her service in the parish. Miss Mary found her very kind and a good model. Thus, she decided to enter Religious Institute H after the companionship with that religious sister for about 6 months.

A summary of the participants' discernment processes and their reasons for selecting their respective religious institutes is shown in Table 7.

**Table 7***Participants' Discernment Processes and Reasons for Selecting the Religious Institute*

Companionship of Spiritual Director	Participant	Religious Institute	Reasons for Selecting the Religious Institute
With Companionship (1)	Father Abraham	A	Able to work in parish serving laity from all walks of life.
With Companionship (2)	Brother David	C	Aligned with the charisma of the institute and felt comfortable in the community.
With Companionship (1)	Brother Emmanuel	C	Aligned with the values of the institute and had no idea about other institutes.
With Companionship (3)	Sister Faith	D	Aligned with the charisma of the institute, felt at home and prayer life.
With Companionship (1)	Sister Grace	E	No idea about other institutes.
With Companionship (3)	Sister Icon	F	Felt at home.
With Companionship (5)	Sister Joy	G	Aligned with the charisma and mission of the institute.
Without Companionship (3)	Father Benedict	B	Lacked positive responses from other institutes; learnt to do God's wants not self wants.
Without Companionship (1)	Father Christopher	A	Able to stay and serve in Hong Kong.
Without Companionship (3)	Sister Humble	F	Found joy and God's will in the institute; lacked positive responses from other institutes.
Without Companionship (2)	Miss Noel	I	Nature of the institute suited her preference for silence and prayer life.
Without Companionship (1)	Mr King	A	No idea about other institutes.
Without Companionship (1)	Mr Luke	A	Merely followed a friend's choice.
Without Companionship (1)	Miss Mary	H	By elimination and was acquainted with a religious sister at the institute.

( ) The figure inside the parentheses indicates the number of religious institutes or come-and-see programmes the participant visited or attended.



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As revealed, half of the participants (7 out of 14) had the assistance of spiritual directors in the discernment process before entering the respective religious institutes. For the remaining half, some made up their minds of which religious institutes to enter through self-reflection as well as lacking positive responses from other possible choices (Father Benedict and Sister Humble). The sign of green lights ahead served as a discernment tool for some other participants, who believed that God would allow them to move on the journey if He genuinely called them.

At present, the usual practices and procedures of the discernment process in the religious institutes in Hong Kong are as follows: First, a candidate is either accompanied by a spiritual director of their own choice or one is assigned by the religious institute, who the candidate approaches in the come-and-see programme. Then, the candidate takes the psychological test provided by the DHK to assess their suitability to pursue a religious life. Sister Humble considered the present arrangement undesirable, as the discernment might tend to be loose by lowering the entrance requirements in view of few candidates applying for admission to the religious institutes.

To ensure the discernment was done thoroughly and to minimise bias, Sister Humble suggested a three-tier approach, saying:

First, the person should be open to God's invitation and make the discernment by self-reflection or with the companionship of a spiritual director. Second, the religious institute concerned should conduct the discernment for the candidate seriously. Lastly, the institute should encourage the candidate to involve a spiritual director from outside, such as the team in the Xavier House, Cheung Chau run by the Society of

Jesus, which was renowned for conducting spiritual exercises of St Ignatius,<sup>13</sup> in the discernment process. For the good of both the institute and the candidate, a thorough discernment has to be conducted prior to his or her profession of initial vows.

Regarding the come-and-see programme, it provided a good opportunity for the person as well as the institutes to understand each other and consider the suitability towards one another by experiencing the daily livelihood of the community. In the course, a person is encouraged to engage in the community life of the institute, and the religious institute should unfold its authentic situation to the candidates.

As shown in Table 7, the number of religious institutes or come-and-see programmes that the participants attended ranged from one (seven participants), two (two participants), three (four participants) to five (one participant). It is noted that half of the participants had only visited one religious institute. Among them, three (Brother Emmanuel, Sister Grace and Mr King) said that they had no ideas about religious institutes other than the one they entered.

According to Father Abraham, come-and-see programmes might provide some assistance or experience to a person in the seek-and-search journey of a religious vocation. He firmly believed that God would personally lead the person; thus, it was unnecessary to spend too much time and energy in knowing as many religious institutes as possible. Father Abraham added that entering a religious institute was not going to a buffet dinner. The latter was after what one wanted for oneself, but the former was what God wanted from oneself. He nevertheless remarked that God might sometimes let someone make the right choice after trying as many as 8 to 10 religious institutes.

Father Abraham opined that the charisma as well as the mission of the religious institute should be the most important criteria for deciding which institute to enter. If it was

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<sup>13</sup> St Ignatius of Loyola (1491–1556) was the founder of the Society of Jesus. He recorded his personal experiences in the form of a set of meditations, prayers and other mental exercises in the *Spiritual Exercises*, which was first published in 1548. The *Spiritual Exercises* is regarded as within everyone's reach to seek and to find the divine will in the disposal of one's life (Dhotel, 2014).

aligned, the religious personnel would find the subsequent missionary work meaningful and have the courage to bear the fatigue that might be involved. Table 7 shows that five participants (Father Abraham, Brother David, Brother Emmanuel, Sister Faith and Sister Joy) took this factor into account when making their decisions.

Apart from charisma, the community life of the institute is another important consideration. Community life means that members stay together, dine together and pray together. Since brothers and sisters live and interact closely with one another, harmony within the community would provide mutual support to its members. Three participants (Brother David, Sister Faith and Sister Icon) experienced home feelings and found comfort with community members in the selection process.

In addition, the nature and approach of community prayer and liturgical life is an indispensable yardstick in the discernment process, as they provide spiritual nutrients to nurture one's religious life. Two participants (Sister Faith and Miss Noel) found that the prayer life and liturgical activities of their religious institutes matched their preferences.

Among the participants, four (Father Abraham, Father Christopher, Mr King and Mr Luke) selected Religious Institute A in their pursuit of a religious life, and two each had entered Religious Institute C (Brother David and Brother Emmanuel) and Religious Institute F (Sister Humble and Sister Icon), respectively. Brother David and Brother Emmanuel were alike, having companionship of spiritual directors in the discernment process and considering the charisma of the institute when deciding which one to enter. Nevertheless, the reason for consecrating their lives as a religious brother, instead of a priest, was different. For the four participants who selected Religious Institute A, none of them had the same reason for doing so, though both Mr King and Mr Luke shared that the pursuit of a religious life was a workable option for them. Regarding Sister Humble and Sister Icon, their discernment pathways and reasons for their choices were totally different. This explains the

saying that a religious vocation is always a mystery and cannot be proven objectively.

The stories of the participants illustrated that each one is leading a unique journey in response to God's calling to a religious vocation under the three components of life events, the discernment process and selection of a religious institute. The next chapter discusses the barriers that the participants encountered in pursuing the religious life, their strategies to overcome the hurdles and the supports that they received, providing them with the strength and courage to continue on their journey.



## **CHAPTER 5: BARRIERS, COPING STRATEGIES AND SUPPORTS IN THE RELIGIOUS VOCATION JOURNEY**

Upon making responses and undergoing discernment, one enters the religious vocation journey (the journey), which is filled with ups and downs, laughter and tears, gains and pains. This chapter is divided into three sections. The first part identifies the barriers that the participants faced in pursuing religious life and the strategies they used to cope with the difficulties encountered. The second part illustrates the supports they received, providing them with the strength and courage to move on. In the last part, I share their perceptions of the verses of Sacred Scriptures and saints that accompanied their religious life as well as the images that they found best described their journeys.

### **Barriers and Coping Strategies**

As pointed out in the literature review chapter, barriers can be defined as “events or conditions, either within the person or in his or her environment, that make career progress difficult” (Swanson & Woitke, 1997, p. 434). In other words, barriers are regarded as deterrents that can be intrapersonal or come from the environment. In this research, intrapersonal is the participants themselves and the environment includes family, friends, the faith community and the religious institutes they entered.

The coping strategies refer to the variety of ways people use to cope with the barriers they have encountered in implementing their choices (Lent et al., 2002). Using personal methods and/or seeking social support are often regarded as coping options.

In the stories of the participants, barriers can be classified into three scenarios:

- (a) deciding to pursue religious life;
- (b) living community life; and
- (c) practising evangelical counsels (poverty, chastity and obedience).

I noticed that the barriers and coping strategies are usually interlinked. In each

scenario that follows, I will begin with the participants' challenges and the ways they used, if any, to overcome the difficulties.

### **Barriers in Deciding to Pursue Religious Life and Related Coping Strategies**

In making the decision to pursue religious life (the decision), the participants had encountered barriers arising from their individual self or negative responses from family, friends and/or the faith community. For individual self, barriers include the participants' readiness or willingness to enter religious life. Family refers to the participants' parents and/or siblings. Friends are acquaintances of the participants at school or work. The faith community are the people that the participants know of through their involvement in parish activities or services.

In short, the most salient barrier encountered by the participants in deciding to pursue religious life is family, in particular, those non-Catholic families. Of all the participants, Miss Mary encountered the most barriers from family, friends and the faith community.

#### *Individual Self*

The theme of individual self relates to the participants' concerns on personal issues, which made them feel unready or unwilling to choose religious life. Sister Grace shared that a health issue had worried her, delaying her response to the religious vocation. Sister Joy indicated that her strong desire for married life had been a barrier to her decision to enter religious life. Nevertheless, the hurdles were overcome by their inspirations from prayer and openness to God's invitation, respectively.

Sister Grace hesitated to pursue religious life due to her skin disease/health problem in the beginning. She said that the skin disease could not be cured permanently but would attack her every one to two years. When the situation got serious, her skin would be itchy and turned red. The itchiness made her feel very uncomfortable and the red skin would scare others. She had to take medicine to stabilise it. Sister Grace, therefore, found the skin disease

very annoying and affected her both physically and psychologically.

She, however, overcame the obstacle through the response received in a prayer. She gave an account of the incident:

Being worried about my skin disease, I had made a prayer on a pilgrimage to Our Lady of Lourdes in France. I got the message from Mother Mary that my health in soul was far more important than my physical goodness. I then began to treat the skin disease as my “good friend”, whom I had to accompany throughout my life. In realising my human weakness, I learnt to rely on God in my life. Nonetheless, I was once too troubled by my health concern that the plan of entering the religious institute was delayed a few months.

Sister Joy always had a strong desire for a married life to nurture children of her own in the context of a Christian family. The desire was so strong that she declined to go for a religious life, despite experiencing a personal encounter with God and His invitation to pursue a religious vocation through other messengers. She admitted that this hindered her response to God’s calling. Sister Joy gradually discovered God’s unconditional love for her and that He granted her whatever she requested without asking for anything in return. As a breakthrough to this hindrance, Sister Joy later questioned herself why she kept focusing on her own desire but refusing God’s calling. She began opening herself to the invitation of leading a religious life and, subsequently, she was willing to let go and surrender.

### *Family*

The theme of family relates to negative responses from the participants’ parents and/or siblings about their decision. Eight participants (Father Benedict, Father Christopher, Mr Luke, Miss Mary, Sister Icon, Brother David, Brother Emmanuel and Father Abraham) expressed that their family members had objected or showed no support to their decisions with different levels of intensity. Among them, only Father Abraham’s family are Christians.

For the seven non-Catholic families, they were greatly influenced by traditional Chinese family values, in which sons and daughters are to marry and bear children; they were also required to render financial support to their families. As they were not Christians, they neither had knowledge of the Christian faith nor understood the meaning of the religious vocation. Compared to those seven families, the intensity of the negative response that Father Abraham received from his family was mild. The majority of the participants' difficulties were eventually addressed by means of prayers to God, putting trust in Him, personal efforts or others' assistance.

On hearing their intentions to pursue a religious life, the parents of four participants (Father Benedict, Father Christopher, Mr Luke and Miss Mary) were angry with them and could not accept their decisions. The mothers of Mr Luke and Miss Mary had even threatened to commit suicide. Father Benedict's mother tried to introduce girls to him so he would marry and drop the idea of entering a religious life. His father threatened to terminate his father-son relationship with him. To address the dilemma, Father Benedict prayed to God, asking for help so that his parents would understand him and change their minds. There was a turning point later when Father Benedict returned from abroad after finishing an assignment, for his father had softened his stance and undertook the care of the family.

Father Christopher's mother strongly objected to his decision at the beginning, as she could not accept his leaving the family to pursue a religious life. His father was not a Christian and could not understand his choice of priesthood life. Aware that his parents were not ready at that stage, Father Christopher spent a year preparing the family, both psychologically and financially, to accept his decision. Realising his son's determination was so firm, his father advised his mother to respect his choice.

Mr Luke said that his family had no idea about the Christian faith and, hence, did not understand a religious vocation. Apart from his parents' objection, his siblings neither



encouraged nor objected to his choice of a religious life. He strongly sensed that they did not want him to enter the vocation. Yet, they respected his decision. He regarded his parents' objection as a significant barrier in his journey. He nevertheless believed that God would help resolve their objection, particularly his mother's, if He willed him to go for a religious life. He, thus, remained calm and kept waiting. After a lapse of several months, his mother told him one day that if he really wished to enter the institute, he should proceed.

In Miss Mary's case, her mother suffered an emotional collapse when noting her decision, which was about one month before she was due to enter the vocation. Her father indicated that she had been fully committed to parish activities and questioned why she needed to be a religious sister. Her elder brother and younger sister had once taken care of the family's financial matters, but later, they showed no support, and influenced by their mother's strong objection, disapproved of her decision. Miss Mary admitted that she was unable to handle her family's reactions and cope with this barrier. She admitted that her coping strategy was merely to ignore the barrier, as she chose to enter the institute right away.

Sister Icon said that her mother cried her eyes out and was very angry with her decision. Her father also disliked her decision but remained silent. Sister Icon had three siblings (one elder brother and two elder sisters). One elder sister was a Protestant and questioned her decision, while the other two siblings respected her choice. Sister Icon recalled that she had approached her godmother for assistance and the matter was later satisfactorily resolved. She stated:

You know, I had just been baptised for some time and did not know how to explain my situation to my mother. Fortunately, my godmother was a veteran faithful, who knew my mother for more than 20 years and had a good working relationship with her. She helped explain to my mother the Christian faith and the meaning of a religious vocation. Having a better knowledge of the Christian faith and a religious vocation . . .

thanks to God, my mother began to show support and even persuaded my elder sister to accept my choice.

Brother David said that he came from a worker's family, the members of which were responsible for contributing to the family's income. He had two elder sisters and one younger brother. He was one of the breadwinners of the family, and his decision was not welcomed by his younger brother; he thought he was abandoning the family and being financially irresponsible. Brother David felt this concern hindered his momentum to pursue a religious life to a certain extent. He, therefore, gave his savings to his family to relieve their financial burden. In addition, he prayed to God to take care of his family and grant them peace.

Brother Emmanuel had three siblings who had moved out, and he was the only one living with his parents. In deciding to pursue a religious life, Brother Emmanuel gave his savings to his parents so that they could be supported financially. Nevertheless, his parents indicated no support at the very beginning, as they would miss his physical presence at home after entering the vocation. The situation later improved. He stated:

Thanks to my younger brother's family, who gave birth to a baby girl. My parents' focus was then oriented towards their granddaughter. This made them accept my decision more easily. I regarded this coincidence was God's arrangement and omnipotence, as it did appear after my making the decision.

Father Abraham always had a very good relationship with his younger sister; they played, talked and shared a lot with each other. He was surprised that among all the family members, she did not support his decision, as she was the closest to him. He did try to talk to her to know about her concerns, but she never told him. He respected her and did not push her for an answer. He suspected that she was upset because it meant he would be leaving the family. Father Abraham noticed a change in her after she worked in his former school and got acquainted with the colleagues who had been his teachers and classmates. She became more

receptive and supportive of his decision, as she got to know more priests and his work.

*Friends and/or the Faith Community*

The theme of friends and/or the faith community relates to feedback from the participants' acquaintances in the circles at school, workplaces or the parish. Father Abraham and Miss Mary found that their friends and the faithful of the parish had reservations about their decisions. Sister Humble and Father Christopher both enjoyed their teaching jobs and had hesitated to leave the profession to enter religious institutes. Owing to their strong self-desire or attractiveness of the religious life, they upheld their choices.

When Father Abraham informed his friends of his decision, some of them advised him to think twice as it meant a great sacrifice. Some altar boys, senior to him in the group, indicated that the priests were smart and this might not be easy for him. They reminded him to seriously think about the decision. At the time, he had a girlfriend, who became very upset upon hearing his decision. Father Abraham indicated that his desire for God by then was so great that none of the advice or concerns had shaken his decision.

Miss Mary shared her desire to lead a religious life to friends, a priest-in-charge and faithful in the parish. As far as she recollected, they all gave unfavourable feedback:

My friends opined that my quick temper might not be suitable for religious life. The priest advised me that community life was very complicated, and it was not easy to be a religious sister. The faithful and members of the Legion of Mary did not support my decision either.

As she was so keen on doing more for God and the Church, Miss Mary chose to uphold her decision, despite all the disapproving responses.

Sister Humble was happy with her teaching and interacting with her students and fellow teachers. In addition, her fellow teachers had advised her not to pursue a religious life, as the image of the religious sisters at their convent school was not very positive. She

admitted that these considerations had, to some extent, hindered her from responding right away. Eventually, it was God's love that drew her to pursue a religious vocation.

Father Christopher enjoyed teaching and found it suited him. He recollected that his passion for teaching and the harmonious relationships he had with his students and fellow teachers put him in a difficult position to make the decision. He believed that the scope and number of people who would benefit from the service offered by a priest would be more than that of a teacher. He said that his coping strategy was through reflection, weighing up the pros and cons. He finally decided to lead a religious life.

### **Barriers in Living Community Life and Related Coping Strategies**

After entering the religious institutes, nearly all the participants (13 out of 14), except Mr King, found challenges originating from community life. In examining the dynamics of community life, the barriers can be viewed from three dimensions. First, the challenges faced by the participants included matching with the setting, values and heavy commitments of the institute, and handling the relationships with the novice master and their counterpart in the formation period. Second, the participants encountered barriers in their interactions with members of the community in the institute as well as with laity in the parishes. Third, conflicts arose between the participants' personalities and the community's requirements. Most of them encountered difficulties in one dimension of community life, but two participants (Father Abraham and Brother David) were involved in two. The participants' experiences of the barriers in these three dimensions of community life and their related coping strategies are highlighted, one by one, in the following paragraphs.

#### *Challenges in the Formation*

Four participants (Miss Mary, Sister Humble, Sister Joy and Brother David) had expressed difficulties in adapting to the community life of the institute early in the formation period. The nature of their barriers varied. They included: finding the traditional setting of the

institute unbearable; arrangements and institute's focus contrary to expectations; feeling exhausted by the heavy commitments; and hardships in dealing with novice master and counterpart in the formation. Though the barriers were diverse, the participants relied on prayers, liturgical life and various self-improvement measures to address the issues.

Throughout the formation period, Miss Mary found the most challenging barrier was the traditional setting of the institute. She stated:

My institute engaged no domestic helpers at all and all novices are responsible for doing their own cooking, cleaning and washing clothes. To me, the volume of housework was more than what I had done from my childhood till the moment I entered the institute. Besides the substantial housework, the studies and liturgical life made my life even more hectic. I have to say that the food we ate was poor and the television programmes we watched together were uninteresting. I did experience tremendous pressure and frustration in community life and, eventually, became ill, which subsequently required surgery.

Miss Mary admitted that she was not an early bird and found it difficult waking up early in the morning for prayers, which was one of the liturgical routines of religious life. Nevertheless, she considered that prayers as well as God's Words and the Eucharist received in the daily mass were important to nurture her spiritual life. She, thus, talked to God about her frustration in community life. God gave her comfort and advised her to bear with it and to keep going. All of this helped her cope with the barriers encountered in the formation.

Sister Humble expected that every religious should be eager to pray, be full of charity and faith, and should support each other. She, however, did not see evidence of this in her institute and she commented:

I was disappointed to find that the formation was very loose without discipline, and the novice mistress did not have a deep relationship with God. Also, I saw that the

institute was lacking direction and focused on secular rather than sacred values. I did note that my pace was not the same as the others in the community . . . All of this made my community life not happy.

To cope with the undesirable community life appearing during formation, Sister Humble set her eyes on the Sacred Heart of Jesus, which enabled her to develop a very intimate relationship with God and walk further on her journey. Enlightened by a spiritual director on a retreat, she had to imitate Jesus by going through passion, death and resurrection before bearing fruits. She experienced that it was Jesus with her and not herself alone. Having understood that she could not control others, Sister Humble began moving inward with a view to improving herself. Therefore, she actively studied the Bible, prayed and read books on saints. Since then, she found that her pace synchronised with that of the community and could pray easily for the institute. She realised if one could anchor oneself in silence in the midst of a thunderstorm, there was little harm the external world could do.

In addition to her studies, Sister Joy engaged in the work of the institute and teaching at convent schools as well as pastoral work in a parish during her formation period. She was so occupied that she felt tired/exhausted at the end of each day. However, no one appreciated her hard work or cared about her being overloaded. She was disappointed that she was not being understood, appreciated or accepted in her community. She admitted:

The thought of discontinuing the religious vocation journey due to those frustrations did cross my mind. Yet, in my prayers, God questioned me saying, “You had promised to follow me. How come you withdrew so easily when facing the difficulties?”

With God’s enlightenment and encouragement, Sister Joy learnt to handle her barriers by expressing the overwhelming feeling of the heavy workload to her superior and trying not to compare herself to others in the institute. Her appreciation of her ‘can-do’ attitude and problem solving, instead of merely focusing on personal limitations, gave her energy to

continue on her journey.

During the formation period, Brother David and another novice were under the lead of a demanding novice master. His counterpart and he were going to pursue a priesthood and a religious brotherhood in the institute, respectively. Brother David admitted that he was a passive person and was not good at expression. He, thus, recalled that he had encountered a number of difficulties and said: “compared to my counterpart, I felt inferior in both academic qualification and status in the Church. I found the novice master harsh and judgmental . . . and I had difficulty meeting his standards.”

Brother David indicated that he relied heavily on prayers to overcome the difficulties. He admitted that he would have been unable to persist without God and prayers to keep him moving on his journey. To address his feelings of inferiority, he tried not to see himself as so important nor compare himself to his counterpart. Instead, he realised that they were complementary to one another in the community. This change of attitude helped him grow and make adjustments whenever negative emotions emerged. Regarding meeting the novice master’s requirements, Brother David worked hard to offer his best, and he learnt to accept his limitations and incapability.

#### *Interactions with Community Members and Laity*

Regarding difficulties in community life, six participants (Sister Grace, Brother Emmanuel, Mr Luke, Father Abraham, Sister Icon, and Brother David) found interactions with others challenging. The ‘others’ here refer to two main groups of people: community members in the institute and laity in the parishes. Among the six participants, Sister Grace, Brother Emmanuel and Mr Luke encountered difficulties interacting with the community members within their institutes. The remaining three (Father Abraham, Sister Icon and Brother David) experienced hardships in handling relationships with both members of their own community and the laity on pastoral work. Regarding their coping strategies, the

participants regarded their faith in God, the spirituality formation, practices in the institute as well as self-growth through reflections effective means to overcome the hurdles.

In Sister Grace's experiences, it was not unusual for some members of the community to do something unreasonable to irritate others and make others angry. She said that one could choose to be angry with the others in response. However, it was impossible to avoid talking to the others forever thereafter in the community. She remarked that community life was, therefore, always a mystery.

Sister Grace gave an interesting account of a practice in her institute to address the issue:

The religious sisters in my institute met weekly to apologise openly to others for their wrongdoings, which might make the latter angry or arouse ill feelings in others. In offering apologies, I learnt to let go of my pride and be humble. I really felt internal peace and regained balance of my emotions faster. To me, it was a good opportunity for my personal breakthrough and sanctification as well as enhancing community harmony.

Sister Grace remarked that mankind could not control or handle all issues. Thus, we should entrust to God who was the Creator of all things while man was only His instrument to execute. As a result, one had to abandon oneself and carry one's cross to follow Christ. She added that there might be a purpose and blessing behind each incident, even undesirable ones. She, thus, shared that if one saw earthly things with supernatural vision, one could maintain internal peace when facing any difficulties in life.

Brother Emmanuel recollected that some of his fellow brothers had once 'cheated' the institute by exaggerating the workload of their volunteer service rendered for an elderly centre run by religious sisters. He regarded this exaggeration as dishonesty. Regarding community life, he understood that no institute was heaven and problems definitely existed in



all communities. He, however, regarded it as a good platform to train his virtues. To address this barrier, Brother Emmanuel chose to use peaceful ways to interact with others and not to argue with them.

Mr Luke understood that interactions with members in the community could not be avoided. He, however, had an ill feeling caused by a novice who kept picking on him unreasonably during the formation. Mr Luke later realised that if a person kept asking others to meet their needs, they would be unhappy as the key to their happiness was placed in the hands of others. He pointed out that the personality and spiritual formation in the institute had enhanced his self-knowledge. In understanding himself more, he began to accept his weaknesses and noted that everyone had their own weaknesses. As a result, he learnt not to make excessive demands on others, and this helped him cope with his interactions with members in community life.

During the formation, Father Abraham once experienced a hard time when he held different viewpoints from other seminarians, who then kept him at a distance. He felt even lonelier after his friend was ordained and left the seminary a year before him. He had no one with whom he could share his unhappiness. In response to his unhappy community life during formation, Father Abraham said that it was God who led him to the religious life, and he would stay in the institute for the priesthood as long as there was no sign from God for him to leave or move in other directions.

Furthermore, Father Abraham faced resistance from the laity, who considered him demanding when serving in a parish. Regarding the laity's feedback, Father Abraham tried to patiently explain the rationale behind his pastoral work for their understanding. He, however, regarded himself as the spiritual father of the faithful, and he was responsible for helping them grow in faith.

Sister Icon said that she was a person of principles and could be stubborn sometimes.

She thought that some religious sisters in her institute failed to walk their talk. She was once greatly hurt by a senior religious sister in her institute, who had taught her to be tolerant, kind to others and patient with others, but was later found to have been impolite to an elderly religious sister in the convent. Owing to her principled character, she had encountered an unhappy experience with the faithful when carrying out her missionary work in a parish.

Sister Icon was aware that her strong character had caused disharmony when interacting with others. Nevertheless, she experienced God's acceptance of her weaknesses and was given chances to improve. Thus, Sister Icon began to be more accepting of others' differences. She also came to understand that the time for awakening one's heart was different for everyone, for each has a unique way to love God. Since everyone was unique, she had to exercise flexibility in setting boundaries when interacting and working with others for the sake of harmony. She expressed that the process was painful, but it was giving her a good balance and she was maintaining good relationship with others. Sister Icon added that in the course of establishing relationships, one had to remove one's own barriers or walls and then build bridges for connection, so as to collaborate with God's plan for oneself. It involved destruction and construction and was similar to the process of deforming, reforming and transforming.

Brother David noticed that some members of his community only talked their walk, rather than walked their talk. In addition, he said that due to his passive character, he experienced great difficulty interacting with the laity when carrying out pastoral work. To handle the interactions with community members and the laity in the parish, he understood that whenever his finger was pointing at others, the other three were pointing at himself. He, therefore, refrained from speaking about others' wrongdoings or shortcomings and, instead, did his best when dealing with them.

*Conflicts between Personalities and Community Requirements*

Five participants (Father Abraham, Father Benedict, Father Christopher, Sister Faith and Miss Noel) observed that barriers arose from conflicts between their personalities and the requirements of their respective communities. On the surface, the issues might be about an unsatisfactory attitude, unfair workload, demanding assignments and unfavourable interactions with community members. The participants, however, cited as the crux of the problem conflicts between their personalities and the requirements of the vocation, the requests from the community, and the community values. To resolve the conflicts, the participants unanimously indicated that acceptance of personal limitations, learning to be humble and willingness to transform were valid coping strategies. Nonetheless, they acknowledged that these strategies were inspired through prayers and the barriers helped them grow.

Father Abraham admitted that he was always an easy-going person. He encountered one priest in the seminary during the formation period who told him that he thought this personality trait might not be appropriate for a priest, and it could create an obstacle to his leading a religious life in the community. This was because some issues in relation to faith had to be treated as absolute and without compromise. He also admitted that he could sometimes be 'lazy' and not utilise every single minute of the day wisely.

To address his 'laziness' and to ensure he used every minute of the day wisely, Father Abraham would first make a timetable for the day, listing the times to wake up, sleep, pray and do other work. He then added the sacred intentions to each task of the daily agenda, which might be for a sinner, a patient, the Pope or the faithful. As advised by his spiritual director, if he could live according to the timetable faithfully, it was already a prayer. Being a priest, Father Abraham had a strong desire to offer every day of his life completely and not allow any 'lazy' areas, which implied that he had not sacrificed himself totally.

Father Benedict thought he had a gentle personality and readily took assignments

without thinking about it twice. He later observed that he was handling most of the tasks in the institute and questioned the fairness of the work shared among all members. However, he came to the realisation that although some members in the community were gifted, educated and capable, they had difficulties interacting with others due to their personalities. Therefore, in assigning tasks, it was not simply about fairness; it also depended on one's capabilities and suitability. He finally realised that he had wrongly prioritised human factors over God. In addition, he recognised that pride would appear if he was tempted to concern himself with his self-ability in handling the assignments.

Father Benedict was grateful for such an experience and learnt to be patient and humble when handling assignments and interacting with others. He then evaluated each mission in the best interest of God. He fully believed God would provide all he needed. In cases when there was no response from God to his prayers, he had to be patient and understand that God was the master and he was the servant. He also understood that interactions with others trained one's virtue. He had, therefore, learnt to be humble when dealing with others in the community.

Father Christopher had been a caring teacher in school and found that the institute formation lacked passion. He was frustrated when the superior turned down his request to enrol in a spirituality course outside the seminary. In addition, he found interactions with the members of the community very challenging. An acquaintance of Father Christopher's had left the institute after the formation commenced for about six months. Thus, he had no one he could share his thoughts with for quite a long time. The thought of quitting religious life did flash across his mind one time. He felt that the heavy pastoral work assigned to him was unfair. Father Christopher later realised that his pride was the root cause of his frustration.

To overcome these difficulties, Father Christopher resorted to praying to God. He shared:

My first and fundamental way was to pray. To me, I usually encountered God in Eucharistic Adoration and night prayers. It was through the prayers that I heard God's voice telling me to stay in the priesthood. I also got enlightenment in the meditations, in which I began to be aware of my pride and learnt to place trust in my superior. Admittedly, if I did not pray, I could not bear the difficulties. To me, it was only through prayers, I showed reliance on God, opened myself to let go and surrendered to His transformation. With this perspective in mind, the busy pastoral work let me realise my limitations, and I learnt to accept them as this was a kind of spirituality.

Sister Faith admitted that she was a subjective person. It was difficult for her to listen to others. She regarded herself capable and thought that her decisions were always right. As a result, she felt uneasy if she was unable to entertain others' requests or meet their expectations in the community. However, she considered her language learning ability not good, while her religious institute was an international one entailing different cultures. Sister Faith recalled that she had once experienced burnout and described the incident:

The institute found me suitable to study a programme in Rome. However, I had little interest in studying and regarded myself poor in language. I, therefore, had strong reservations about this study offer. I later submitted to the needs of the institute and left my comfort zone to accept the study arrangement and live up to her sacrifice charisma. The institute then arranged for me to stay in the community with religious sisters from different cultures while studying abroad. I did experience great difficulty in adapting to the community life there on top of my intensive study. Worse still, I was unaware that some community requests exceeded my limitations. I finally got burnout during my stay in Rome.

During times of difficulties, Sister Faith told God about her anxiety and unhappiness in community life. God comforted her and told her to trust Him, so that He could lead her

through. She learnt to discern doing the right things at the right moments, and to say ‘no’ to others’ overwhelming requests when noting that they were beyond her capabilities. The barriers had, thus, taught her to keep a balance when interacting with others. She also thanked God for the grace to experience the religious institute’s intercultural characteristics. After reflection, she commented that she thought valid to a large extent what many religious maintain about barriers in community life, which was that they stem from one’s inner self and not from outside.

Miss Noel thought the formation in the institute helped her understand that she was not a patient person, and she discovered that she had a great fear of finding herself far from perfect. She learnt that the self was the biggest enemy to a person, and it was a lifelong lesson for one to accept oneself. Furthermore, her personal values conflicted with those of the community. Miss Noel knew that everyone had their weaknesses and, sometimes, it was her fault. Nevertheless, she felt upset when her voice was not listened to in the community. As a result, Miss Noel failed to focus on personal prayers, work and handling her emotions when interacting with community members.

Miss Noel was afraid of seeing her imperfections and indicated that it was a kind of existential pain. She shared that her ‘talking’ to God in silence helped her cope with difficulties. She said:

I appreciated the silence in the convent, in which God spoke to me. Without such, I felt myself imbalanced. I asked God to grant me grace to overcome my weaknesses. I learnt to appreciate myself and accept my limitations. With grace, I witnessed God’s presence in my difficulties.

### **Barriers in Practising Evangelical Counsels and Related Coping Strategies**

Traditional sacrifices are required of priests and the religious, chief among these are vows of celibacy, obedience, and in the case of those entering orders, poverty (Stark & Finke,

2000). It is, therefore, understood that all religious have to make public professions of the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity and obedience for their consecrated life. Regarding the difference between diocesan priests and the religious in this regard, I have captured the explanation provided by Bishop Joseph Ha in Chapter 1.

As the four laity left religious life without being ordained or making final proclamations of evangelical counsels (in the form of three vows, namely, poverty, chastity and obedience), only the views of the 10 religious personnel are presented here. On this part, I will begin with the collective views of the religious personnel participants on their working experiences with the three vows. Then, I will list the respective challenges, if any, they faced with each vow and their insights or wisdom in addressing them.

### *Poverty*

The participants clarified that poverty was not confined to the outside material world but also one's inner spirit and relationship with God. In the first place, religious personnel should lead a simple way of life and let go of unnecessary material needs, as there is a general belief that if one loves God, one would not care about material things. Such a belief leads to spiritual poverty. From Christianity's perspective, it is regarded as 'Poor in Spirit', which means one places total reliance on God alone, especially when making choices. The only Son of God, Jesus, who surrendered His life totally without saving a breath, a drop of sweat, water or blood upon being crucified on the cross, set a good model for His followers. This infers that one shares not only his time, knowledge and talent but also his insufficiency generously with others in his everyday life.

All 10 participants expressed that poverty was not difficult for them, compared to chastity and obedience. Both Father Abraham and Father Christopher found that they adapted to the way of life in Religious A easily, as the former said that he was not from a wealthy family and the latter indicated that he had always lived a simple life before entering the

seminary. Father Abraham added that he had sometimes practised poverty in material life by refraining from eating his favourite food, as a kind of self-denial and redemption of one's sin.

Sister Grace considered that the Hong Kong-born religious would not face great difficulty with this vow, as they more or less had experienced different levels of material life before entering religious life. However, religious coming from less-developed countries might be attracted to a material life. She shared a very interesting experience in resisting temptation against poverty:

I once had a preference for a particular brand of ballpoint pen. I felt a bit uneasy when not using it. As a result, I still kept this habit after entering the institute. Though the ballpoint pen might not cost a lot, it still implied a kind of attachment to material things. Having realised this, I gave up this habit and felt a kind of freedom afterwards.

Father Benedict echoed that if a person still had a preference for or an attachment to something, he had not yet placed total reliance on God. He noted that some elderly priests in his institute had neither possessed cell phones nor owned books. They would ask people to reach them on the convent phone, and they borrowed books from the library. When considering what discipline to study, Father Benedict recalled that he chose the one that would best accomplish the mission entrusted to him, rather than the academic qualification that he would be awarded from it. This is what it means to make God the top priority.

Both Brother David and Sister Humble pointed out that being a religious, one had to let go of one's family, friends, money and job. To both, it was worth it, as in God alone, there is nothing one shall lack. Similarly, Sister Icon was impressed by the poor widow whose insignificant offering in the eyes of man is invaluable in God's (Mark 12:41-44). The widow offered God all she had, knowing that God would take care of everything. In her experience, God was not only looking after her but also preparing her from possessing nothing to lacking nothing.



To imitate Jesus's generosity, Sister Joy kept in mind to share with others, even her limited time and resources. I remembered that in my invitation to Sister Joy for interviews related to this research, she initially showed hesitation, as she was busily engaged in a variety of missionary work. I, therefore, dared not bother her again. She later took the initiative to approach me to schedule the interviews as she regarded it very important research. I was deeply touched by her active assistance and generosity in the midst of her heavy commitments.

### *Chastity*

Chastity, to all religious participants, did not simply refer to having no relations with other men or women but also to love God above all things. Some of them commented that it was a challenging vow. Apart from the physical aspect, absolute love to God required one's heart, mind, spirit and will. Although this might seem beyond one's imagination, the participants stated that nothing was impossible to God. With God's grace to His chosen ones, leading a celibate life was like carrying a light burden or pulling a gentle yoke. Nevertheless, man's utmost effort to collaborate with God's grace was indispensable.

The majority of the participants considered the challenges from this vow could be overcome, while Father Abraham and Sister Humble admitted encountering great difficulties. I will highlight the viewpoints of the majority (from the angles of men and women) first, and then illustrate the experiences of the two religious personnel, in particular.

Father Christopher said that chastity could be handled, and if a person really had difficulty in this regard, they should not choose religious life. According to him, one should rely on God and overcome the temptations by means of prayers. Father Benedict relied on the faithful, friends and students as parts of his life and family to address his loneliness during priesthood. On his interactions with female faithful, he kept his distance and was careful to avoid any misunderstanding. Brother David felt that religious personnel belonged to God and

could not have a preference for others. He used a metaphor, saying that one should treat others as a glass of water. If a person did not own the glass of water, they could only appreciate it without an intention to drink it, even if they were thirsty.

On the side of the religious sisters, Sister Faith indicated no difficulty, as the sexual attraction was not very strong for her. Sister Grace said that the challenge would be greater after leaving the formation and engaging in missionary work, where one might come into contact with the faithful or people of the opposite sex. She, nevertheless, pointed out that God would provide grace to the chosen one, who should also make the effort to manage one's lust. In the eyes of Sister Icon, no one was as smart and perfect as the Lord Jesus Christ. She thought it would be very foolish for a religious sister to feel pleased by the sweet words of a priest or religious brother. This was because if a man failed to honour his chastity towards God, how could he commit himself to her? Sister Joy said that there was a need to put God first and at the centre of one's life. She added that if/when a religious felt tempted, it was a sign that they did not yet love God wholeheartedly; thus, they needed to put more effort into loving Him. She then made a joke that if a person looked at another twice because of attraction; they had to look upon God thrice.

In his teens, Father Abraham found that the physical attraction to the opposite sex came first. This gave way to the desire to form a family, which existed in the early stage of formation, and the temptation remained even after ordination. The desire to form a family might stem from the fact that his parents had led a successful married life, providing him with a lovely home life. Father Abraham shared his ways of resisting the temptations:

I had made use of the confession sacrament to control my desire in this regard.

Through the sacrament and prayers, God strengthened my faithfulness towards Him by taking away my love of or preference for others. Mother Mary had also helped fend off external distractions and safeguard my religious vocation. In the process,

I did make an effort to love God more. Thanks to God for grace and Mother Mary for guidance, I had learnt to transform the temptation into a kind of attraction, which would neither shake my present priesthood nor change my choice of religious life.

Sister Humble rejected dates initiated by some male laity while working in the parish. However, she noticed that she felt good when hearing ‘sweet’ words from some young priests. She felt ashamed that her love of God was not deep enough to resist these temptations. God did not give her up but alerted her with a sign in this regard. She recalled that she had learnt that a religious sister was suffering from venereal disease because she failed to remain chaste. Sister Humble then learnt move inwardly to transform her personal passion for others to the great love embraced by God. She frankly told those priests that their pleasing remarks to her were inappropriate as they should be spoken to God. Her reminder was good for both parties, and she received appreciation from the priests concerned. She was happy to find that their relationships with God became more solid.

### *Obedience*

Religious personnel regard obedience as listening to the superior of the institute or the bishop of the diocese (in the case of diocesan priests), whose words are believed to be in line with God’s will. Traditionally, the religious and diocesan priests have to take any assignments from the superiors and bishops with absolute obedience. The assignments are treated as orders or commands in the eyes of religious personnel. Thus, obedience requires a person to let go of their own will.

The root meaning of obedience is listening. Nowadays, obedience will not be adopted blindly, as some institutes practise mutual listening to discern if the assignments are God’s will. Mutual listening provides a platform for the religious institute, the superior and the religious personnel concerned to ‘listen’ to God’s voice before the tasks are assigned.

Nevertheless, most people nowadays are individualists, and obedience may be a challenge for

them, especially youngsters.

Seven out of the 10 religious personnel found it hard to practise obedience, and some even regarded it as the most difficult vow among the three. The remaining three (Father Abraham, Father Christopher and Brother Emmanuel), however, showed no great difficulties. I will elaborate the experiences of the three and then the majority in coping with obedience.

Being a parish priest, Father Abraham had to obey the bishop's arrangements of pastoral duties and coordinate with other priests living together in the same parish. He said that the requirements were not so demanding, and he could handle them properly. Father Christopher considered himself an obedient person and quoted his study plan as an example for illustration. His superior had discussed with him the discipline needed to study abroad, and there was discrepancy between his views and those of his superior. He eventually submitted himself to his superior's preference for the needs of the faithful community over his personal interests. In facing the assignments that were not aligned with his personal desire, Brother Emmanuel would first express his views to the institute hierarchy and leave the rest to God's lead. He, therefore, did not experience much difficulty in living up to obedience.

Among the majority, Father Benedict said that his superior consulted and discussed the proposed assignment with him, inviting him to discern as well. Thus, mutual interaction between the superior and himself was involved. In the discernment process, he placed total trust in his superior, believing that the latter's perspective would be wider, and he was sent by God to lead the religious institute. In contrast, Father Benedict stated:

I was worried about my capability to accomplish the assignment entrusted to me. My superior, nevertheless, advised that there was no mission that one was fully ready or well prepared for before carrying it out. I was very relieved by this advice and kept in mind that obedience and a sense of mission were the two important charisma of my religious institute.

In Brother David's eyes, obedience not only required a person to obey others but also to have self-control. He again used the glass of water as an example. A person should refrain from drinking the glass of water if it is not theirs, even if they had a desire to drink it. Similarly, a person should let go of those things that they do not own. Self-control not only implies a person's external behaviour but also their internal desire.

In Sister Faith's experiences, obedience required her to open up and make herself transparent in front of the community for the sake of mutual respect and understanding among the members. She recalled one incident for illustration:

I suffered from influenza one day. Incidentally, a woman faithful who was a Chinese Medical Practitioner paid a visit to my convent. She saw me feeling unwell and prescribed Chinese medicine to me. My superior later questioned me about why I had not told her about my taking the Chinese medicine. My immediate response was that I was an adult and taking medicine to cure an illness was a straightforward matter. I was puzzled why I had to account for this trivial thing to her.

I later understood that she as well as members of the community had to know whatever I did and wherever I went, so that they could take good care of me or each another. The practice of obedience let me realise that the essence of consecrated life was to offer oneself wholly.

According to Sister Grace, perfect obedience meant that a person would just do what was assigned to them without asking. However, the elements of pride and individualism would affect a person's obedience. She remarked that only a humble person who was willing to let go of their pride and ego could be trained to be obedient. She had experienced that once she was submissive to her superior's will, God gave her merits and made her bear fruits. She stated:

Early in my formation in Italy many years ago, I noted that a seminary in the

Philippines was renowned for its good speed in construction. After completing the formation and returning to Hong Kong in 2014, I really wished to visit the seminary but no opportunities arose. Two years later, I attended a one-month retreat in the Philippines and again had no chance to visit it.

Last June, I had a six-day retreat in the Philippines and the strong desire to see the seminary remained. After finishing the retreat, I asked my superior there if I had time to visit the seminary. The superior said that a talk was going to be delivered and wanted me to attend the talk, instead of going out to visit the seminary. I, therefore, obeyed and gave up the idea of the visit. Ten minutes later, the superior suddenly searched for me, saying that the supervisor of the House of Temporary Vows was going to visit the seminary with two friends and wondered if I would like to go with them. I immediately joined them, despite the fact that the visit was only 30-minutes in duration.

To me, this was the fruit of obedience. I was very happy as the dream (of many years) had come true. I also realised that God would give you something better than what you had desired when you were obedient.

Sister Humble prayed to God, telling Him her limitations and reservations about accepting assignments that she did not like. However, if she thought that they were God's will, she would take them up eventually. She remarked that God had transformed her and made her become obedient.

Sister Icon expressed her concerns to her superior if she found the proposed assignments beyond her abilities. Nevertheless, she was afraid of failing to do God's will when she turned down such assignments. She, therefore, kept praying hard to discern God's will on her as far as possible. To her understanding, not all superiors practised mutual listening with the religious of their respective institutes.

Sister Joy also found it most difficult to accept assignments if they were not according to her wishes. She learnt that obedience helped her to let God take the lead and listen to His voice. This art of listening was a kind of spirituality to identify God's will for her. Obedience taught her to pray, ponder, learn, grow, transform and get closer to perfect.

As an overview of the three vows, Father Abraham stated:

All of them involve a person denying oneself for the sake of God.

To fulfil the spirit of poverty, the person has to let go of one's material needs.

To fulfil the spirit of chastity, the person has to let go of one's bodily desires.

To fulfil the spirit of obedience, the person has to let go of one's free will.

To surrender oneself totally is never easy.

In contrast, Sister Joy summed up the three vows into one: love God above all. She elaborated:

Poverty is to love God more than other earthly matters.

Chastity is to love God above all mankind.

Obedience is to love God by listening to one's superior, whose words are believed to be from God.

To a religious, therefore, these three vows are the yardsticks to illustrate if the reason for pursuing religious life is out of love for God.

The vows, nevertheless, provided a person with a form of life that served as an instrument to accomplish the mission that God entrusted in the calling. Their predecessors have long complied with these vows, though with difficulties, throughout the history of the Church. The participants believed that there should be reasons and wisdom left behind.

In reviewing the barriers faced by the religious personnel in the form of the three vows, none of them expressed difficulties with poverty. Most of them, however, considered obedience the most challenging one. Regarding chastity, one priest and one religious sister

had experienced difficulties and did remove temptations by means of God's grace and personal effort. When linking the three vows to the capital sins of Christian experience,<sup>14</sup> it is observed that obedience is related to pride, chastity is related to lust and poverty is related to gluttony. Among them, pride was the most difficult for the participants to overcome, while gluttony did not constitute a problem for them. Nevertheless, the concrete measures shared by them to overcome the hurdles were very valuable.

In examining the barriers, 13 out of the 14 participants, except Mr King, encountered different kinds of difficulties in deciding to pursue religious life, living in community life and practising the evangelical counsels (in the forms of the three vows). Mr King, however, did not express difficulties in this regard. This might be due to his comparatively short stay of approximately 6 months in the institute prior leaving. Among the barriers, all the participants unanimously agreed that living in community life was the most challenging one in pursuing a religious vocation.

A summary of the barriers encountered by the participants is shown in Table 8.

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<sup>14</sup> There are seven capital sins, namely pride, avarice, envy, wrath, lust, gluttony and sloth or acedia. They are called 'capital' because they engender other sins, other vices (Catechism of the Catholic Church No. 1866).



**Table 8**

*Barriers Encountered by the Participants in the Religious Vocation Journey*

Participant	In Deciding to Pursue Religious Life				In Living Community Life			In Practising Evangelical Counsels		
	Self	Family	Friends	Faith Community	Formation	Interaction	Personality	Poverty	Chastity	Obedience
Father Abraham		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓	
Father Benedict		✓					✓			✓
Father Christopher		✓	✓				✓			
Brother David		✓			✓	✓				✓
Brother Emmanuel		✓				✓				
Sister Faith							✓			✓
Sister Grace	✓					✓				✓
Sister Humble			✓		✓				✓	✓
Sister Icon		✓				✓				✓
Sister Joy	✓				✓					✓
Mr King								Not Applicable		
Mr Luke		✓				✓		Not Applicable		
Miss Mary		✓	✓	✓	✓			Not Applicable		
Miss Noel							✓	Not Applicable		



The ✓ in a box indicates that the participant experienced that barrier during the religious vocation journey.

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Regarding the strategies to cope with the barriers, the participants had mainly adopted two approaches: looking upward to God and going inward to their individual self. All of them had looked upon God by means of prayers, putting trust in God, receiving sacraments (Eucharist and Confession) and involving themselves in different aspects of liturgical life, such as Eucharistic Adoration, reading the Bible or books on saints to cope with the barriers. The participants had also gone inward to their individual self by means of deepening their personal relationship with God, improving themselves and/or accepting and accommodating others during interactions. For people to deepen their personal relationship with God, they are required to love God more by engaging in close encounters with Him through ‘talking’ to Him, ‘listening’ to Him and making Him the top priority in their life, and they must be ready to completely surrender themselves to fulfil His will.

A summary of the coping strategies adopted by the participants is shown in Table 9.

**Table 9**

*Coping Strategies Adopted by the Participants in the Religious Vocation Journey*

Participant	Looking Upward to God			Going Inward to Individual Self		
	Prayer	Trust in God	Sacraments/Liturgical life	Deepen Relationship with God	Improve Self	Accept Others
Father Abraham	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
Father Benedict	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
Father Christopher	✓		✓		✓	
Brother David	✓			✓	✓	✓
Brother Emmanuel		✓				✓
Sister Faith	✓				✓	✓
Sister Grace	✓	✓			✓	✓
Sister Humble	✓		✓	✓	✓	
Sister Icon	✓				✓	✓
Sister Joy	✓			✓	✓	✓
Mr King						
Mr Luke		✓				✓
Miss Mary	✓		✓	✓		
Miss Noel	✓			✓	✓	



The ✓ in a box indicates that the participant adopted that coping strategy during the religious vocation journey.

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## New Insights into Barriers and Community Life

Despite having experienced hardship from the barriers and community life, the participants gained new insights from them. While the barriers provided opportunities for them to grow, integrate and discern; community life allowed them to experience God's presence through interactions with one another. I consider the new insights very inspiring for our spiritual growth and synthesise them here to share.

Firstly, the barriers were very beneficial for the participants' growth. Father Christopher considered barriers and gains complementary. To him, only when a person has faced the pains arising from barriers would they be able to allow God to widen their eyes to what they have gained. Brother Emmanuel pointed out that barriers helped him grow up by equipping him with wisdom to handle other problems lying ahead. Sister Humble shared that the barriers had helped her overcome personal weaknesses and made her aware of Jesus's companionship and presence in the course. She remarked that if we did not encounter any difficulties, life would be dull and colourless. Sister Icon regarded the barriers as trials from God to give the person an opportunity to understand themselves better, and at the same time, prepare them for the possibility of engaging in other services ahead. God will also grant grace for the person to go through the barriers and trials, as witnessed by St. Paul's saying of 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weaknesses' (2 Corinthians 12:9).

Miss Noel viewed barriers from the angle of integration. She said that a person was not to overcome their weaknesses; instead, they should accept and accommodate them in harmony within themselves. She quoted the saying of Father Laurence Freeman OSB<sup>15</sup> on a meditation talk on the Ego on Our Spiritual Journey II, that in the process of dying to our ego, we discover wholeness and become holy (Freeman, 2008). Holiness was not something that,

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<sup>15</sup> Father Lawrence Freeman is a Catholic priest (born on 17 July 1951) of the Order of Saint Benedict (Benedictine Monk). He is the Director of the World Community for Christian Meditation and its Benedictine Oblate Community.

as it were, we got to by leap-frogging over our difficulties and problems and personalities and egos; holiness was the state or the result of reconciling the opposing forces within ourselves, reconciling the conflicts that we had within our own hearts and minds and psyches, and integrating the extremes. Father Freeman pointed that when we had found the centre, we had found the point of balance, including our life, our appetites and our emotional reactions to things. We then became more integrated people from the centre. Having been inspired by Father Freeman, Miss Noel would not view the barriers as hurdles in real life. This is because the hurdles are still there after all the hurdles are cleared. Yet, at that moment, the hurdles are no longer seen as ‘barriers’ but a leap in life, indicating that the choices we make enhance our capacity to accommodate personal weaknesses through integration.

According to Father Benedict, barriers served as road signs for one to discern the following steps to collaborate with God’s will or plan. He saw a resemblance between the barriers and the wounds of Jesus, and he remarked that one should not focus mainly on the pain of the crucified Jesus but look forward to God’s glory. Brother David regarded barriers as stepping stones paving the way for him to reach his destination.

On community life, Father Benedict said that community was a mission, and we had to learn how to cooperate with each other so as to live up to its spirit. Sister Icon regarded everyone she encountered in life as her teacher, enabling her to see herself more clearly from different perspectives. She indicated that every member in the institute had their own weaknesses, and community life offered a perfect venue for everyone to learn how to interact with one another in harmony. Sister Grace reiterated that community life was a mystery—the most challenging but full of God’s grace.

### **Supports Received by the Participants in the Religious Vocation Journey**

As mentioned in the literature review chapter, supportive influences stem mainly from social groups, including family, teachers and peers. The participants’ contributions show that

the sources of supports, similar to those for barriers, can be from their individual self and the environment, including family, friends, the faith community and the religious institute they entered. The majority of the participants, however, realised that the most fundamental and significant source of support providing them with strength to continue on their journeys was from God above. In this part, I will present the supports the participants received in the order of God, the individual self and the environment.

### *God from Above*

All of the participants indicated they had looked upward to God for assistance in the journey and God's presence was in a number of forms. The majority of them (six in number) sought God's support through prayers, which could be by means of invocation in words, meditation or contemplation through Eucharistic Adoration. Four participants experienced God's support whenever they placed trust in Him. The other three tasted God's support once they were on intimate terms with Him. The remaining one regarded God's support as the ultimate source of assistance he received in the journey.

Father Abraham, Brother David, Sister Joy, Mr Luke, Miss Mary and Miss Noel found God's support channelled through prayers was an effective tool to face their difficulties. Father Abraham encountered God through prayers, meditation and Eucharistic Adoration, in which he had 'conversations' with God, raising his concerns to Him 'face to face'. Brother David mentioned that whenever he was unhappy and experiencing setbacks, he would hear God's voice in prayers and find enlightenment and comfort. Sister Joy felt God's support whenever she spent time to stay with God and pray. Mr Luke also considered prayers very supportive, and God's attractiveness to him never decreased as he advanced in age. Miss Mary and Miss Noel indicated that prayers provided them with support and strength to continue the journey despite all the hardships.

Father Christopher, Brother Emmanuel, Sister Faith and Sister Grace considered that

their total reliance and trust in God gave them the anchor they needed and supplied them with the fuel to sail along. Father Christopher placed complete reliance on God and admitted that he could not move forward without Him. When compared to God, in his experiences, people's assistance was temporary and might not always be reliable. Brother Emmanuel ensured that his calling was to appreciate whatever tasks were assigned to him. He firmly believed that God would equip him with the knowledge or skills to solve the problems he encountered. In times of setbacks, Sister Faith prayed to God, requesting assistance to help her unbelief. In return, God assured her of His trust, which would lead her through. Sister Grace opined that she relied on God's support and grace to remain faithful to His calling.

Sister Humble, Sister Icon and Mr King regarded their intimate relationship with God as the key support in their journeys. Sister Humble mentioned that she had once encountered Jesus, who promised her that He would love, honour and cherish her in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health. This was similar to the Catholic Marriage Vow of a wedded couple. She, therefore, found that Jesus was the source of life and was sufficient with Him. Sister Icon considered Jesus's love and support crucial. She would use her whole religious life to testify and return love to Him. Mr King said that he was motivated by his intimate relationship with God to enter the religious life.

Father Benedict indicated that all sorts of supports he had received on his journey were from God above. During the interviews, I noticed that Father Benedict repeatedly mentioned that God had given him the strength and energy for his priesthood life. I, therefore, asked him if other people had provided him with assistance on his journey. In answer to my enquiry, he stated:

I believed that all the people who had rendered me support were sent by God. Of course, there were many important persons in the institute, such as the superior, who had given me support. In them, I saw God's presence. As a result, I regarded the

supports I received from people on earth as ultimately coming from God.

*Individual Self from Within*

Apart from seeking support from God from above, seven participants pointed out that their personal character as well as individual efforts had to a certain extent given them strength to continue the journey. Among them, four took credit for their positive attitude in supporting themselves to move ahead. The remaining three showed their willingness to let go of their personal desires or pride for the sake of leading the religious life.

Sister Humble, Father Abraham, Miss Mary and Miss Noel appreciated that their personal character, desire and courage had helped maintain their momentum in the pursuit of a religious vocation. Sister Humble considered that her pure and simple character as well as her enthusiasm to practise prayer life since childhood had maintained her desire to follow God. In Father Abraham's case, he had received negative responses from friends within or outside the church on his decision to enter religious life. It was his strong determination that sustained his choice to pursue the priestly vocation. Miss Mary admitted that she was not certain if her desire to pursue a religious life came from God or herself. Nevertheless, she had the courage to commence the journey with the belief that she would regret it if she did not try. Similarly, Miss Noel found it uncomfortable or would be restless if she did not give herself a chance to address her inner desire of entering the institute. She, thus, had the courage to proceed.

Sister Joy, Sister Grace and Mr Luke found it painful to let go of personal desires and pride to initiate as well as continue their journeys. Sister Joy indicated that her letting go of her personal desire for a married life was a prerequisite of letting God lead her to a religious vocation. Sister Grace learnt to let go of her pride when interacting with others, particularly by taking the initiative to apologise to the community members. Mr Luke reflected that he had to let go of his false self through prayers in his response to God's ongoing search for him.



### *Environment from Outside*

Besides support from God above and personal effort from within, the majority of the participants (11 out of 14) said that they had also received assistance and positive encouragement from the outside environment at different stages of their religious vocation journeys. The parties of the environment from outside included the participants' families, friends, the faith community and the religious institutes that they entered. Most of them expressed thanks to more than one party of the group. The number of parties that the participants showed appreciation for ranged from one (two participants), two (one participant) to three (eight participants). When viewing them by group: 9 participants had received support from families that were mostly of the Christian faith; 2 participants said that their friends, being their teacher or classmates, had given them encouragement and comfort; 7 participants acknowledged assistance from the spiritual directors at the discernment, a priest in their workplace and the faithful in the parish community; and 10 participants thanked their superiors, members and elderly priests or religious sister of their institutes for enlightenment, care and sharing.

### Family

As an overview of the 14 participants, six (Father Abraham, Sister Faith, Sister Grace, Sister Humble, Sister Joy and Mr King) were of the Christian faith. In the context of family under the outside environment, nine participants (five of whom were of the Christian faith) mentioned that their parents or family members actively supported their decision to pursue a religious life. Regarding the remaining participant of Christian faith, Mr King pointed out that his parents' faith was not deep enough to know what a religious vocation was. Thus, they had neither supported nor objected to his decision. This showed that families of the Christian faith were more receptive and supportive of their children's choice of religious life.

Among these five participants of the Christian faith, the parents of Sister Faith and

Sister Joy had rendered respect, trust and support for their decisions. For Sister Humble, her parents had passed away by the time she decided to enter religious life. However, her younger sister did fully support her response to the religious vocation. Father Abraham's father and Sister Grace's mother once had concerns on their adaptability to a religious life. Their worries were alleviated after visiting their respective seminary or convent.

Father Abraham remembered that at the time of his formation, Hong Kong society was experiencing economic hardship. He mentioned:

My mother, however, proactively comforted me not to worry about money, as I had to sustain the priesthood life, which was a more important task for me to accomplish.

My father, unlike my mother, had not shown support for my decision at the beginning.

I later found that he was worried if I could adapt to religious life. His worry was lifted after visiting me at the seminary and understanding my livelihood there.

Similarly, Sister Grace's mother was concerned about her health. She was afraid that her daughter's skin disease would affect her religious life. Her concern was addressed after visiting her formation convent abroad and seeing that the community treated her very well.

The other four participants (Father Christopher, Brother David, Sister Icon and Miss Noel) came from non-Catholic families, and they were grateful for their family members' kindness in allowing them to respond to the religious vocation, as the latter neither had knowledge of Christianity nor understood the meaning of a religious vocation. In the case of Father Christopher, though his parents had reservations about his choice of entering a religious life, his younger sister showed support for him by taking over the responsibility of looking after the family. Brother David said that some of his siblings disliked his decision, but his mother and an elder sister supported him. He was grateful for his mother's generosity in letting go and consecrating him to God. His elder sister reassured him that if he ever found religious life did not suit him, his family was always there to welcome him with open arms.

Sister Icon thanked her godmother's companionship at the start of the journey and her family's sacrifice for her pursuit of a consecrated life. Miss Noel's father felt great comfort, noting that she was not journeying alone but with the whole community. In addition, her younger brother took over the responsibility of taking care of their father. Her aunt was a religious sister, who had provided unceasing support on her search for a religious vocation.

### Friends and/or Faith Community

This group consisted of the participants' friends, spiritual directors, priest and faithful in the parish community. The friends were those the participants (Father Christopher and Sister Faith) knew during their schooling or studying. The spiritual directors were those the participants (Father Abraham, Brother David, Sister Joy and Miss Noel) received guidance from in the discernment stage of their religious life. The faithful were those the participants (Sister Icon and Mr Luke) encountered in the parishes. The priest was whom the participant (Sister Humble) received enlightenment from on pastoral work. These people provided the participants with valuable guidance and support for choosing a religious life. They also gave them encouragement and comforted them when they encountered difficulties on their journeys.

Father Christopher and Sister Faith found that friends were important for rendering support for their perseverance on the journey. Father Christopher's teacher had encouraged him to pursue religious life, saying that it would be more meaningful for him than teaching in school. His teacher was a man of wisdom, giving him positive advice during his setbacks and offering him support to continue on his journey. Sister Faith recalled that all the people around her showed support for her decision. She was particularly grateful to her good friend for her companionship as well as her acquaintances in the Catholic Society at university for helping her in her search of a religious vocation. During the challenging study period in Rome, Sister Faith recalled that sharing her difficulties with her classmates was encouraging

and comforting. It was where she could regain her energy.

Father Abraham, Brother David, Sister Joy and Miss Noel appreciated the valuable guidance and assistance rendered by their spiritual directors, particularly in the discernment stage of their religious life. Miss Noel added that reading spiritual books written by Henri Nouwen, a Dutch Catholic priest and Macrina Wiederkehr, a Benedictine nun had given her inspiration to address her difficulties, as they had come across similar difficulties in their journeys.

Sister Icon and Mr Luke considered the faithful in their parishes played a role in their response to a religious vocation. Sister Icon thanked the catechists for teaching her to pray, through which she encountered God who invited her to become a religious sister. Mr Luke indicated that the elderly faithful in his parish had given him tremendous encouragement for choosing a religious life.

Sister Humble was grateful to the missionary priest who once worked with her in a parish for giving her good formation and spiritual direction. She said:

As I mentioned, the formation provided by my institute was very loose and without discipline. I regarded the coaching given by this priest my “second formation”. He taught me about administrative matters, human relationships, evangelisation and caring for the faithful. He also asked me to focus on the Sacred Heart of Jesus in the midst of difficulties.

### Religious Institute of the Participants

The sources of support in this group were mainly from superiors, religious comrades, elderly religious and members of the institute that the participants belonged to. Superiors were the Father-in-charge or Mother-in-charge of the institutes who gave care and enlightenment to the participants. Religious comrades referred to the priests or religious sisters who had been good companions to the participants, providing them with guidance and

sharing. Elderly religious were the senior members of the community from whom the participants received encouragement and learnt from their wisdom. Members of the institute were those who had once lived with the participants in the community and gave support and joy to the latter.

Father Benedict, Sister Grace and Miss Noel thanked their superiors for their valuable direction and caring rendered during their journey. Father Benedict appreciated the visitation, enlightenment and monthly spiritual direction provided by his superior. Sister Grace had fruitful experiences by listening and following the advice of her superior during her formation abroad. Miss Noel felt indebted to her superior for arranging for her to experience the community life abroad, to receive spiritual direction from a priest outside the convent and to allow her family to visit her in the convent. All these were aimed at helping her to identify if she was suitable for pursuing a religious life in the institute.

Sister Faith, Sister Joy, Father Abraham and Father Christopher felt that the companionship of their religious comrades helped them embrace the difficulties in religious life. Sister Faith was impressed by the continuous guidance and companionship of a religious sister in her search for a religious vocation and upon entering religious life. Sister Joy was once frustrated by the heavy assignments and desperate for more understanding and acceptance among community members. She was grateful for the sincere sharing and comfort provided by a religious sister, who had enlightened her about the essence of consecrated life. Father Abraham was grateful to a priest counterpart for his unfailing support by actively listening and sharing whenever he encountered difficulties in priesthood life. Father Christopher treasured the brotherhood support during and after the formation and considered it very important to his wellbeing.

Father Benedict, Sister Humble and Sister Icon were grateful for the encouragement and wisdom they received and learnt from the elderly religious in the institute. Father

Benedict valued very much the wisdom and companionship of elderly priests from whom he learnt to be humble and rely on God, instead of material things. Sister Humble found the comfort and encouragement from the elderly religious sisters help her adapt to religious life in the formation period. Sister Icon learnt a lot of virtues, such as patience and obedience, from the elderly religious sisters.

Father Benedict, Brother David, Sister Faith and Sister Grace appreciated the understanding and support from the members of their communities. Father Benedict received support and found happiness in the regular sharing sessions with the community members. Brother David considered the community members' support and care invaluable. Sister Faith appreciated the caring and support of community members, in particular, during her studies in Rome. Sister Grace was touched by the mutual assistance and understanding among the community members, who were not only helpful but also full of fun.

Compared to the supports that the participants received from the outside environment, the role played by friends was less substantial. This might be due to the fact that this group was not familiar with the livelihood of religious life and, hence, had little understanding of the difficulties that the participants encountered. This explains the friends mentioned by Father Christopher and Sister Faith were of Christian faith. Otherwise, they might not even have known about the meaning and mission of a religious vocation. The supports from family and the faith community mostly appeared at the stage when the participants responded to the religious vocation, and the members of their respective institutes emerged upon their entering the religious life.

The data shows that all participants experienced support from at least one of the three sources: God from above, individual self from within and environment from outside, on their religious vocation journeys. Among them, Brother Emmanuel and Mr King expressed that the support they received was solely from God. In the case of Miss Mary, she said that apart from

God's support, her personal effort, in terms of courage, had helped her enter a religious life. The other five participants (Father Benedict, Father Christopher, Brother David, Sister Faith and Sister Icon) thanked the assistance of various parties in the outside environment in addition to God's support. The remaining six participants (Father Abraham, Sister Grace, Sister Humble, Sister Joy, Mr Luke and Miss Noel) indicated that they had received support from all three sources.

It is worth noting that the support the participants received was often closely related to the strategies they adopted to cope with the difficulties, and sometimes the two overlapped. For instance, when people pray to God as a way of coping with the difficulties they encountered, they believe that they will receive support from God above. Similarly, when people make use of the strategies of letting go of self-desire/pride to face the challenges they have encountered, they regard this as putting their own efforts into supporting themselves as well.

A summary of the supports received by the participants on their religious vocation journeys is shown in Table 10.

**Table 10***Supports Received by the Participants on Their Religious Vocation Journeys*

Source/Nature of Support	Participant													
	Father Abraham	Father Benedict	Father Christopher	Father David	Father Emmanuel	Sister Faith	Sister Grace	Sister Humble	Sister Icon	Sister Joy	Mr King	Mr Luke	Miss Mary	Miss Noel
I. God from Above														
• Prayer to God	✓			✓						✓		✓	✓	✓
• Trust in God			✓		✓	✓	✓							
• Intimate Relationship with God								✓	✓		✓			
• All Sorts of Support from God		✓												
II. Individual Self from Within														
• Personal Character/Efforts	✓							✓					✓	✓
• Letting Go of Self Desire/Pride							✓			✓		✓		
III. Environment from Outside														
(a) Family														
• Catholic	✓					✓	✓	✓		✓				
• Non-Catholic			✓	✓					✓					✓
(b) Friends			✓			✓								
(c) Faith Community														
• Spiritual Directors	✓			✓						✓				✓
• Faithful in Parishes									✓			✓		
• Priest at Workplace								✓						
(d) Religious Institute of Participant														
• Superiors		✓					✓							✓
• Religious Comrades	✓		✓			✓				✓				
• Elderly Religious		✓						✓	✓					
• Community Members		✓		✓		✓	✓							

The ✓ in a box indicates that the participant received support from this party on their religious vocation journey.



## Sacred Scripture and Saints

The data collected from the interviews revealed that the participants received positive inspiration and enlightenment from Sacred Scripture and saints along their journeys, in addition to support from God, themselves and social groups in the environment. Sacred Scripture and saints are regarded as two wonderful treasures of the Catholic Church. Sacred Scripture is the speech of God as it is put down in writing under the breath of the Holy Spirit (CCC No. 81). The Church constantly finds her nourishment and her strength in it, as the Father who is in heaven comes lovingly to meet his children and talk with them (CCC No. 104). Sacred Scripture is the Word of God and is considered love letters from God to His people. Saints are like living information signs pointing towards God and bridges to heaven (YOUCAT for kids, Catholic Catechism for Children and Parents, 2018). Saints are people who recognised their need for God's help, who took risks to discover His will, who helped others and who nurtured a habit of thanksgiving (Sunday Examiner, 2020)<sup>16</sup>. Saints showed how they responded to God's unconditioned love with their lives.

It is interesting to note that most of the participants had their own favourite verse from Sacred Scripture, which served as their motto in religious life. Father Abraham and Miss Mary, however, considered it difficult to quote one verse, as God's Words or love were found in the whole Bible or the Gospel of John, respectively. In Table 11, I have tried to group the participants' favourite verses into five themes, namely (a) God's Love; (b) God's Might; (c) God's Promise; (d) God's Followers and (e) God's Companion. These verses help demonstrate how God appeared to the participants in different aspects (in terms of love, might and promise) or the latter's respective relationship with Him (by means of followers and companions) on their unique journeys. I find the verses provide us with good material for meditation, and I would like to capture them here to share.

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<sup>16</sup> Pope Francis gave this definition to the Saints in his homily on 13 October 2019, after formally declaring five new saints for the Catholic Church.

**Table 11**

*Participants' Favourite Verse of the Sacred Scripture which Served as Their Motto in Religious Life*

Theme	Participant	Verse of the Scripture/Bible/Gospel
God's Love	Sister Humble	I say to the Lord, you are my Lord, you are my only good. ( <i>Psalms 16:2</i> )
	Father Abraham	Not focus on one verse but the whole Bible, as God talks to him and transforms him to do His will through it. ( <i>the whole Bible</i> )
	Miss Mary	Gospel of John in which he describes how God has deeply loved mankind. ( <i>Gospel of John</i> )
God's Might	Father Benedict	For human beings it is impossible, but not for God. All things are possible for God. ( <i>Mark 10:27</i> )
	Sister Joy	The Lord is my shepherd; there is nothing I lack. ( <i>Psalms 23:1</i> )
	Miss Noel	Be still and know that I am God! ( <i>Psalms 46:11</i> )
God's Promise	Father Christopher	I am with you always, until the end of the age. ( <i>Matthew 28:20</i> )
	Sister Icon	I came so that they might have life and have it more abundantly. ( <i>John 10:10</i> )
God's Follower	Brother David	Brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. ( <i>Philippians 4:8</i> )
	Brother Emmanuel	Follow me. ( <i>John 1:43</i> )
	Sister Grace	Yet I live, no longer I, but Christ lives in me. ( <i>Galatians 2:20</i> )
	Mr Luke	Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart. ( <i>Matthew 11:29</i> )
God's Companion	Sister Faith	It is you who have stood by me in my trials. ( <i>Luke 22:28</i> )
	Mr King	I even consider everything is a loss because of the supreme good of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. ( <i>Philippians 3:8</i> )



The participants said that the saints in the Catholic Church had a close relationship with God and, thus, set good examples for them to follow. Some participants had more than one saint they admired, and they had named a total of 19 saints (14 males and five females). However, five saints (St Ignatius of Loyola, St Therese of Lisieux, St Francis of Assisi, St John Vianney and St Teresa of Calcutta) were appreciated by two to three participants. In Table 12, I have listed the names of the saints and summarised their respective characteristics that the participants wished to learn. It is noted that the characters and strengths of the saints varied. Among them, the qualities of humility, simplicity and perseverance seem to dominate.

**Table 12**

*Saints whom the Participants Admired on Their Religious Vocation Journeys*

Name of Saint	Participant(s)	Inspirations and Learning Points from the Saint
Mary Mother of God	Father Abraham	Perseverance of religious vocation from temptation.
St Athanasius	Mr King	Brave in safeguarding the Christian faith.
St Augustine of Hippo	Sister Icon	Searching journey for God and self-confession.
St Bonaventure	Sister Faith	Wonderful wisdom and humility.
St Faustina	Sister Humble	The intimate spiritual exchange with Jesus.
St Francis of Assisi	Brother David	Joyful, simplicity, thanks for and praise to God.
	Sister Faith	Simplicity, inner freedom and fervent love for God.
St Francis Xavier	Father Christopher	Passion for evangelisation to China.
St Ignatius of Loyola	Father Benedict	Grace in discernment.
	Sister Humble	Spiritual exercise and magis for excellence.
	Mr Luke	Self-discipline and magis for excellence.
St John XXIII	Father Christopher	Perseverance over difficulties in priesthood life.
St John of the Cross	Sister Icon	Down-to-earth spirituality.
St John Vianney	Father Abraham	Becoming a serious priest to save souls of the faithful.
	Miss Mary	Perseverance, humility, love God and others.
St Josemaria Escriva de Balaguer	Father Abraham	Becoming a good priest to help the faithful.
St Luigi Versiglia	Sister Joy	Humility and make sacrifice for others.
St Margaret Mary of Alacoque	Sister Humble	Passion for Sacred Heart of Jesus.
St Philip Neri	Sister Grace	Humility, joy and humour.
St Raymond Lull	Brother Emmanuel	Passion for Bible-related missionary work.
St Teresa of Calcutta	Father Benedict	Passion for serving others.
	Miss Noel	Doing small things with great love.
St Therese of Lisieux	Sister Humble	Simplicity and be faithful in small things.
	Sister Joy	Passion for evangelisation.
	Miss Noel	Be faithful in small things.
St Thomas Aquinas	Mr King	Knowledgeable in various disciplines in the Church.

## Image of the Religious Vocation Journey

At the end of the interviews, the participants were requested to describe their religious vocation journeys by means of a metaphor, a word, a phrase, a book or a song, as an overview of their experiences therein. A large variety of images emerged. The illustrations included a path, a person carrying a backpack while walking uphill, the presence of Jesus Christ, a figure or a verse in the Bible, the constitution of a religious order, a hymn, a pencil, a book and a priest's prayer.

Coincidentally, Father Christopher and Brother David used a path to illustrate the journey but with different approaches. Father Christopher regarded it as a winding path full of difficulties and not easy to walk. If a person persevered with moving on, they would find many attractive sceneries along the journey. Nevertheless, they should depend on God but not man, as they might be led astray. Brother David regarded it as a rugged path full of ups and downs. A person would never know what lies ahead unless they took the first step and kept going. Life, like a rugged path, was a matter of experience and process.

Both Sister Humble and Mr Luke portrayed the religious vocation journey as a person carrying a backpack while walking uphill. Sister Humble vividly described her journey as a little girl walking uphill, carrying a backpack and holding toys and sweets in her hands to meet Jesus at the hilltop. As she walked uphill, the girl let go of her toys and sweets one by one. When she met Jesus, there was nothing left in her hands. She found complete joy in Jesus's hug. As for Mr Luke, he described:

I saw myself as a traveller, carrying a backpack used in Jesus's time and a walking stick in one hand. I did not carry anything while walking. Though my hands remained empty when reaching the destination at the hilltop, my life was not the same. It had already been enriched by the experiences that I encountered on the journey.

Father Abraham, Father Benedict and Sister Icon related their journey with Jesus but in different scenarios/settings. Father Abraham said that he found his religious vocation and God's love through the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mother Mary. He expressed that these two sacred hearts were of great comfort to him when he experienced pain in the priesthood life. Father Benedict thought of the image in which Jesus fell while carrying the cross. He said that the image had illustrated Lord's mercy for bearing the sin and pain for mankind and, thus, helped him learn to make sacrifices in his religious life. Sister Icon recalled a vision in which Jesus was crucified and water spilled over from the rock on which the cross stood to the ground. Wherever the water passed, the plants and flowers bloomed. This vision gave her the mission of proclaiming Good News of God to all human creatures.

Miss Mary was amazed by the faith of the Patriarch Abraham in offering his only son, Isaac, to God unreservedly (Genesis 22:1-18) and in following God's calling when he was 99 years old (Genesis 17:1). She found her journey resembled his, as God also led her to religious life at her advanced age.

In a retreat during his formation, Mr King was deeply touched by a verse in the Sacred Scripture: 'So I look to you in the sanctuary to see your power and glory' (Psalm 63:3). He then looked upon God's power and glory as the direction in his life thereafter.

Brother Emmanuel fully appreciated the constitution of his religious order. He was proud of having such a journey to live up to the virtues of poverty and obedience of the founder.

Sister Faith chose a hymn 《主慈頌》 (means 'Praise for the Kindness of God' in English) to describe her journey. She mentioned:

The hymn assured God's everlasting kindness to mankind, and it reminded me to put trust in Him. As the lyrics say, "God has never promised the sky to be always blue or the flowers always in full bloom. Yet, He has promised His kindness everlasting". I

was particularly impressed by the word “always”, which had repeatedly appeared in the lyrics, symbolising that God’s caring love for mankind was always and everlasting.

Like St Teresa of Calcutta, Sister Grace would be a pencil in God’s hand so that she would become an instrument of God to do whatever He willed her. She, therefore, chose to surrender herself totally to God’s disposal for the sake of returning His great love on her.

Miss Noel found that a book called *Falling Upward* best echoed her experiences on her journey. She explained that during times of setbacks and falling down, one had an opportunity to climb up again. In moving upward in moments of falling in the face of adversities, which were full of paradox or dynamics, one had to rely on God’s grace. It kind of resembled Jesus by going through the passion, death and resurrection before one reached glory.

Sister Joy considered that ‘The Priest: A Prayer on Sunday Night’,<sup>17</sup> showing the authenticity and loneliness of religious personnel, best portrayed her religious life. She shared parts of the prayer:

Tonight, Lord, I am alone,  
 Little by little the sounds died down in the church,  
 The people went away,  
 And I came home,  
 Alone.

I passed people who were returning from a walk.  
 I went by the cinema that was disgorging its crowd.  
 I skirted café terraces where tired strollers were trying to prolong the pleasure of a Sunday holiday.

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<sup>17</sup> The Prayer was written by Father Michel Quoist in the book, *Prayers of Life* (1963), which was translated by Anne Marie De Commille and Agnes Mitchell Forsyth.

I bumped into youngsters playing on the footpath,

Youngsters, Lord.

Other people's youngsters who will never be my own.

Here I am, Lord,

Alone.

The silence troubles me,

The solitude oppresses me.

Lord, I'm . . . a body made like others, ready for work,

A heart meant for love,

But I've given you all.

It's true, of course, that you needed it.

I've given you all, but it's hard, Lord . . .

God replies,

Son, you are not alone,

I am with you,

I am you. (Quoist, 1963, pp. 49–50; elision mine)

Among the images, the path and a person carrying a backpack while walking uphill were described by two participants. Yet, the interpretations were not the same. This illustrated that God had entered a distinct relationship with each participant and entrusted them with different missions in the calling. In response to the calling, everyone had led a unique religious vocation journey. To me, the religious personnel are great to offer themselves completely for God's unconditional love and for the faithful's goodness. I have to salute them with a wholehearted bow.

This chapter has presented the barriers that the participants faced in deciding to pursue a religious life, live community life and practise evangelical counsels at different



stages of their religious vocation journeys and the strategies they used to cope with them. The support received from God above, the efforts made by the individual self and the encouragement given by the outside environment have also been discussed. I have captured the participants' favourite verses from Sacred Scripture and saints, and shared their imagery of their journeys. Coupled with the previous chapter, which described the participants' responses and discernment processes in pursuing a religious vocation, these two chapters told the stories of the participants on a micro level. The next chapter will view the issue from a macro level by discussing the possible reasons for the declining trend of responses to religious vocations and suggested measures to foster religious vocations, providing some insights drawn from the experiences of the participants.

## **CHAPTER 6: REASONS FOR THE DECLINING TREND OF RESPONSES AND MEASURES TO FOSTER A RELIGIOUS VOCATION**

The last two chapters examined the stories of the participants in their responses to a religious vocation in respect to their discernments, barriers and supports as experienced on their journeys at a micro level. In analysing the data collected from them, this chapter will discuss the participants' perspectives on the reasons for the declining trend of responses to religious vocations by Hong Kong people and measures to foster religious vocations from a macro perspective.

Among the 14 participants, four had once entered religious institutes but left after undergoing formation, ranging from 6 months to over 9 years. The other 10 remained as religious personnel up to the present. From the perspectives of the participants, I will begin with the experiences and reasons of the four laity for quitting the religious vocation journey using 'insider' stories, and then follow this by presenting the views of the 10 religious personnel. In order to provide a full picture of the four laity in this regard, I will also capture their pains, gains and current lives after leaving their respective religious institutes. Regarding the measures, I will consolidate the participants' ideas on the suggested ways that the respective parties can take to nurture the soil of faith, so as to foster religious vocations in the territory.

### **Four Laity's Reasons for Quitting the Journey: Pains and Gains, and Current Lives**

The stories of the four laity (Mr King, Mr Luke, Miss Mary and Miss Noel) revealed that their self-desire had been the dominant factor driving them to pursue a religious life. Some of their discernment processes might not have been done properly, or they may have encountered detours on their respective journeys. They experienced pains in realising personal weaknesses and/or interacting with members of the community. Nevertheless, they found gains in self-knowledge and personal growth. They felt embarrassed and were afraid of

their lives after leaving the institutes. God's grace and guidance, however, had led them through the sorrowful valleys and helped them settle down well. The reasons for leaving the religious institutes, the subsequent painful experiences, reflections of their gains and their current lives are presented below.

### *Reasons for Quitting the Religious Vocation Journey*

The reasons for leaving among the four laity differ, but they do share some similarities. Mr King and Mr Luke discerned that God did not call them to be priests during the formation after 6 months and 6 years, respectively. They later found that their vocations were to lead married lives to serve the Church. Miss Mary and Miss Noel left the institutes because they could not overcome their respective difficulties in community life and adapt to the religious sisterhood life therein.

In thinking about the religious vocation, Mr King learnt more about the Christian faith and considered that some priests failed to bring the faith to the faithful in a desirable manner. He then said, 'As they are not doing well, let me do it by myself and rectify the situation accordingly'. As a result, he decided to pursue religious life. During the formation, he was on good terms with other seminarians and superiors, and adapted well to both community life and study. Thus, Mr King did not experience difficulties upon entering religious life, but he left the institute after the formation had commenced after approximately 6 months.

However, Mr King recalled that he had a shocking experience, which served as a turning point in his journey. He described that occasion as follows:

I had attended one event for promoting a religious vocation to youngsters when I was a seminarian. In a game of the event, we asked the youngsters if they would wish to be priests. I was shocked to find that I had strong reservations of this identity change, from a faithful to a priest . . . You know, it seemed to be impossible for me to have such reservations, as I was prepared to become a priest after the formation . . . This

prompted me to critically review my religious vocation.

To me, “identity” was a very . . . very . . . fundamental . . . Yes, it was a fundamental issue. I had, therefore, to discern whether I could really make this lifelong commitment . . . After reflections, I regarded my motivation for pursuing religious life . . . as others were not doing well and I would do it by myself . . . was not proper and very self-centred. I finally discovered that I was not called to become a priest. I, therefore, left the seminary.

Mr King had no regrets about deciding to leave. He indicated that there might have been room for improvement in his discernment process. Having no idea about other religious institutes at that time, he was unable to consider their respective charisma in making a choice. Nevertheless, he opined that it was not necessary to have full knowledge about all religious institutes for selection, as God had already put the person in a certain position, showing them green lights to proceed.

According to Mr Luke, his decision to pursue priesthood life was very simple and subjective with a view to following God, who loved him very much. He considered himself very brave to try this form of life, though he was neither certain nor had experienced God’s calling him to become a priest. Though he was not very satisfied with the community life of the religious institute, there was nothing that triggered him to leave. He, thus, continued to stay in the institute.

The turning point was his attendance at a retreat after completing the formation in the seminary for 6 years before proceeding to the final year. He recalled:

In that retreat, my focus was to discern my identity as I had one year to go before ordination as a priest. I was surprised to see the message of “family” pop up and later realised that family was my vocation. After this “discovery”, I found myself lacking passion to become a priest but had a growing desire for a married life. In contrast, the

institute had not given me a clear vision of what being a priest was throughout the formation. I, nevertheless, decided to complete the final year of the formation, but I left the institute eventually.

Looking back, Mr Luke regarded his deliberation to pursue a religious life was not thorough. He simply wished to return love to God, as he had not felt loved by his parents in childhood. He considered the decision childish and immature. In addition, he found he had not totally surrendered to God, and there were struggles in the course of the formation.

Miss Mary could not distinguish if her desire to pursue a religious life came from God or herself. Nevertheless, she was certain that if she did not try, she would regret it in her life. She, therefore, decided to let herself try. She had used the method of elimination in her selection of religious institutes.

It was not a singular incident that triggered her decision to leave but a number of difficulties she had encountered over 9 years during the formation. She mentioned:

The hardships included the unreasonable heavy workload of housework in the convent, the conservative practices of the superiors and the undesirable behaviour of the community members. You know, the housework was so much . . . a workload of which I had never done from my childhood till now. In addition, I considered myself unsuitable for the missionary work of the institute, though I had put in years of effort to perform. All of this had adversely affected my emotions, made me angry and caused me to become ill. Though I had “talked” to God, who had comforted me and encouraged me to stay, I found myself unable to bear the pressure and adapt to such a form of life. I chose to leave eventually.

I, nevertheless, believed that God did call me as He had given me green lights to move on the journey. It was my will that chose not to continue the religious life.

Though I appreciated that God had respected my freedom in making the choice, I told

myself to lead a happy life as a kind of return to God's giving me the life on earth.

Miss Mary had no regrets for either entering the religious life or her subsequent decision to leave. She, however, wondered if she would have encountered such difficulties if she had properly undergone her discernment process. She recalled that she did not have the companionship of spiritual directors in the discernment, and that she entered the institute because she was acquainted with a religious sister there and felt the other institutes unsuitable for her.

Miss Noel admitted that she neither had a very clear picture nor knew herself very well before entering the institute. She said that she made the following discovery in the formation:

During my formation, I was aware of my weaknesses. I then recognised that I could not stand myself for doing nothing or being idle. I valued my worth for always doing something. In addition, I could not remain calm and handle my emotions when tensions arose in community life. Such problems might have been from myself as well as from other religious sisters.

However, I did not wish to push myself and saw a need for me to leave after 2 years' formation. I didn't know if my thinking was right; therefore, I invited the community to discern together with me as well. The members took into account the daily life I displayed during my stay in the community over the past 2 years and considered it better for me to leave at that juncture of time.

### *Pains and Gains*

All four laity experienced pains in identifying personal weaknesses and/or embarrassments upon leaving their respective institutes. Looking back, they found their gains outweighed the pains they experienced in leaving their religious vocation journeys. They all have a deeper understanding of God and maintain an intimate relationship with Him. They

also have better personal knowledge of themselves and have learnt to accept who they are, letting go of what they were and having faith in what they will be. They have opportunities to take care of their parents and to interact with others in a harmonious manner. In short, all four have experienced personal growth or breakthroughs.

There was a general expectation that once a man entered a seminary, he would become a priest after the formation. At the early stage of leaving the religious life, Mr King considered himself a loser and could not accept himself. He felt embarrassed about telling others his stories when asked. He, however, appreciated the personality and spirituality formation gained in the seminary, which helped him accept himself and go through the healing process more easily. He, therefore, kept up his prayer life to maintain a connection with God by attending mass in the parish every day. In retrospect, he saw that God had invited him to purify his relationship with Him by focusing not on doing but on being himself. He indicated that God led him to make a detour by taking away his pride and letting him learn to be humble.

Hearing of his decision, Mr Luke's siblings teased him, saying that he should have left the institute earlier, instead of spending 7 years there. Furthermore, his superiors at the institute also thought he was wasting his time. He was embarrassed right after leaving the seminary but reminded himself to be faithful to his desire. Nevertheless, he felt comfortable, peaceful and mature, as the decision would affect his life and he had to take responsibility for it. He found that his acceptance of his decision increased with the passage of time.

Mr Luke was grateful for the formation given by the institute, as the experience had paved the way for his present livelihood. He said:

During the formation, I learnt a lot . . . My spiritual life has been enhanced; I came across more human issues and cultivated an interest in psychology. After leaving the institute, I had a dream of becoming a counsellor. God granted me opportunities to

further my studies in the discipline and obtained the required qualification for the profession.

I realised that vocation was God's calling to a person to accomplish their unique mission on earth. In my case, God had used the detour journey to nurture and equip me. The path might not have been clear at the beginning, but it was a process for me to walk through.

Miss Mary expressed her failure in preparing her family psychologically to accept her decision to pursue a religious life. She always said that if this had been handled better, it would have hurt them less, in particular, her mother. Admittedly, Miss Mary had received abundant gains. First, she knew more about prayer life and schools of spirituality of the Catholic Church. She began praying with Bible scriptures and saints. The formation also facilitated her personal growth and development. She learnt to own herself by moving inwardly and did not require others' recognition of herself to get satisfaction from outside.

The utmost gain was her impressive experience about God's caring love to mankind. She said:

The elderly religious sisters in the community sometimes forgot to turn off the fire in the kitchen at night. It was unusual for me to visit the kitchen at those times. I believed that it was God who prompted me to go there to turn off the fire on those occasions. Otherwise, the convent would be on fire.

According to Miss Noel, the experience of entering religious life was painful and full of struggles but meaningful. She had no regrets and viewed it as the package of the journey. She regarded each experience as a treasure that enriched her. Miss Noel had learnt to be humble and adjust herself when interacting with others. Realising tensions were unavoidable in a community of people, she had to moderate the sacred and secular forces within her inner self to strike a balance between rest, prayer, life and work. Previously, Miss Noel would keep



asking herself whether a decision was right or wrong. She now treated it as a journey, and if this was not viable, she walked another one. The ‘wrong’ ones might help her see the way ahead more clearly.

### *Current Lives after Leaving the Religious Institute*

These four laity are leading peaceful and contented lives with their families, children and parents. It is interesting to note that Mr King, Mr Luke and Miss Mary are presently serving different groups of the faithful in the Church, including parish parents, family couples and the faithful at large, respectively. Miss Noel’s hospice service shows that the involvement is for all people and not confined to the faith community. All four laity have praised God for His unceasing blessings and continuous care, and they had no regrets in their decision to respond to the religious vocation.

Mr King understood that he could use his role of a faithful to serve the Church and bring God to others. He got married and has two sons. Instead of becoming a priest to manage a parish, he had the mission to make his family a domestic church. As a result, he has put his efforts into nurturing his children by accompanying them to mass and liturgical activities, which he found most beneficial for their spiritual growth. Recently, Mr King has also provided formation to parish parents in cultivating faith in their children. He regularly reminded himself of the motto: ‘Look to God to see His power and glory’.

Mr Luke was grateful for God’s unceasing guidance and blessings after quitting the religious vocation journey. He got married and was wholeheartedly committed to his family, performing the roles of a caring husband and a good father to three children. To witness God’s love to him, Mr Luke had once engaged in leading family prayer groups for couples in Hong Kong and conducting psychology formation as well as Marian spirituality for the faithful in mainland China. In recent years, he and his wife have been serving in a parish choir in the territory.

What had once worried Miss Mary most after leaving the institute was her livelihood. Looking back, she was grateful to God for preparing her to acquire the relevant qualification and experiences during the formation. Otherwise, she would not be eligible for her current post, which was related to the formation of the faithful in the DHK. Miss Mary was satisfied with her current livelihood as she could take care of her parents and lead a happy life on her own.

Miss Noel had feared leaving the religious life. She was deeply touched by realising that God had not abandoned her but fed her needs. She stated:

You know, by the time I left the institute, my father had just undergone surgery. I, therefore, could take care of him; it was perfect timing. For myself, I got a job in a hospice. I am satisfied that the patients feel comfortable in my care. On weekends, I am involved in reading and choir service in mass in the parish. I feel at peace and content with my present livelihood.

She suggested that a person might have different callings at different stages of their life. Her strong desire for God remained, and she was still seeking the wisdom to know His calling for her. She elaborated:

I have a feeling of something unfinished and I am still searching. I sometimes feel very peaceful and warm in recalling people calling me Sister Noel when I was in the convent. To me, Sister Noel reflected my calling from our Father in Heaven.

### **Other Reasons as Shared by the 10 Religious Personnel**

In addition to the insider contributions by the four laity, I also asked the 10 religious personnel about their knowledge of people's reasons for quitting the religious vocation journey. According to their personal experiences and learning from members of their own or other institutes, the reasons might arise from: (a) the lack of a thorough discernment process before entering religious life or uncertainty of God's calling; (b) the person's personality

weaknesses; (c) difficulties coping with community life; and (d) an inability to live up to one's own expectations and/or those imposed by others.

Sister Faith shared her personal experience during the discernment process and said:

I had once entered a religious institute but left 6 months after finding the community life boring and rigid. Looking back, I considered the decisions to enter as well as to leave had not gone through proper discernment. Also, the decisions were immature and a bit impulsive.

Father Christopher said that his novice counterpart was not certain if he was suitable for married life or religious life. He left the seminary after 6 months of formation when he found that God had not called him as a priest to serve the Church. Sister Grace echoed that some seminarians were wondering if God had called them. They, therefore, entered the seminary to try but showed no strong determination to pursue priesthood life. She added that one religious sister had 'discovered' that she had no religious vocation in a spiritual exercise conducted approximately 3 years after the formation commenced. Father Abraham also noted that some men could only discern that they did not have God's calling after staying in the institute for years of formation.

A person's personality might pose obstacles or make one unwilling to overcome the difficulties encountered in the religious life and, subsequently, decide to quit the journey.

Sister Humble shared:

I was acquainted with a religious sister who had personality weaknesses and had difficulty dealing with others in the community. She eventually left the institute. In my experience, a person had to cooperate with God's grace and let go of one's self-centred personality in pursuing religious life. Otherwise, he or she would suffer a lot.

From Father Abraham's point of view, it was mainly due to a person's unwillingness

to overcome the difficulties that triggered the decision to leave. In contrast, Father Christopher remarked that it was usually the institute's assessment if a novice was suitable or not. If not, they would request that they leave the institute.

Regarding community life, Father Abraham opined that 90% of the problems were caused by human beings. As a result, if a person was unable to face the difficulties stemming from human interactions, they would fail to cope with the community life. Sister Grace had heard that most religious sisters left because of conflicts arising from the community life. Sister Humble had cited some examples in this regard and said:

I once heard a religious sister say that when women live together, there will be problems. According to that religious sister, the problems would multiply if the women came from different nationalities and cultures. Therefore, tensions are unavoidable in religious sisterhood.

By the way, I am acquainted with some religious sisters who think that their superiors find the novices unsuitable and ask them to leave the institute. It is a painful experience that makes the novices feel abandoned by the institutes.

A person might decide to leave when they cannot live up to their own expectations and/or those imposed by others. Father Benedict had come across two incidents. He stated:

Some years ago, I met a lady who had been to three religious institutes. To me, she was in search of an institute that could fulfil her desires or preferences. I have no knowledge if she succeeded in entering her desired institute, though.

Another example is a gifted religious sister I met when I was a seminarian. She wanted to study theology, but her request was turned down by her superior/institute at that time. She then left the community, studied theology and led a fulfilling life as a laity, teaching theology eventually.

Sister Humble had a novice counterpart whose father had once been a seminarian but

later got married. He wished for his daughter to be a religious. However, community life did not meet the daughter's expectations, and she left the institute.

Father Benedict said that a person should have some kind of spiritual experiences before considering a religious life. It was, however, noted that some people simply thought about becoming a religious to do more for God or the Church. He stressed that entering religious life was not the only way to serve God or the Church, and there were other forms of equally fulfilling lives, such as single or married life. Father Benedict believed that whoever chose to leave, for whatever reason, felt pressure, and it was a painful experience, as such an act betrayed their original commitment.

### **Participants' Perspectives on the Reasons for the Declining Trend of Responses to a Religious Vocation**

After identifying the possible reasons for leaving the religious life, it is observed that the journey in response to a religious vocation is not an easy one to walk. This section will visit the participants' perspectives on the reasons that explain the declining trend of responses to a religious vocation. In analysing the data from the participants, the reasons are related to four major parties: religious personnel, religious institutes, family and youngsters.

Some religious personnel cannot live up to God's image and, thus, fail to attract others to pursue a religious life. Other people find the requirement for religious personnel to comply with a life of celibacy difficult. For religious institutes, the aging of its members and the conservativeness of its rules/regulations pose hindrances to people's desires to enter them. The religious institutes also lack the resources to promote religious vocations. In addition, families' lack of support and the increase of broken families also impose challenges to people's responses to a religious vocation. Finally, today's youngsters are immature and are attached to the material world, and they often have no close links with God. They, therefore, can hardly think about a religious vocation.

*Religious Personnel*

Religious personnel are God's chosen ones and should be full of joy and kindness, so as to reflect His image. Sister Joy, Sister Grace, Sister Humble and Brother Emmanuel, however, considered some religious personnel incapable of living up to God's image and, hence, failed to attract others to pursue a religious life. It seemed to Sister Joy that people found it difficult to find joy in most religious sisters. Sister Grace echoed this viewpoint, as most religious sisters seldom wore a smile and some had quick tempers. Sister Humble pointed out that some religious sisters were not easy going, unhappy, inconsiderate and quarrelsome. These undesirable behaviours could hardly make religious life attractive. She remembered that some of her colleagues in a convent school had advised her not to enter a religious life after hearing about her decision, as they had the impression that many of the religious sisters were neither friendly nor cheerful.

According to Brother Emmanuel, the religious brotherhood life was also not very attractive. He remarked:

As far as I know, some members in my institute are judgmental and stubborn to change, and the community is, thus, full of quarrels and conflicts. As I might not bear it myself, I dare not invite or encourage others to join the community. If the religious personnel's life shows no difference from the life of an ordinary person, what would motivate or attract people, in particular, the youngsters to consider a religious vocation?

Among the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity and obedience, Sister Joy shared that celibacy, with which all religious personnel had to comply, was a big challenge. This also made people find religious life unattractive. She had vividly described the situation as follows:

A married couple has the responsibility of bearing children as well as handling the

family's financial difficulties. This can be regarded as the package of a marriage.

Nevertheless, they can share the difficulties with one another. If they were religious, they share their difficulties with God, who is intangible and, hence, seems to be less concrete compared to one's spouse. In other words, God can at most provide spiritual support, rather than intimate physical closeness, to religious personnel in the face of their hardships.

In response to a religious vocation for men, they would consider it if they were called to be a priest or a religious brother. Nevertheless, the status of religious brothers in the Church hierarchy seems inferior to priests. As pointed out by Brother David, the priests were usually in the spotlight as they could minister sacraments for the faithful, while the religious brothers were involved in pastoral work in parishes or internal administration of their own institutes. As a result, responses to the calling of religious brotherhood might be more difficult, compared to the priestly vocation.

### *Religious Institutes*

The religious institutes serve as the families of the religious personnel and provide them with formation. They, therefore, play a very crucial role in fostering religious vocations. Six participants (Sister Grace, Sister Joy, Father Benedict, Sister Humble, Sister Icon and Sister Faith) indicated that the present religious institutes were experiencing difficulties in recruiting intakes because of their aging populations, conservative nature, limited resources or insufficient focus on promoting religious vocations.

Both Sister Grace and Sister Joy pointed out the aging populations in the religious institutes, with the majority of the members over 50 years old, making them less attractive to youngsters. This age difference might create a generation gap among the members of the community within these religious institutes. Especially, young novices might find the rules and regulations of the institute too conservative or rigid to follow.

Father Benedict had studied in convent school and admitted that his institute had put limited time and resources into promoting religious vocations. He recalled:

Looking back to my school years, priests were in classrooms, teaching and interacting directly with students. Nowadays, almost all priests in school are busily engaged with administrative work and hardly have time to accompany their students. In my case, I am stationed in schools, and I encounter the same difficulties and can hardly squeeze in any time to be with the students at school. I am really sorry about this.

I am also sorry to say that my institute has neither the manpower nor the resources to promote religious vocations in Hong Kong. Compared to my counterparts in Taiwan, they have a dedicated team for youth work and related religious vocational promotion activities.

Sister Humble shared similar limitations. Her institute had to run schools and were unable to spare manpower to promote religious vocations. Sister Icon opined that there was room for improvement in the transmission of faith in Catholic and convent schools, as they tended to focus on the academic results of their students, rather than nurturing their faith.

According to Sister Faith, the lack of annual events to promote religious vocations at the diocesan level in Hong Kong might to a certain extent adversely affect youngsters' knowledge and passion in their responses to a religious vocation. She said:

I remembered that in my day, different religious institutes serving in the Diocese of Hong Kong set up booths somewhere . . . might be in the hall of the Cathedral at Central . . . introducing their own religious order to attract intake. It was an annual event in which people would have a chance to know about the charisma and mission of different religious institutes in one go. This provided a good platform for the youngsters to know about various religious institutes in Hong Kong and inspire their thoughts about a religious vocation. A lot of coordination and logistics work were



involved, though.

However, in recent years, the religious institutes were busy with their own affairs and chose not to collaborate. Now, they do the religious vocation promotions by themselves alone. As a result, this “grand” situation of the past no longer appears.

### *Family*

In Chapter 4, we noted that the families of seven participants (Father Abraham, Father Benedict, Father Christopher, Brother David, Sister Icon, Mr Luke and Miss Mary) had expressed objections upon hearing their decisions to pursue a religious life. Among them, only Father Abraham’s family is Christian. Compared to the other six, the intensity of the negative responses he received from family members was mild. In other words, family plays a role in their children’s considerations, including their responses to a religious vocation. In identifying the reasons for the declining trend of responses to a religious vocation, they were attributed to no support from family, no trust in Church, insufficient formation and the increasing number of broken families. Four participants (Sister Humble, Sister Grace, Brother David and Sister Icon) shared their experiences and views in this respect.

Sister Humble mentioned that the mother of her novice counterpart disagreed with her daughter’s choice to become a religious sister. This generated some hurdles to the daughter’s motivation to respond to a religious vocation. Sister Grace knew a mother who loved her daughter so much that did not want to let her go. She told a parish priest that she would not pray for her daughter’s religious vocation. Therefore, with no support from family, a youngster is unlikely to take the religious vocation path.

Brother David was disappointed that some parents did not trust the Church to provide the best for their children. He explained:

Nowadays, parents treat their children as their own assets and wish to control them, instead of letting them go. On the contrary, I was amazed by the parents in a Christian

village<sup>18</sup> in mainland China, a place I visited while travelling some years ago. They did not mind consecrating their children for religious life, as they regarded their children as the only property they could offer to God.

Nevertheless, Sister Icon pointed out that parishes today are busily engaged in administrative affairs and have insufficient time to focus on taking care of the spiritual wellbeing of the faithful. She considered the formation for laity families as well as Sunday school in parishes inadequate.

Sister Humble, Sister Joy and Sister Icon pointed out that the phenomenon of broken families in recent decades has presented challenges to the responses of a religious vocation. Children from single-parent or broken families may hardly experience love, which was one of the effective motivations to nurture one's thoughts of a religious vocation.

### *Youngsters*

It generally takes about 7 to 10 years for a person to go through formation before ordination as a priest or final profession of the evangelical counsels as a religious. As a result, it is preferable to have young people respond to the religious vocation and enter religious life in their twenties to mid-thirties, so that they are able to serve the Church in the next 10 years. Youngsters are, therefore, regarded as the major potential source of respondents to a religious vocation. Six participants (Sister Humble, Sister Joy, Father Benedict, Brother David, Sister Grace and Sister Icon) expressed their views on today's youth and the challenges in the present world that hinder their consideration of a religious life.

Sister Humble indicated that the youngsters of this generation did not have direction in life and nor a close relationship with God. She said:

In my contact, the youngsters had neither direction nor a desire in life. You know, some of them even have no idea about what to study in university. The choice is

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<sup>18</sup> Christian village means that all residents in the entire village are of the Christian faith. As the residents are deep in faith, their infants will be baptised after birth.

subsequently decided by their parents. Most Catholic youths, in my observation, do not have a close relationship with God or a commitment to the parish.

Sister Joy echoed that the youngsters had no close link with God. They would, therefore, neither think about a religious vocation nor care to listen to God's calling on them. In Father Benedict's view, the present environment of the digital world was full of messages, and it was difficult to provide a silent space for youngsters to think about a religious vocation.

Brother David agreed that youngsters today were immature. He added that there were more attractions in the material world than in the Church. In other words, a person has other choices in life apart from leading a religious life. Compared to other walks of life, the religious life was comparatively less attractive as it required a lot of sacrifice. In her encounter with some youngsters, Sister Grace found that they were reluctant to let go of earthly pleasures to pursue a religious life. She described:

Some youngsters once shared with me their desire to become priests. They were, however, worried that they would lose their friends and could not play ball games after pursuing a religious life. They subsequently chose not to pray and search for the religious vocation. What a pity!

In my experience, the decision to respond to a religious vocation takes immense courage to abandon earthly pleasures and great perseverance to advance. The pursuit of a religious life requires one's total surrender to God.

Sister Icon, however, held a different view. She pointed out that if a youngster saw the 'gains' that the religious vocation offers, they would leave everything they had behind and go forward without turning back.

The participants' perspectives on the reasons for the declining trend of responses to a religious vocation in respect of these four parties are summarised in Table 13.

**Table 13**

*Participants' Perspectives on the Reasons for the Declining Trend of Responses to a Religious Vocation*

Party	Reasons for the Declining Trend of Responses to Religious Vocation
Religious Personnel	Religious personnel do not express a joyful and kind nature and, thus, hardly make a religious life attractive to others.
	Complying with the requirement to live a celibate life may be a big challenge for people, deterring them from entering a religious life.
	The status of religious brothers in the Church hierarchy seems to be inferior to that of priests, making the response to its calling difficult.
Religious Institutes	Aging populations of religious institutes make entering a religious life less attractive to youngsters.
	Young novices may consider the rules and regulations of the institutes too conservative or rigid to follow.
	Religious institutes running convent schools have limited time and no spare manpower to promote religious vocations.
	Convent schools focus on the students' academic results, rather than nurturing their faith.
Family	Families' lack of support or disagreement generates hurdles to their children's motivation to respond to a religious vocation.
	Parents treat their children as their own assets and are not willing to consecrate them for religious life.
	The phenomenon of broken families imposes challenges to the responses of religious vocation as their children often lack love.
Youngsters	Youngsters have neither direction nor a desire in life. They are immature and attached to the material world.
	Youngsters do not have a close link with God or a commitment to the parish. They find religious life less attractive as it requires sacrifice.
	It is difficult in the present environment of the digital world to provide a silent space for youngsters to think about a religious vocation.

## Participants' Perspectives on the Measures to Foster a Religious Vocation

In order to prepare favourable soil for nurturing the seeds of religious vocations, two steps have to be taken: remove the hurdles from the ground and put growth ingredients into the soil. Based on the data collected from the participants during the interviews, apart from the four parties (religious personnel, religious institutes, family and youngsters) mentioned among the reasons for the declining responses to a religious vocation, five more parties are involved in fostering religious vocations in Hong Kong. They are schools, DHK, parishes, DVC and social media.

I have categorised these nine parties into five groups for the upcoming presentation as some of them are closely linked with one another:

- (1) Family and Schools;
- (2) Church Communities (DHK, Parishes and DVC);
- (3) Religious Personnel and Religious Institutes;
- (4) Youngsters; and
- (5) Social Media.

In the interviews, the participants had cited some exemplary examples of themselves or others that were favourable to ones' responses to the religious vocation invitation. They also mentioned some good practices of these parties that would help foster religious vocations among youngsters, in particular. The exemplary examples and good practices shared in the following paragraphs serve as collective wisdom.

### *Family and Schools*

Family and school are the two entities that a person first meets or interacts with their life. According to the Christian faith, parents must regard their children as children of God and educate them to fulfil God's law. Parents have the mission of teaching their children to pray and to discover their vocation. The Christian family constitutes a specific revelation and

realisation of ecclesial community, and for this reason, it can and should be called a domestic church, which has an evangelising and missionary work task (CCC No. 2204). The home is well suited for teaching the virtues of tenderness, forgiveness, respect and fidelity (CCC No. 2223).

School is a place to nurture students' characters, disseminate knowledge and educate people to contribute to society in return. More importantly, Catholic schools must develop an atmosphere of liberty and charity to help young people understand the spirit of gospel. Faith formation in schools is very important as the students are the greatest potential group for responding to a religious vocation and pursuing a religious life.

### Family

Education in the faith by parents should begin in the child's earliest years. Family catechism precedes, accompanies and enriches other forms of instruction in faith. Parents should respect and encourage their children's vocation. This explains the saying, 'family is the cradle for religious vocations'. The parents' role of nourishing the Christian faith in their children is of paramount importance. On the one hand, if the faith of the parents is very strong, their children may consider a religious vocation. On the other hand, if parents do not mention God in their lives, their children will not feel that they have a relationship with God and, thus, will not think about a religious vocation.

Four participants (Sister Humble, Sister Grace, Brother David and Sister Icon) shared the importance of formation and the generosity of families in fostering religious vocations and the healing of broken families in the transmission of faith. The mother of Sister Humble demonstrated an excellent model in family formation. Sister Humble remembered her mother's teaching and recalled some events in her childhood as follows:

I had suffered from asthma since the age of 3 years. My mother told me that no one could help me, except Jesus Christ. I remembered that I would recite the Lord's

Prayer and Rosary whenever I felt an asthma attack coming on. As a result, these prayers had accompanied me during hospitalisations due to my asthma. If I felt sick on a Sunday, my mother would suggest I attend mass to greet our Father in Heaven first before seeing the doctor for medical consultation.

In choosing schools, she would consider if they would help me establish a close relationship with God, rather than merely focusing on academic performance. In dealing with others, my mother always taught me to respect, forgive and give my best to them as much as possible.

In Sister Grace's experience, many religious sisters were from 'healthy' families. She came from a Catholic family and admitted that the love of her parents had a positive impact on her response to a religious vocation. In the case of Brother David, he said that although his parents were neither Catholics nor educated, they supported his pursuit of a religious life. Therefore, they advised that parents should nurture their children to seek God's will for themselves and encourage as well as support their children to think about a religious vocation.

Brother David indicated that family formation on the positive vision of the Church was, therefore, necessary. Nowadays, when children wished to pursue a religious life, their parents advised them to think it through thoroughly, as they could not reverse the decision. Also, parents tended to magnify the negative aspects of a religious life to influence their children's decision. However, parents of some traditional Christian families were grateful for the caring received from the Church and wished to consecrate their children in return, saying that they had no money to offer. In other words, these parents would encourage as well as generously offer their children to serve the Church.

In handling broken families, Sister Icon suggested healing their wounds first and then reforming them to lead a new life. It was hoped that if the children of these reformed broken

families eventually married, they could provide appropriate faith formation to their offspring, who would become good faithful. The important focus was the transmission of faith. If religious personnel came from these families later, it was bonus.

### Schools

The schools referred to here are Catholic schools. Broadly speaking, there are two types of Catholic schools: those that are administered by the DHK and those that are run by religious institutes. According to the HKCCD 2020, there are a total of 250 Catholic schools and kindergartens, catering to approximately 150,000 pupils. Among the schools, there are 32 kindergartens, 105 primary, 85 secondary & middle, 1 vocational, 17 adult education, 8 special schools and 2 post-secondary. Of these schools, 99 are run by the diocese, 37 by Caritas,<sup>19</sup> 46 by men institutes, 66 by women institutes and 2 by the laity. Thus, Catholic education is a unique opportunity for the Church to serve students and contribute to the local educational culture.

Schools are important venues to nurture young people's whole-person development and properly prepare them for their life and future responsibilities. Catholic schools cultivate their students with five core values—truth, justice, love, life and family—in alignment with the Christian faith through school education and activities, as appropriate. Five (Sister Grace, Father Benedict, Sister Humble, Sister Joy and Sister Icon) out of the 10 religious personnel are either teaching or involved in pastoral work in Catholic schools. They acknowledged the present difficulties faced by schools on the transmission of faith, and they shared the good practices and their thoughts about the way forward.

These five participants pointed out that in the past, priests, religious brothers or

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<sup>19</sup> Caritas–Hong Kong (Caritas) was founded in July 1953 by the Diocese of Hong Kong. The primary purpose of its establishment was to offer relief and rehabilitation services to the poor and the distressed. The wide-ranging services provided by Caritas include social work services, education, medical care, community development, hospitality, etc.



religious sisters were the principals of the schools. Some priests were also involved in teaching the Bible or some other subjects and had many interactions with students. The religious atmosphere was very strong, as there were morning masses and various religious activities for students to attend. Presently, school principal posts are usually held by the faithful or even those who have no Christian faith. They may not be concerned about the values of Christian faith or the visions of the religious institutes in running the schools; rather, they focus on students' academic performance results. No class is given solely on the Bible, but there is a subject on Religious Studies/Ethics (RSE).

In Sister Grace's school, Catholic students are a minority. She commented that pastoral work was not easy, and the catechumen classes bore little fruit, as the students were busy with their studies and could hardly spare time to participate in related activities. Nevertheless, seeds of faith could be sowed. She recalled a touching experience:

I had led a group of students, most of whom were not Catholics, to a pilgrimage to Macau to celebrate the anniversary of the apparitions of Our Blessed Mother in Fatima.<sup>20</sup> I was amazed by their holding the rosaries<sup>21</sup> and saying the Rosary during the procession on the road leading to the Chapel of Our Lady at the hilltop of Penha Hill. They enjoyed the pilgrimage very much.

I regretted that I did not do any follow-up, as some of the students who participated in the event later indicated to me that they had a desire to know more about the Christian faith right after the pilgrimage. Really, a pity . . . if I did do a follow-up, some of them might have become Catholics. Nevertheless, I believe that the seeds of faith had been sown in their hearts.

<sup>20</sup> In the Roman Catholic Church, the key message of the apparitions of Our Blessed Mother in Fatima in Portugal in 1917 emphasised acts of reparation and prayers to console Jesus for the sins of the world.

<sup>21</sup> The Rosary is a string of beads used by Roman Catholics for counting prayers. The saying of the Rosary is a kind of Marian prayer in meditating the mysteries of Christ. Pope Pius XII described the rosary prayer as 'the compendium of the entire Gospel'. The Mysteries of the Rosary are meditations on episodes in the life and death of Jesus from the Annunciation to the Ascension and beyond. These are grouped by five into four themed sets known as the Joyful, Sorrowful, Glorious and Luminous.

For the sake of fostering religious vocations, Father Benedict said that he added prayer intentions in school masses, introduced priesthood life and made his presence known to students in school so that they could see him and talk to him. Sister Humble said the DVC had designed some training kits on the religious vocations as promotional materials for both primary and secondary schools. She remarked that it required a suitable person to introduce the material, as it was a kind of relationship with God and not merely the transfer of knowledge.

The transmission of faith done by Sister Joy's convent school could offer some good practices to mobilise teachers, enhance direct interactions with students and introduce religious life and missionary work of the institute to share. She stated:

First, we give our school teachers an annual retreat and let them know the vision and mission of our institute. When the teachers are mobilised, they conduct RSE classes for Form One students in our convent, so that the students have the chance to visit our chapel and learn about the history and founder of our institute.

Second, we encourage our teachers to lead students on a pilgrimage abroad. I remembered that they had once led the students on a pilgrimage to South Korea. We then invited the students to give presentations as well as share their experiences with our religious sisters after the pilgrimage. This provided the students with opportunities to directly interact with our religious sisters.

Moreover, our religious sisters set up a booth on Career Day to introduce the religious life and missionary work of our institute to our students, as they may never think being a religious is an option or possibility. The students can see that being a religious does not simply mean living in another world cut off from the earthly world. There is meaningful missionary work for them to lead a fulfilling life through the poor and the disadvantaged.

As experienced in teaching her institute's primary and secondary schools, Sister Icon suggested some measures to arouse students' awareness of a religious vocation by means of identifying suitable manpower for the faith cultivation and collaborating with school management to live up to the mission of the institute. First, identify teachers fit for teaching RSE classes. Apart from bringing the knowledge to the students, the teacher should also nourish students' prayer life and involve them in charity services to live up to the Christian faith. Second, engage suitable pastoral assistants to help cultivate the students' faith by organising religious activities for them to participate. Third, communicate and collaborate with school management to lead the learning and develop the students' potential in line with the spirit of the institute by providing manpower and financial support in case of need. Sister Icon believed and kept saying, 'If the parties concerned are willing to do, God will offer suitable manpower and required resources.'

*Church Community (DHK, Parishes and DVC)*

The Church community here covers the DHK, parishes and the DVC. The DHK has its own administrative structure, maintaining close links with the Pope and is the 'head' of the Church in Hong Kong responsible for caring about the Christian faithful community in the territory. The parish is a place where all the faithful can be gathered together for the Sunday celebration of the Eucharist and receive Christ's saving doctrine, as well as practise the charity of the Lord in good works and brotherly love (CCC No. 2179). The DVC is aimed at fostering religious vocations in Hong Kong by (a) assisting young men and women with understanding the priesthood and consecrated life so as to respond to God's calling; (b) facilitating Catholic families' understanding of the meaning of consecrated life, so they can encourage and nurture their children to pursue consecrated life; and (c) promoting, coordinating and collaborating with Catholic communities in the planning and formation

work in relation to religious vocations.<sup>22</sup>

After noting the functions of these three parties, their respective roles in fostering religious vocations will each be examined in the following paragraphs.

### Diocese of Hong Kong

For the sake of fostering religious vocations, the participants considered that the DHK is responsible for preparing the ground for the seeds of religious vocations to grow, and seeking God's grace and assistance in granting youngsters the courage to respond to His calling. On this, the DHK has to steer the provision of foundation formation for the faithful, give proper recognition to and promote religious life, and react as well as respond to the needs of society. Father Abraham considered that the DHK has to proclaim the message to the faithful that God loves mankind unconditionally, and it is natural for one to think about one's vocation as well as a religious vocation. Sister Joy, thus, pointed out that only a person who has a good relationship with God would invest time with Him, as witnessed by studying faith-related courses and participating in spiritual retreats. The love encounter with God would make one gradually let go of one's desires and surrender to God's will.

The faithful have to be aware that every Christian has a mission to live up to their faith in life, and some may be chosen by God to pursue priestly or consecrated life. These priests and religious form different parts of the mystery body of the Church and play their unique roles. Brother David considered it essential to propagate the good points and advantages of pursuing a religious life, which offers a regular form of life with spirituality and prayers for oneself and meaningful work for others. Nevertheless, every organisation has its own structure and the Catholic Church is no exception. To a certain extent, it is a misconception that the status of a religious brother is inferior to that of a priest in the Church hierarchy, as experienced by Brother David. It is, therefore, important to rectify such a

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<sup>22</sup> The information is from the website of Catholic Diocese of Hong Kong (<https://catholic.org.hk>).

misconception and give proper recognition to religious brothers.

Church is the visual image of God present on earth. Therefore, the DHK should perform her role closely by relating to society and reacting/responding to its needs. Both Father Abraham and Brother Emmanuel indicated that if youngsters see the mercy and love of God present in the Church, they would find the religious life meaningful to pursue.

### Parishes

In Hong Kong, there are at present 52 parishes (Hong Kong 14, Kowloon 21 and New Territory 17), comprising 40 churches, 31 chapels and 27 halls for religious services (HKCCD 2020). With the formation of the faithful at the central level by the DHK, parishes can foster religious vocations in their respective communities in three ways: formation of all faithful from all walks of life; engagement with youth in particular; and displaying religious personnel icons of God's chosen ones.

For a good foundation, parishes have to organise tailor-made formation programmes for various target groups, namely laity, couples, parents and children. First, Sister Icon pointed out that parishes can organise formation for laity, in general, about some basic catechumen of the Christian faith and cultivate them to become enthusiastic Catholics. Second, Sister Humble indicated that parishes should identify suitable people to introduce the teaching kits on religious vocations provided by the DVC in Sunday schools. Third, Sister Humble further opined that confirmation celebrations can be jointly held among parishes of the same deanery<sup>23</sup> to enhance the faithful's sense of belonging in the Church and their connection within the same deanery. Fourth, Sister Grace said that parishes can encourage parents of keen faithful to support their children's pursuit of a religious vocation. Lastly,

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<sup>23</sup> There are a total of eight deaneries in the Diocese of Hong Kong. Each deanery consists of a number of parishes, ranging from 4 to 8, for administrative and better coordination purposes. The eight deaneries are Hong Kong East (consisting of 8 parishes), Hong Kong South-West and Islands (consisting of 6), East Kowloon (consisting of 6), Central Kowloon (consisting of 7), South-West Kowloon (consisting of 8), North-East New Territories (consisting of 7), South-West New Territories (consisting of 6) and North-West New Territories (consisting of 4).

Sister Icon suggested that parishes also accompany those faithful who have emotional disturbances to heal their wounds through caring and companionship.

For the youth, in particular, Father Benedict shared that parish priests can include the message of a religious vocation in their homilies during mass and encourage youngsters to think more about it. He added that parishes can organise talks to promote religious vocations. In addition, Miss Noel thought that parish religious personnel can encourage and accompany youngsters to participate in WYD, which provides a very good opportunity for youngsters to encounter God, as many cases have shown that participants of WYD started to think about their religious vocation after they attended the event. Also, Father Abraham and Father Christopher considered that parishes should give encouragement to youngsters who indicate a desire to pursue a religious vocation, pray for them, accompany them and offer assistance to them whenever they are in need.

According to Sister Humble, religious personnel are God's chosen ones and should set a good example to attract others to follow Jesus. Sister Icon considered that religious personnel should approach the faithful proactively when serving in parishes. Sister Joy opined that religious personnel should also try to spare some time to teach catechumen classes in parishes, so as to have more interactions with the faithful and know their concerns.

#### Diocesan Vocation Commission

The DVC acts as the resource centre for promoting religious vocations in Hong Kong. Brother David and Sister Joy appreciated the DVC's efforts in organising religious vocation camps and providing systematic information on religious institutes to facilitate youngsters' interest in and search for a religious vocation. Sister Faith pointed out that in her school years, the DVC coordinated youngsters from different parishes or schools to participate in WYD, invited priests as spiritual directors for the event and organised follow-up gatherings. In recent years, Sister Humble and Sister Joy have been aware that the DVC has invited the

faithful to help with prayers for religious vocations in Hong Kong and designed learning kits on religious vocations to be used in both schools and Sunday school in the parishes.

According to Sister Faith, some religious personnel are invited to share their religious vocation journeys at schools and in parishes. Noting that religious vocations cannot be generated, Father Abraham, Brother David and Sister Humble indicated that the DVC has been involved in nurturing a culture for religious vocations as well as cultivating an environment to facilitate people's listening to God's calling.

Although the DVC has delivered numerous positive works, Sister Faith pointed out that it still lacks the manpower to implement the work. There is still room for improvement in two respects: (a) the promotion programmes are mainly focused on enhancing the faithful's awareness of the need to respond to a religious vocation, but they have not touched upon the religious life itself, and (b) there is a lack of spiritual directors to act as companions to the faithful in the discernment process.

To address these two limitations, Sister Faith understood that the DVC recently revamped the promotion programmes, and in October 2019, launched a series of seven 2-hour sharing sessions conducted by religious personnel from different religious institutes on a monthly basis. The themes included a deeper understanding of the three vows (chastity, poverty and obedience), listening to God's voice, knowing about priesthood life and responding to a religious vocation, in the hope that they would provide an overview of the major components of religious life.

The DVC plays a neutral role in providing the faithful with information about the various religious institutes, rather than accompanying them in the discernment process. Sister Faith said that the DVC recently invited her to conduct formation for vocation promoters and novice masters/mistresses of religious institutes to equip them with both knowledge and skills in interacting with those people who wish to respond to a religious vocation and undergo

subsequent formation programmes.

### *Religious Personnel and Religious Institutes*

Before people decide to pursue a religious life, religious personnel serve as important icons to attract them or draw them into considering as well as responding to a religious vocation. Upon entering a religious life, the formation and community life of the institute concerned have a great impact on people continuing on their religious vocation journeys. The participants' experiences provide insights into the respective roles performed by religious personnel and religious institutes that help foster religious vocations. The following paragraphs elicit the participants' insights in this regard.

#### Religious Personnel

The participants unanimously opined that religious personnel should first live up to their nature of being people of God, so as to attract, rather than deter, others to pursue a religious life. The nature is two-sided: internal and external. Joy is the internal disposition. Though religious life may be busy, religious personnel can still remain joyful as they are experiencing God's love at the same time. Joyless religious personnel runs counter to God's calling them.

Compared to the other participants, Sister Grace's institute has produced quite abundant fruits in the religious vocation in recent decades. For just over 30 years, her institute has established approximately 1,300 religious sisters throughout the world up to the present day. Between 2001 and March 2019, there were 11 Hong Kong-born religious sisters. Some people have shared with Sister Grace that only the religious sisters of her institute know how to smile. Hence, the joyfulness as witnessed by the religious personnel is very important in attracting others to pursue a religious life.

The external display includes religious personnel's ability to (a) walk the talk, (b) be faithful to their callings and (c) inspire youngsters to consider and have the courage to



respond to a religious vocation. As religious personnel are God's chosen ones, they should best reflect His image. Brother David, Brother Emmanuel and Sister Icon, therefore, agreed with the general expectation that the thoughts, words and deeds of religious personnel should at least be good, if not exemplary, and consistent. In other words, if religious personnel live up to their reputation, they can attract others to imitate and, thus, think of their own religious vocation.

Second, religious personnel should be faithful to their callings and maintain their respective identities in their religious vocations. In other words, one has to respect one's own vocation, show perseverance in encountering difficulties and accomplish the entrusted mission. Father Abraham, thus, considered that as a priest, he should be a kind shepherd caring about his sheep. He is the only one who can minister the sacrament of the Eucharist for the faithful, the sacrament of Reconciliation for the penitents and the sacrament of Anointing for the sick. For the religious, they should be the image and messenger of God to bring the Good News to others. They carry out the mission of evangelisation, letting more people know God to love and follow Him. To those who have left the Church for whatever reason, the religious should seek them out, talk and walk with them, so that they can feel loved, forgiven and accepted by God. These faithful will then return to the Church for a revived life. Sister Grace said that the founder of her institute believed that if the religious have done their mission well, they will produce fruits for the religious vocation in the institute.

Third, Father Abraham, Father Benedict and Father Christopher remarked that one of the major tasks of religious personnel is to inspire youngsters to consider and have the courage to respond to a religious vocation. They should make themselves approachable and available to youngsters and accompany the latter in 'seek-and-search' processes. The presence and companionship of religious personnel are regarded as two important tools to promote religious vocations.

In order to live up to the religious life, the participants shared that religious personnel have to put effort into (a) strengthening spirituality, (b) practising humility and (c) being the icons of evangelisation. Brother David, Sister Humble and Sister Icon indicated that religious personnel should have a deep prayer life and build an intimate relationship with God. Father Abraham echoed that only when religious personnel have strengthened their spiritual foundation, will they let go of earthly values and place their free will at God's disposal. Otherwise, they may not truly live up to their respective lives.

On practising humility, Father Benedict and Father Christopher both agreed that religious personnel have to bear in mind that they are called to consecrate their lives to serve others in the state of celibacy, and they should also be aware that they have to sacrifice themselves. Father Abraham and Mr King regarded that priests have to minister sacraments of Eucharist and Anointing for the dying faithful, no matter how busy they are or how little sleep they have had. The experiences of Father Abraham, Father Benedict, Sister Grace and Sister Icon indicate that religious personnel as a whole have to spend time and actively take care of their members in the diocese or institute, in particular, the elderly and senior members.

To become an icon of evangelisation, Sister Grace considered that religious personnel have to wear the habit of their institutes, showing that they are members of that particular community. Sister Icon added that the habit would present a clear symbol of their identities and facilitate their bringing the gospel of good news to others.

Last but not least, Sister Humble and Sister Joy shared that religious personnel should keep praying to God for the required grace to walk the religious vocation journey.

### Religious Institutes

The participants' stories tell that the formation and community life they experienced in the religious institutes had a considerable impact on their proceeding on the journey. Good

practices will benefit novices' personal development and harmonious interactions with community members, while undesirable community life will trigger thoughts of leaving the institute. Good practices can be regarded as the Dos, which may increase the attractiveness of religious life and, thus, foster religious vocations. Unsatisfactory areas can be treated as DON'Ts, and improving these may also help foster religious vocations.

Regarding good practices, they arose from the formation period, including the closed environment, personality development and prayer life, and the training of one's discipline. On the closed environment of formation, Father Abraham, Father Christopher and Brother David agreed that this good practice enables seminarians/novices to focus on religious life away from worldly distractions. The formation of religious personnel takes approximately 7–10 years, providing them with sufficient time to examine if their motivation to pursue a religious life is pure, directed towards sacred values, and that they are ready for the identity change from laity to priests or religious.

The religious institutes put great emphasis on personality development and prayer life during the formation. In the self-knowing process, one has to be aware of as well as to accept one's weaknesses. It is a painful but fruitful experience. Sister Humble considered the prayer life, liturgical routines and yearly retreats golden opportunities to enrich the spiritual life of religious personnel. This explains why the four laity, although they have quit the religious life, fully appreciate the formation, which enabled them to know who they are and their life direction after leaving the institute. Mr King shared a saying: 'An ex-seminarian is always the best husband', because a person can produce fruits after the pruning.

Father Abraham and Father Christopher, both from Religious Institute A, pointed out that the formation helped train their discipline and perseverance. The repetitive nature of the timetable, particularly the prayer sessions, nurtures a person's inner discipline and feelings of God's presence in the tasks of the daily agenda. This discipline trains one to keep up the

prayer practices in the midst of the daily busy missionary work. Seminarians in some institutes may have the luxury of living with the bishop, who acts as a role model for them to learn. The placement arrangement allows the priest-to-be to familiarise himself with the services in parishes, so as to adapt to the subsequent pastoral work life more easily.

The formation programme at Sister Grace's institute is comprehensive and impressive. The institute represents missionary work and prayer life as two lungs that have to breathe together and are important to one another. The religious sisters are equipped with knowledge to carry out the mission of evangelisation effectively. Furthermore, they study and make use of the spirituality of St Ignatius to meditate and to discern. They also learn the methods of St Don Bosco for encountering youth. To maintain a balance with their busy missionary work, the religious sisters are given a 1-hour nap to recharge and time to read spiritual books. The recreation activities are full of interactions with community members and require one to learn humility and self-sacrifice to create joy for others. Every religious sister is required to prepare their own yearly whole-person development plan, covering five aspects: personal development, team building, and intellectual, spiritual and evangelising or missionary work. Finally, there is a 30-day retreat every 10 years.

In order to learn humility, Sister Grace said that the religious sisters of her institute have to go to the market to 'beg' hawkers for vegetables for consumption during the formation period. Some hawkers give them good ones, but others give them spoiled ones. Apart from learning to be humble, they learn what it means to be reliant on God. In addition, a 'challenge' programme is conducted once a year, which demands one's physical energy, such as hiking and swimming, and involves teamwork. The programme is aimed at giving the individual a chance to overcome their weaknesses as well as enhance their understanding and interactions among members of the community.

The participants, nevertheless, pointed out that there is room for improvement in the

religious institutes in relation to their formation or missionary work. In the aspects of formation, the participants opined that some of the religious institutes had: (a) engaged their novices in substantial housework in addition to their hectic schedules of studies and liturgical life (Miss Mary); (b) assigned inconsiderate and shallow (relationship with God) formation masters/mistresses (Sister Humble); (c) allowed insufficient time for prayer life (Father Abraham and Sister Humble); (d) provided inadequate support with their placements in parishes for pastoral work (Father Christopher); and (e) provided no clear picture of their mission upon ordination (Mr Luke). To address these issues, the institutes concerned should make appropriate adjustments or rectifications so that balance can be obtained at the respective ends to facilitate novices' adaptations to a religious life.

Sister Humble cited a message given in a talk by Bishop Joseph Ha, who said that when the missionary work of religious institutes is focused and not too diverse, the recruits for the religious vocations of these institutes are comparatively more stable. This might be attributed to the fact that the religious personnel in these institutes are clear about the mission and, thus, can carry out dedicated work with passion, despite the hardships they may encounter. Sister Humble, Sister Grace and Sister Joy remarked that missionary work should not be too busy. Otherwise, religious personnel can neither squeeze in time to 'talk' to God in silence nor pray together with the community. Brother David and Sister Humble indicated that a good team spirit among community members will help attract the faithful to its institute to lead a religious life, due to its strong sense of belonging. Sister Humble further pointed out that the religious sisters of the Missionaries of Charity, St Teresa of Calcutta being the foundress of the institute, have presented a good example in this regard, as they always attend important celebrations in the DHK together amidst their busy schedules.

### *Youngsters*

When the parties concerned (family, schools, DHK, parishes, DVC, religious

personnel and religious institutes) are in place, it implies that a favourable foundation is already established. The focus will then be on the youngsters, who are the major potential target group of respondents to the religious vocations. In fostering religious vocations among youngsters, the participants considered that the measures of (a) understanding them more, (b) engaging them in spiritual development, (c) providing them with opportunities for faith experiences, and (d) introducing them to religious life and various religious institutes are all indispensable.

Father Christopher and Sister Faith considered it essential to know who the youngsters are and to identify what they are looking for. Father Benedict said that it is equally important to accompany them, listen to them and address their concerns. It is natural for most people to seek a comfortable, easier way of life. However, some people, especially youngsters, will leave everything behind if they find a more meaningful life. Therefore, if they consider the priesthood or religious life meaningful, they will daringly go forward even with the anticipated difficulties that lie ahead. Father Abraham and Mr King have known some youngsters in their twenties who had the determination and courage to let go of all things to follow God and pursue a religious life.

Not all youngsters will have or desire a religious vocation. It is, however, fundamentally important to nurture them to have a good conscience, and live out the faith and values of life. As a result, Sister Joy considered engaging youngsters in spiritual development by strengthening their prayer life, practising silence and attending Eucharistic Adoration. All of these practices enable youngsters to establish a good connection as well as a relationship with God, and at the same time, serve as good preparation for a religious vocation in the long run. In the present digital world, Father Benedict pointed out that people are flooded with messages and seldom have silence, which provides the perfect environment to listen to God's voice. Only when a person can listen to God's calling will they identify His will for them and

gradually abandon their own desires to submit to His plan. Youngsters are advised to practise spiritual exercises to discern God's will for them.

In their own experiences, the participants expressed that their participation in WYD (Father Abraham, Father Christopher, Brother David, Sister Faith and Miss Noel) and pilgrimages abroad (Brother Emmanuel, Sister Grace, Sister Humble and Sister Joy) were a turning point in their lives, triggering them to think about a religious vocation. Sister Grace shared that her religious institute organised volunteer services or exposure trips for youngsters to developing countries, such as Ukraine and Tanzania, so that they could see the missionary work her institute provided therein. These activities provide youngsters with opportunities to experience faith in various environments. She recalled that the general feelings of the participants were peaceful, impressed, joyful and holy.

From the participants' experiences, their response to a religious vocation first came about by contact and invitation. As a result, it is useful to introduce youngsters to the essence of religious life and various religious institutes to facilitate their consideration of a religious vocation. Religious life involves sacrificing oneself for God's love by serving others. Every religious personnel has a unique mission. For example, priests are called on to minister the sacraments of Eucharist, Reconciliation and Anointing for the dying faithful, and to bring God's love and salvation to others. Father Abraham, Father Benedict, Father Christopher and Mr Luke found that the mission of priests, in this respect, is holy and meaningful, and their role in ministering sacraments is irreplaceable.

Sister Joy, Sister Grace and Brother Emmanuel shared their personal experiences and views in accompanying youngsters in the 'seek-and-search' process. Sister Joy led a group of youngsters, who attended activities organised by the DVC, to discern God's will or plan for their lives, disregarding if it was a religious or a married life. As taught by the parish priests, Sister Grace learnt and agreed that one had to seek and ask God about His will for oneself

unceasingly. She recalled that a man was asked by a religious sister in a catechumen class if he had thought of becoming a priest. This prompted the man to start thinking, and he subsequently entered religious life. Although there was a declining trend in the responses to a religious vocation, Brother Emmanuel insisted that youngsters should be given an overall picture of religious life, especially the challenges and hardships anticipated along the way, to prepare them psychologically.

### *Social Media*

In modern society, communication media play a major role in information dissemination, cultural promotion and formation. With technological progress, the role of the media continues to increase, along with the extent and diversity of the news transmitted (CCC No. 2493). The social media referred to here examines how technology helps foster religious vocations in the Hong Kong context. The data collected from the participants show that four stakeholders have deployed technology in the promotion of religious vocations in their respective areas. The four stakeholders are Youth Boiling Point (YBP), the DVC, the HSS and Religious Institute E.

Started in 2016, YBP is a new media campaign based on the cooperation of the Hong Kong Diocesan Audio-Visual Centre and the Diocesan Youth Commission. This new media initiative is aimed at enhancing the Catholic faith of youngsters and attracting nonbelievers to know more about the Catholic Church. Its hope is to equip Catholics to become apostles of the new media, and to testify and share their experiences and faith, so as to spread/bring the gospel to a wider horizon.<sup>24</sup> Sister Grace pointed out that, in recent years, YBP has been the media outlet frequently used by the DHK to address the concerns and topics of interest of

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<sup>24</sup> The information is from the Facebook page of the Youth Boiling Point (<https://www.facebook.com/YouthBoilingPoint/>)



today's youth. It also serves as an effective tool to answer the youth's enquiries about faith. In May 2020, YBP and the DVC jointly organised four live online talks (2 hours each on Sunday nights) to promote religious vocations. The programme invited religious personnel from different institutes to share their love encounters with God. Two Christian lovers and a married youngster also participated in the programme to share their experiences and seek answers to questions from the religious personnel.

As mentioned earlier by Sister Faith, the DVC has revamped the religious vocation programme, and in October 2019, launched a series of seven 2-hour sharing sessions conducted by religious personnel from different institutes on a monthly basis for a period of 7 months. It is noted that the first five sharing sessions were held in the HSS. Owing to the effect of the Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) pandemic, the DVC conducted the last two sharing sessions online in March and April 2020.

The HSS was set up in 1964 with the primary goal of teaching theology and philosophy to men preparing for the ordained ministry. In other words, the HSS is responsible for the formation of seminarians, who will then become priests to serve in the DHK after their ordination. It was learnt from Sister Humble that the HSS is going to revamp the website and introduce a mobile application to promote the religious vocation.

According to Sister Grace, her Religious Institute E has been using Facebook and Instagram as media to promulgate the messages of the community and promote religious vocations. The Mother-in-charge of her institute considers the Chinese materials limited. In order to promote the institute by means of technology, her Mother-in-charge plans to develop a website in Chinese in addition to the current media.

Participants' perspectives on the measures to foster religious vocation are consolidated in Table 14.

Together with the previous two chapters, the stories of the participants' religious

vocation journeys were examined. It began with their responses, followed by the discernment processes, supports received, barriers encountered and coping strategies adopted. Moreover, the participants' perspectives on the reasons for the declining trend of responses to religious vocation in Hong Kong and measures to foster religious vocation were analysed. The next chapter critically discusses how the findings answer the two questions stated in this research.



**Table 14***Participants' Perspectives on the Measures to Foster a Religious Vocation*

Group	Party	Present Good Practices/Suggested Measures to Foster a Religious Vocation
1	Family	Parents nurture children to seek God's will and support them to think about a religious vocation.
		Religious personnel heal the wounds of broken families and transmit faith to them.
	Schools (run by Diocese of Hong Kong/ Religious Institutes)	Identify suitable teachers to cultivate faith by means of teaching and leading pilgrimages.
		Increase interactions with students and introduce religious life to them at appropriate times.
		Collaborate with school management to live out the spirit of the institute in education.
2	Diocese of Hong Kong	Add prayer intentions for religious vocations in school masses.
		Proclaim God's love to mankind and help the faithful build a close relationship with God.
		Help Christians live up to their mission in life and give proper recognition to religious brothers.
	Parishes	Closely relates to society and reacts to its needs; also, let people see God's presence in it.
		Organise tailor-made formation programmes for the faithful from all walks of life.
		Engage youngsters through talks and religious-related activities, and provide companionship.
		Religious personnel set good examples of God's chosen ones, attracting others to respond.
3	Religious Personnel	Organise promotion programmes on the essence of religious life for the faithful.
		Conduct formation for members of institutes involved in vocation promotion/formation.
	Religious Institutes	<u>Internal Disposition</u> : Live out the joyful nature of religious personnel.
		<u>External Display</u> : Ability to walk the talk; Be faithful to their callings; Capable of inspiring youngsters to consider and have the courage to respond to a religious vocation.
		<u>DOs</u> : Closed environment of formation; Personality development and prayer life; Training on discipline, perseverance and humility; Placement in parishes for pastoral work.
4	Youngsters	<u>DON'Ts</u> : Engage novices in substantial housework; Assign inconsiderate and shallow (relationship with God) novice masters/mistresses; Insufficient time for prayer life; Inadequate support with placements in parishes for pastoral work; Provide no clear picture on the mission upon ordination; Missionary work too diverse.
		Religious personnel should understand youngsters more; engage them in spiritual development; provide them with opportunities for faith experiences; and introduce them to religious life and various religious institutes.
5	Social Media	Religious personnel should understand youngsters more; engage them in spiritual development; provide them with opportunities for faith experiences; and introduce them to religious life and various religious institutes.
		Enhance the Catholic faith of youngsters and address their concerns and interests.
		Increase online means for promotion; Revamp the website; Develop website in Chinese.

## CHAPTER 7: DISCUSSION

This chapter aims to provide a critical discussion of the findings that I have examined in the previous three chapters, and to construct an overall understanding of the religious vocation journeys of the religious personnel and laity who participated in this study. First, the purpose and research questions of this thesis are restated. Second, the findings related to the journeys of the 14 participants, including their responses to a religious vocation, discernment processes and selection of religious institutes, barriers encountered, coping strategies adopted and supports received, are summarised. Third, the participants' perspectives on the reasons for the declining trend of responses to a religious vocation and measures to foster religious vocations in Hong Kong are presented. Lastly, with the insights gained from the discussion of the findings, an attempt to address the issue of the declining population of religious personnel, despite an expansion of the Catholic lay population in Hong Kong, is mapped out. In the course of the discussion, reference to and application of relevant theories and literature will be made.

### **Restatement of the Purpose and the Research Questions of the Study**

In order to summarise and discuss the major findings presented in the previous three chapters with the appropriate focus, the purpose of the study and the research questions are revisited here. The aim of this research was to explore the religious vocation journeys of a sample of Chinese priests, religious brothers and religious sisters, who are Hong Kong-born in the context of a declining population of religious personnel, despite an expansion of the Catholic lay population in the territory. The study was, thus, to examine the responses of these religious personnel to the religious calling to pursue priestly/consecrated life, and to identify the supports and barriers associated with their respective vocation journeys, as well as their coping strategies to overcome the barriers therein. Based on this purpose, two

research questions were developed:

- (1) What are the journeys that lead to a sample of Chinese priests, religious brothers and religious sisters to respond to the religious vocation and pursue priestly/consecrated life in the context of a declining population of religious personnel, despite an expansion of the Catholic lay population in Hong Kong?
- (2) What supports and barriers are associated with their religious vocation journeys, and what are their coping strategies to overcome the barriers therein?

It is noted that not all people become religious personnel after admission to religious institutes for formation, as some quit the journey. To provide a comprehensive story of a vocation and achieve multiple data collection, some religious personnel-to-be, who had entered religious institutes but later left, were also invited to participate in this research. Life history interviews with a total of 14 participants (7 male and 7 female), comprising 10 religious personnel (3 priests, 2 religious brothers and 5 religious sisters) and 4 laity (2 men and 2 women), were conducted. Having briefly reviewed the study aim, research questions and research method, the key findings to the two research questions are summarised and discussed one by one below.

### **Summary and Discussion of the Findings Related to the First Research Question**

The first research question aimed to (a) identify the major events that triggered the participants' responses to a religious vocation and examine if they are solely from the guiding force, the individual self, the intention for others' good or a combination of these; and (b) understand their discernment processes for leading a religious life and selecting a diocese or particular religious institute to pursue a religious life. This section summarises five major findings identified under this research question: two on the dimensions of the calling in respect of life events that triggered the participants' responses to the religious vocation, and three on the discernment processes and selection of religious institutes.

*Dimensions of the Calling that Triggered Participants' Responses to the Religious Vocation*

First, the study identified that the 14 participants' responses to a religious vocation could broadly be grouped into four dimensions in accordance with the feelings they experienced in the process: (a) Personal encounter with God; (b) God's invitation through messengers; (c) Desire from individual self; and (d) Intention for others' good (Table 6). It was discovered that the participants either received the calling from the three dimensions (groupings of (a), (b) and (c)) alone, or they experienced various combinations with a dominant role played by one of these three dimensions. Though some participants considered others' good under grouping (d) in leading a religious life, their feeling in this regard was comparatively less strong and had, hence, been subsumed under either (a) or (b). Some other participants experienced the calling from three out of the four dimensions, but they considered their personal encounter with God had fundamentally moved them to respond to His call. Regarding the feeling of being solely driven by self-desire, there were traits relating to God for one participant aimed at responding to God's love, and another who wished to consecrate totally to God, as their respective motivations for pursuing a religious life. In other words, all the callings of religious vocation come from God, who may encounter the person directly, pass the messages through others or inspire one's inner desire.

Second, the findings showed that the channels to experience the dimensions of callings varied, but the majority of them were linked to participants' exposures in religious-related activities. For those who had a personal encounter with God, the participants were engaging in religious experiences, ranging from personal prayer at home or at a retreat, receiving Holy Communion at mass, attending Eucharistic Adoration, joining a pilgrimage or participating in WYD. Regarding the venues in which the messengers appeared to trigger the thoughts of the participants, they included their interactions with others at parishes, during liturgy (mass celebration) and participating in WYD. For the desire from individual self,

some participants were prompted by the love/passion they obtained through services at parishes or feeling God's invitation while attending the mass celebration at Easter.

*Discernment Processes and Selection of Religious Institutes*

Third, the study found that some participants had the companionship of spiritual director(s) in discerning whether to pursue a religious life prior to their admission to the respective religious institutes. For those who did not have the companionship of spiritual directors, some of them had once entered religious life but later left the institute. The majority of these participants admitted that their discernment processes had not been thoroughly conducted. To a certain extent, this indicates the importance of the companionship of spiritual directors in helping one discern God's will for one's religious vocation in life.

The findings showed that participants also made use of visits to religious institutes and/or attending come-and-see programmes to take part in the daily life of the religious institutes, which involved prayers and liturgical activities to discern if it was God's will for them to pursue such a life. In selecting a particular religious institute, the come-and-see programmes were also helpful in the discernment process, as they provided opportunities for the participants to know more about the respective institutes, including their charisma, missionary work, community and liturgical life.

Furthermore, the participants indicated that self-reflection by means of prayers, meditation and/or contemplation were indispensable for examining one's decision to lead a religious life and select a religious institute. A person would consider the decision on the right track if they had inner peace and saw no hurdles in front of their path to move on.

In view of the importance of the discernment process, Sister Humble suggested a three-tier approach to ensure the discernment was done thoroughly and to minimise bias therein. In this approach, a concerted effort from the subject person, the religious institute concerned and a third neutral party, such as the team of spiritual directors in the Xavier

House, which is renowned for providing spiritual companionship for retreatants, is required to conduct the discernment. For the good of both the institute and the candidate, a thorough discernment has to be conducted prior to the person professing their initial vows.

Fourth, the study discovered that concerns at various stages of the discernment might differ between men and women. In the early stage of the discernment, five female participants (three religious sisters and two laity) thought that there might be many options to serve God, other than being a religious sister. They were, therefore, open to other forms of life and exploring the possibilities. Nevertheless, they found themselves restless and still dissatisfied with their work or activities in the Church. They finally let go of their self-desire and surrendered to God in choosing a religious life.

In contrast, the male participants in this research had not thought of other options to serve God, other than entering religious life. However, in pursuing a religious vocation, the men did have a further choice between the priesthood and a religious brotherhood. The findings showed that the decisions of the three male participants (one priest and two religious brothers) were made by self-desire, others' advice or green lights on the way, respectively. One participant discerned himself to be a religious brother, as he desired fraternal communion and service, rather than that of ministerial priesthood. The superior in the institute of another participant considered that the pursuit of a religious brotherhood in the community suited him better. Regarding the remaining participant, he had once approached a religious institute for priesthood life but received no response. He, therefore, went for a religious brotherhood but there were stumbling blocks. He finally found his calling of becoming a priest in his current institute.

Lastly, the study found that each participant's path to responding to a religious vocation was unique and could not be proven objectively, as the reasons given by each individual to follow a religious vocation involved personal experience and subjective



interpretations. The researcher purposely invited some participants (8 out of 14) from the same religious institutes to study if they selected a particular institute for the same reasons. Among them, 4 participants had selected Religious Institute A, and 2 each had selected Religious Institute C and Religious Institute F, respectively. Only 2 religious brothers shared similarities in having the companionship of spiritual directors in the discernment process and selecting the institute for its charisma. However, the reasons for consecrating their lives as religious brothers differed. Moreover, the findings also revealed that in terms of the discernment processes and their rationale for consecrating their lives as priests or religious, the reasons of the majority of the participants differed (Table 7), even among those at the same religious institute.

Having summarised the key findings in both the dimensions of the calling and the discernment processes as well as the selection of religious institutes, I will now discuss their implications for the relevant theories, the literature and the context in Hong Kong. The discussion covers the areas of the elements and interpretation of a religious vocation, dimensions and nature of callings, tools of the discernment process, transformation of identity and exploration of religious personnel.

### *Elements and Interpretation of a Religious Vocation*

First, the findings provide some insights that enrich the elements of a religious vocation and suggest an interpretation that best suits this research. According to Rulla (1971), a religious vocation carries three elements: an invitation by God; a claim upon the total existence of the one called; and a new obligation, involving the permanent choice of a particular form of life in the Church. The solid experiences of the participants added four more elements: a gift from the Creator to His creatures on earth and mankind, who can at most seek grace for receiving the gift but not creating it; God grants the chosen ones with grace to accomplish the unique mission entrusted; God attracts mankind to have an intimate

relationship with Him but leaves them the freedom to choose which form of life to lead; and the genuineness of God's calling may be viewed from a retrospective angle and cannot be proven objectively. The benchmark of a religious vocation is subject to one's looking upward towards God, desiring communion with Him and pursuing the glory of God as the ultimate goal in life, irrespective of whether it is a religious life, celibate life or married life. This coincides with the four types of religious vocation for Christians, namely laity, religious, priests and missionaries as defined by the DVC (1993) in the book 《獻》.

With this interpretation of religious vocation, the four laity in this study, although they had once been religious personnel-to-be, did have their respective religious vocations called by God. Two have engaged in married life, and the other two are currently leading a celibate life. Nevertheless, the final forms of life for the latter two are not yet known, as one of them is still searching God's will and her answer remains open.

#### *Dimensions and Nature of Callings*

Second, the findings provide a further breakdown to the dimensions of a calling. Currently, the definition of a calling to a career/vocation involves three dimensions: guiding force, individual self and intention for others' good (Dik & Diffy, 2009; Hunter et al., 2010). The participants differentiated between the guiding force from a personal encounter with God and God's invitation through messengers. They regarded the former as their personal direct encounter with God and the latter as God's indirect approach to them through others. God's invitation through messengers can, therefore, be viewed as a kind of environmental influence that is beyond the human's control or awareness (Lent et al., 2000). Nevertheless, both callings are fundamentally orientated from God above, inviting mankind to act on His will/plan. The findings, thus, provide a similar categorisation, yet with a further breakdown, to the present studies on the dimensions of calling in the aspect of guiding force.

The findings, however, offer a different perspective to the dimension of self. The

focus of the participants under the desire from individual self is not on their enjoyment and happiness through the pursuit of interests/talents/meaning in their respective lives (Hunter et al., 2010), but rather on entering a deeper relationship with God, consecrating oneself totally to God and responding to His love. Regarding the dimension for others' good, the findings show that its impact is comparatively less and has been subsumed under the personal encounter with God or God's invitation through messengers. In other words, the dimension of calling from God above outweighs or embraces participants' pursuit of altruism with a positive impact on and outcome for others (Hunter et al., 2010).

Third, the findings show that a religious vocation is not a secular conceptualisation of a calling, emphasising meaning and personal fulfilment in work (Steger et al., 2010), or an active search for personal and professional development (Hall & Chandler, 2005). Instead, a religious vocation is a sacred calling, which is an invitation from God to a vocation through which God's will is done (Rosso et al., 2010). The pursuit of a sacred calling imbues work with both meaning and meaningfulness through the sense that one is serving God and meeting the needs of the larger community. The findings also help illustrate that a religious vocation is a response not to internal promptings or desires, but rather to divine promptings. The vocation in this spiritual tradition is something finding its source in God (Bannon, 1998). In addition, the majority of the participants experienced their callings through their exposure to religious-related activities. This, thus, concurs with some studies' findings that personal religious experiences played a critical role in the development of a vocational interest and in the decision process of the priesthood (Sunardi, 2014).

#### *Tools of the Discernment Process*

Fourth, the study shows that the participants made use of three tools to assist them in the discernment process, including the companionship of spiritual directors, visiting religious institutes/attending the come-and-see programmes, and self-reflection to ascertain God's will.

The findings illustrate that the concept of discernment is complex and multifaceted (Hankle, 2009). Although it has often been reiterated that a religious vocation is not a career or occupation, but a particular form of life or state in life (Hankle, 2009), the come-and-see programmes are similar to those mentioned in career exploration activities, e.g. job shadowing, internships, which enable a person to clarify their interests, values and skills in relation to a particular occupational field and work tasks (Lent et al., 2002). Along these lines, studies in the literature on career/vocation choices indicate that the elements of personality, interests, ability, self-efficacy and motivation each play a role in the process (Ackerman & Beier, 2003; Bandura, 1977; Super, 1963). The cognitive-person variables further identify self-efficacy, outcome expectations and personal goals as constituting important factors in one's choice of career, enabling people to exercise personal control within their own career development (Lent et al., 2000). These three factors share a common ground, focusing on the subject person's beliefs in their abilities to successfully attain a particular behaviour, their response to their capabilities/outcome expectations and the occupational aspirations they wish to achieve.

The aim of the participants in this study, on the contrary, was on doing God's will rather than expressing their self-abilities and capabilities to achieve personal goals in the pursuit of a religious life. Nevertheless, the participants' experiences reflect that perseverance helped them sustain their career goals over long periods of time, even in the absence of external reinforcement, increasing the likelihood that desired outcomes would be attained (Lent et al., 1994).

### *Transformation of Identity*

Fifth, the findings show that the transformation of identity from self to priest is one of the important factors in discerning the vocation to the priesthood, and this is similar to the study conducted by Hankle (2009) on the psychological processes involved in discerning the

vocation to the Catholic priesthood in the United States. A sample of nine men from one singular Catholic seminary were selected for interviews in that study, which revealed that identity and sense of self were important factors in discerning the vocation to the Catholic priesthood.

In this research, two laity chose to leave the religious institutes during formation after realising that they were not called to become priests. Mr King discovered that he had strong reservations about his potential identity change from a faithful to a priest. He also understood that he should determine first and foremost what he was ‘becoming’, rather than what he would be ‘doing’ once he became a Catholic priest (Hankle, 2009). Mr Luke found that his genuine vocation was family and God desired him to undergo a married life. He realised and admitted that he had not been devoted and dedicated, and he had not consecrated himself totally to God on the journey of leading a religious life (Rulla, 1971).

Compared to the study conducted by Hankle, this research also offers insights into identity changes in the discernment process from the perspectives of the religious in addition to the priests. The participants who chose to become a religious did not experience such difficulties with the identity shift, unlike the laity in this study, who left the religious vocation journey.

### *Exploration of Religious Personnel*

Lastly, the study captured the life events that triggered the participants’ responses to the callings and their discernment processes to pursue a religious life as well as select a religious institute. In the Hong Kong context, short articles on how the priests and religious discovered and responded to their callings are usually published in KKP when the priests receive their ordination and the religious proclaim their permanent vows. Some books (《百力支》(2000), 《百力支II》(2002), 《猜·情·尋》(2011) and 《我的天使·我的Teens》(2018)) have collected the religious vocation journeys from a total of approximately 110 priests or

religious who have been or are serving in Hong Kong. However, their discernment processes as well as the ups and downs in their religious vocation journeys have not been recorded in detail. This study has, therefore, provided very valuable material on the inner worlds of religious personnel in this regard.

The participants in this study shared some similarities in their backgrounds and experiences to those religious personnel featured in the four books, which may be considered favourable factors for responding to a religious vocation. Both groups had studied in Catholic schools, participated in pilgrimages and WYD or were involved in parish activities. Nevertheless, no participants in this study indicated that they were motivated by the positive models of priests and religious, as mentioned by those religious personnel in the above books.

### **Summary and Discussion of the Findings Related to the Second Research Question**

The second research question aimed to (a) identify the barriers that participants faced in pursuing religious life and the strategies that they adopted to cope with the difficulties encountered; and (b) illustrate the supports that they received in providing them with strength and courage to continue on their religious vocation journeys. This section summarises the major findings identified under this research question in the respective aspects of barriers encountered, coping strategies adopted and supports received.

#### *Barriers Encountered*

The study found that the participants encountered barriers in three different scenarios of their journey: (a) deciding to pursue a religious life; (b) living the community life; and (c) practising evangelical counsels (poverty, chastity and obedience). In making the decision to pursue a religious life, the participants had encountered barriers arising from the individual self, or they had received negative responses from the outside environment, including family, friends and/or the faith community. From the aspect of the individual self, participants' personal issues, i.e. skin disease or a self-desire for married life, made them unready or

unwilling to choose a religious life. Families' objections or non-support were greatly influenced by traditional Chinese family values, in which sons and daughters should get married and bear children, and render financial support to their families. The friends and/or faith community either had reservations about the participants' decisions after taking into account the latter's personalities/abilities or had a negative image of the religious. The most salient barrier encountered by the participants in this scenario was family, in particular, those non-Catholic families who neither had knowledge of the Christian faith nor understood the meaning of a religious vocation.

In living community life, the findings revealed that the participants met hindrances in three areas. First, they faced challenges in matching with the setting, values and heavy commitments of the institute and in handling the relationship with the novice masters and their counterparts in the formation period. Second, the participants encountered difficulties in interactions with members in the community and laity at parishes on pastoral work. Third, their personalities clashed with the requirements of the vocation as well as community values.

In practising the evangelical counsels, the study found that all religious personnel participants expressed no difficulties with the vow of poverty. The majority of them thought that the challenges with chastity could be overcome while a few admitted encountering great difficulties. Most of the participants, however, found it hard to practise obedience, and some even regarded it as the most difficult vow among the three. When linking the vows to the capital sins of Christian experience, obedience is related to pride, which was the most difficult for the participants to overcome, while gluttony, which is related to poverty, did not constitute a problem for them. The participants stated that the three vows can be summarised as a person's denying oneself for the sake of God and/or love of God above all.

Among the three scenarios of the barriers (Table 8), all the participants unanimously agreed that community life was the most challenging one in pursuing a religious vocation.

Nevertheless, the participants viewed their hardships with the barriers and community life from a positive perspective: barriers provided opportunities for one to grow, integrate and discern; and community life gave one the opportunity to experience God's presence through interactions with one another.

### *Coping Strategies Adopted*

On the aspect of coping strategies, the findings unveiled that the participants had mainly adopted two approaches: looking upward to God and going inward to the individual self (Table 9). The participants had looked upward to God by means of prayers, putting trust in God, receiving sacraments (Eucharistic and Confession) and participating in liturgical life (Eucharistic Adoration and reading the Bible). They had also gone inward to the individual self by means of deepening their personal relationships with God, improving themselves and/or accepting and accommodating others to fulfil the two greatest commandments in the law as taught by Jesus: love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind; and love your neighbour as yourself (Matthew 22:37-40).

### *Supports Received*

The study found that the sources of support that the participants received, similar to those for barriers, came from their individual self and the environment, including family, friends, the faith community and the religious institute they entered (Table 10). The majority of them, however, realised that the most fundamental and significant source of support providing them with the strength to continue on the religious vocation journey was from God above. They experienced God's support and presence whenever they prayed to Him, whatever they put trust in Him and wherever they entered into an intimate relationship with Him. The participants' positive attitudes, willingness and efforts to let go of personal desires or pride for the sake of leading a religious life had also given them energy to continue the journey.



The participants received encouragement from the outside environment at different stages of their religious vocation journeys. The families of Christian faith were more receptive and supportive of their choice of a religious life, while participants from non-Catholic families were grateful for their family members' kindness in allowing them to respond to the religious vocation. They found their friends' encouragement, companionship and comfort were important in their regaining energy and perseverance on their journeys. Regarding the faith community (spiritual directors, priest and faithful in the parishes), the participants appreciated their valuable guidance in choosing a religious life as well as their enlightenment and support in handling pastoral work. Regarding support from their respective religious institutes, the participants thanked their superiors for their valuable direction and caring; their religious comrades for sharing and companionship; the elderly religious for their encouragement and wisdom; and members of the communities for their understanding and support, as they all helped them embrace the difficulties faced in religious life.

Apart from these sources of support, the findings revealed that the participants received positive inspiration and enlightenment from Sacred Scripture and saints along the journey. The favourite verses quoted by the participants (Table 11) had demonstrated how God appeared to them in different aspects (in terms of love, might and promise) or the latter's respective relationship with Him (by means of followers and companionship) in their unique religious lives. The characteristics and strengths that the participants most wished to learn from the saints were humility, simplicity and perseverance (Table 12).

Having summarised the key findings of the barriers encountered, coping strategies adopted and supports received by the participants, I will now discuss their implications for the relevant theories, the literature and the context in Hong Kong one by one.

### *On the Aspect of Barriers*

First, the findings show that, similar to some studies on career/vocation choices, the barriers come from both intrapersonal and environmental interactions, i.e. internal and external factors (Briscoe & Hall, 2006; Krumboltz et al., 1976; Swanson & Woitke, 1997). In the three scenarios of the barriers, the interplay of the elements of the subject person (self and personality) and the environment (family, friends, faith community, formation, interaction, poverty, celibacy and obedience) is obvious. Similar to some studies on career/vocation choices, the participants experienced barriers in deciding to pursue a religious life in the aspects of financial concerns, personality (non-ability) difficulties and negative family/social influences (Lent et al., 2002) or non-support of significant others or work/family conflicts (Lent et al., 2000).

The participants regarded formation and community life difficult, and this aligns with findings on the challenges of consecrated life, making people abandon the religious life during formation and generating emotional crises and disappointments with the inauthentic community life (Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, 2017).

Nevertheless, the findings on the participants' practise of the evangelical counsels are quite different to those outlined in other Western studies. It has been said that the loss of a religious vocation is due to the Church hierarchy's strict upholding of the traditional sacrifice of the three vows; in addition, loneliness and a lack of fraternisation are important factors contributing to difficulties recruiting religious personnel (Stark & Finke, 2000). Among the participants, only one religious sister had indicated that her strong desire for married life had imposed hurdles for her in choosing a religious life. The others did not consider these three vows challenges for them in the pursuit of a religious life. On the contrary, their positive views reflect their acceptance of celibacy as God's call or grace (Sunardi, 2014). Some of

them did experience loneliness and a lack of fraternisation only after entering the institute for a religious life. Even the four laity participants did not quit the journey because of these difficulties.

### *On the Aspect of Coping Strategies*

Second, the findings identified that the coping strategies adopted by the participants are looking upward to God and going inward to the individual self. The strategies of looking upward to God resemble the positive forms of religious coping, in which one's efforts to understand and deal with life stressors are related to the sacred by securing a relationship with a transcendent force, a sense of spiritual connectedness with others, and a benevolent world view (Sunardi, 2014). For going inward to the individual self, the methods share similarities with coping efficacy, emphasising the importance of people's perceptions and beliefs about their capabilities to handle particular environmental barriers or obstacles (Bandura, 1977).

However, the findings deviated from the coping options, to a certain extent, by using personal methods and/or seeking social support in encountering barriers (Lent et al., 2002). The personal methods mentioned in the coping options may involve one's personal efforts, which are similar to the participants' experiences of going inward to the individual self. Seeking social support is categorised under the supports received, as such support was not initiated by the participants to cope with the obstacles. Rather, it was a source they received to help resolve the difficulties. Nevertheless, it has been noted that the supports the participants received were often closely related to the strategies they adopted to cope with the difficulties and, sometimes, the two are overlapped.

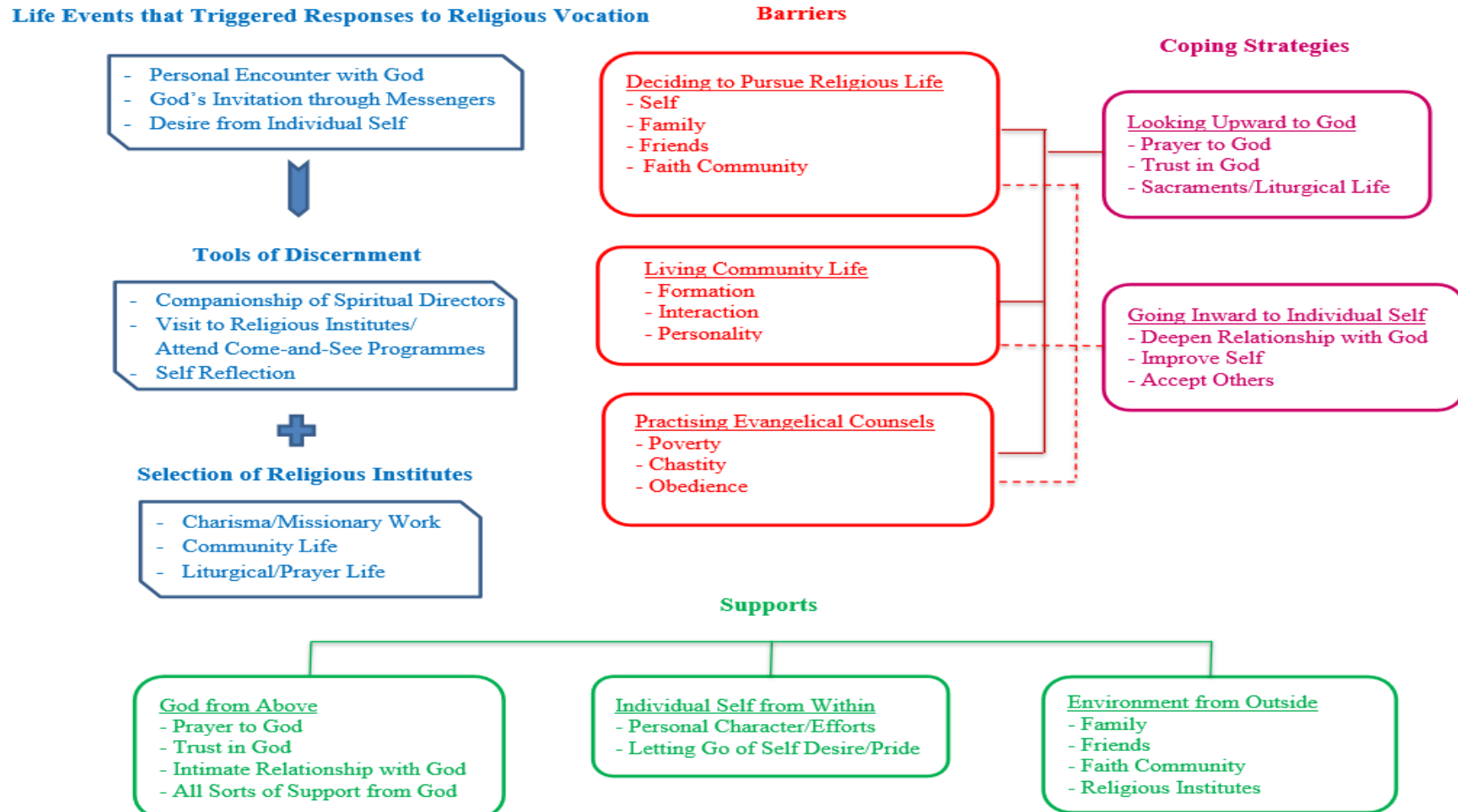
### *On the Aspect of Supports*

Third, the findings indicate that, similar to other studies on the choice of pursuit, the participants received social support or encouragement from family members, friends, teachers and peers (Lent et al., 2002; Sunardi, 2014). The study showed that the majority of the religious personnel participants became motivated to enter religious life because of the encouragement they received from vocational directors or other priests/religious (Schweickert, 1987). These social supports provided the participants with assistance or companionship (Sunardi, 2014). When compared to the social support offered by the faith community/religious institutes, the support from families or friends was much less. This may be due to the fact that their families or friends were not very knowledgeable about religious life, and at the same time, the participants found it difficult to share with them. As a result, it was hard to solicit their support. This coincides with the shift of reference group from parents/peers to, eventually, professionals in the career of interest (Super, 1957). In this study, the professionals in the religious vocations may refer to groups in the faith community and the religious institutes. In the literature on the choice of pursuit, the focus is more on types of social support, which resemble the environment from outside, and there is little or no mention of the support from the individual self or from God above as well as the inspiration/enlightenment from Sacred Scripture and saints. This study has provided new or additional perspectives on the sources of support that a person may receive on their religious vocation journey.

An overview illustrating the interrelationship of the two research questions by depicting the life events that triggered responses to religious vocation, the tools of discernment, selection of religious institutes, supports, barriers and coping strategies associated with the responses to the religious vocation journey at the micro level is shown in Figure 7.

**Figure 7**

*An Overview of the Religious Vocation Journey of the Participants in the Study*



## **Participants' Perspectives on the Reasons for the Declining Trend of Responses to a Religious Vocation and Measures to Foster Religious Vocations in Hong Kong**

The examination of the stories of the participants' unique responses to the religious vocation are useful for identifying the similarities and differences among their pathways in respect to the discernment processes, barriers and supports, as experienced on their journeys at the micro level, which provided findings to answer the two research questions. The findings of the possible reasons for the declining trend of responses to a religious vocation and suggested measures to foster religious vocations from a macro perspective are important to provide insights to the DHK and religious institutes serving in the territory to address the lack of religious vocations in the context of a declining population of religious personnel, despite an expansion of the Catholic lay population in Hong Kong. This section summarises the major findings of the participants' perspectives on the reasons for the declining trend of responses and measures to foster religious vocations in the territory.

As a related issue to account for the declining trend of responses to religious vocations, the study has tried to identify people's reasons for quitting the religious vocation journey. The findings were based on the personal experiences of the four laity participants and the knowledge of the 10 religious personnel from their own or other institutes. Four possible reasons for leaving religious life were identified, and all were related to the individual: the lack of a thorough discernment process before entering religious life or uncertainty of God's calling; the person's personality weaknesses; difficulties coping with community life; and an inability to live up to the expectations of oneself or imposed by others.

### *Possible Reasons for the Declining Trend of Responses to a Religious Vocation*

Regarding the participants' perspectives on the reasons for the declining trend of responses to a religious vocation, the findings showed that they fell under the purview of four

parties: religious personnel, religious institutes, family and youngsters (Table 13). Some religious personnel could not live up to God's image and, thus, failed to attract others to pursue a religious life. Alternatively, people found the requirement of religious personnel to comply with a celibate life difficult. For religious institutes, the aging of its members and the conservativeness of its rules/regulations posed hindrances to people's desire to enter the institutes. They also experienced a lack of resources to promote religious vocation. Furthermore, the lack of support from families and the increase of broken families imposed challenges to people's responses to a religious vocation. Some participants considered that today's youngsters had an immature attachment to the material world and had no close link with God; therefore, they could hardly think about a religious vocation.

#### *Suggested Measures to Foster a Religious Vocation*

On the suggested measures to foster a religious vocation, the findings showed that apart from the four parties involved in the reasons for the declining responses to a religious vocation, five more parties (DHK, parishes, DVC, schools and social media) could be engaged in fostering religious vocations in Hong Kong. The nine parties are categorised into five groups: (1) Family and Schools; (2) Church Communities (DHK, Parishes and DVC); (3) Religious Personnel and Religious Institutes; (4) Youngsters; and (5) Social Media. Each party in the group has its own responsibilities to participate in fostering religious vocations in their corner of the world (Table 14).

Parents have a significant role to play in providing faith formation to their children, and they should be generous in supporting the latter's responses to a religious vocation. Schools can initiate more interactions with students and collaborate with teachers and school management in cultivating the Christian faith and introducing the religious life as well as different institutes.

The DHK should take the lead to prepare the ground for the seeds of religious

vocations to grow, and seek God's grace and assistance for granting youngsters the courage to respond to God's calling. Parishes have to identify the needs of their various target groups—laity, couples, parents and children—and organise tailor-made formation programmes for them. The DVC has to maintain her momentum in cultivating a culture of religious vocations and fine-tune her focus on organising promotion programmes and supporting the faithful in the discernment process.

Religious personnel should lead a joyful life, walk the talk, be faithful to their callings and inspire youngsters to consider and have the courage to respond to a religious vocation. Religious institutes have to continue their good practices for their novices on the provision of personality development programmes and discipline training in a closed environment, and improve the undesirable arrangements of housework and placements in the formation period.

Youngsters should be engaged in spiritual development, provided with opportunities for faith experiences, and be introduced to religious life and the various religious institutes. Regarding social media, there is an increasing trend of deploying technology by means of websites, the internet, online broadcasts, zoom webinars, mobile applications, etc. in the promotion of religious vocations.

Having summarised the key findings of the participants' perspectives on the reasons for the declining trend of responses to religious vocations and the measures to foster them, I will now discuss their implications for the relevant theories, the literature and the Hong Kong context. The findings show a large gap to those pointed out by other studies on the hindrances in pursuing religious life. Regarding the part on formation and community life in the religious institutes, this study provides supplements to related literature.

### *Hindrances to the Pursuit of Religious Life*

First, none of the participants indicated that the lapse of the sacred role of priests/religious and their noble calling (Doyle, 2003; Hoge & Wenger, 2003; 《百力支II》,



2002) in present society hindered their desire to pursue a religious life. On the contrary, it was the desire to serve others that motivated some of them to choose such a life.

Second, the participants did not consider the traditional sacrifices of the three vows of poverty, celibacy and obedience as great barriers in their responses to a religious vocation (Stark & Finke, 2000). All of them indicated no problem with practising poverty. Though Sister Joy had once struggled with her strong desire for a married life, the compliance of celibacy did not trouble her when she decided to lead a religious life. In addition, none of the male participants thought celibacy should be optional as a way to ameliorate the problem of the shortage of priests (Hoge & Wenger, 2003). Regarding obedience, some participants admitted that it had been challenging for them. They, however, learnt to let go of self-desire/pride to overcome the difficulties and experienced self-growth.

Third, the findings revealed that 5 female participants (3 religious sisters and 2 laity) thought that there might be many options to serve God, other than being a religious sister, and they, therefore, were open to other forms of life and exploring other possibilities before entering religious life. This, to a certain extent, may confirm the assertion that increased educational and secular career opportunities for women has reduced the attractiveness of a religious life as a career option for young Catholic women, as such a life involved high costs for membership, namely a celibate life of poverty and obedience to superiors (Stark & Finke, 2000). Nevertheless, these female participants found themselves restless and still dissatisfied with their work and activities in the Church. They finally let go of self-desires and surrendered to God to lead a religious life. In other words, the high costs of a vocation may not deter Catholic women from responding to religious vocations if God really calls them.

#### *Formation and Community Life in the Religious Institutes*

The study provides further evidence to acknowledge that special attention should be paid to the formation and community life of consecrated life (Congregation for Institutes of

Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, 2017). The findings show that nearly all participants (13 out of 14) considered the challenges they encountered after entering the institutes were mostly from community life, followed by difficulties faced during formation. However, the participants indicated that community life let them experience God's presence and grace through their interactions with members in the community.

The decline of religious vocations has posed concerns on the challenges faced by religious personnel as well as their commitment to remain in consecrated life. The literature review indicates that there has been little discussion on these areas. Moreover, there seems to be no study or statistics on religious personnel who have abandoned their pursuit of consecrated life. The findings of the four laity participants, therefore, offer valuable insiders' viewpoints on the issue. Their pains and gains have also provided a wide angle on the pathways of religious vocation journeys.

Lastly, the study provides new insights into the participants' perspectives of the reasons for the declining trend of responses to religious vocations from the dimensions of religious personnel, religious institutes, family and youngsters by consolidating the views of the participants. These insights are very useful for mapping out the measures to address the issue as well as fostering religious vocations.

However, the findings on the measures to foster religious vocations, as suggested by the participants, are largely parallel to those discussed in other similar studies, particularly with reference to the roles of the parties involved, although the focuses may be a bit different in terms of both breadth and depth.

### *Roles of Family and Schools*

First, it is generally agreed that family is considered a primary force in shaping the values and attitudes of its members, especially its young members, and children are typically socialised (or indoctrinated) by the religious beliefs and practices of their parents (Cornwall,

1988). The studies also point out that family plays a dominant role in the religious socialisation in their offspring (Stott, 1988), and family, church and peers are regarded as the three agents of religious socialisation (Cornwall, 1988). The findings in this study have further suggested that family should be generous in supporting their children's responses to a religious vocation and pointed out the need to heal the wounds of broken families, which has been on the increase in recent decades.

The study also shows that Catholic schools are the primary place outside the family where vocations are nurtured. Since ordination classes have a much higher percentage of members who attended Catholic schools, the operation of Catholic schools should be promoted (Schwietz, 2001). The findings do confirm this view, as 11 (8 religious personnel and 3 laity) out of the 14 participants attended Catholic schools (administered by DHK/run by religious institutes) either from the elementary or secondary levels, with the religious vocation of one priest participant triggered while teaching in a covenant school. This study provides more solid measures for the schools in interacting with students, teachers and school management in fostering religious vocations.

#### *Roles of the DHK, Parishes and the DVC*

Second, the findings acknowledge the need for parishes to organise tailor-made formation programmes for various target groups, and this coincides with the parishes' role to increase the devotional life of the faithful by means of the Rosary and Eucharistic Adoration (Schwietz, 2001). Regarding the respective measures suggested for the DHK and the DVC in fostering religious vocations, this study provides a unique division of work among the two parties. In the study by Schwietz (2001), diocesan vocation offices from religious institutes were differentiated. The DVC seemed to have no similar set up under the DHK as a separate resource centre for promoting religious vocations in the diocese. The spectrum of work undertaken by the parties in that study might not be the same as those mentioned in this

research. Nevertheless, the idea that church groups should work together but not side by side, as put forth by Schwietz, is worth promoting as well as implementing.

It is said that diocesan vocation offices must concern themselves with religious institutes as well as priests. Religious institutes must concern themselves with diocesan issues as well as their own religious sisters and brothers. Thus, lay ministry, families and other church groups must concern themselves with religious vocations. All should make religious vocation recruitment a top priority. In view of the importance of a vocation, Schwietz demanded that a petition for vocations become a part of every mass offered in a parish or religious house and in every Catholic school and religious education class. There is also a need to include prayers at home from the hearts of children, parents and grandparents.

The coverage of Schwietz's strategies is wide, and it resembles the cultivation of a culture of religious vocations, as proposed by both the DHK and the DVC in the territory. On this, the DVC has requested that all faithful pray earnestly for vocations in Hong Kong with the following 'Prayer for Vocation'<sup>25</sup>:

O heavenly Father, increase the faith of our communities, particularly of those individuals whom you have chosen and whom you will choose for your service.

May the love of God enkindle the hearts of many young people, so that they may respond to your call with generosity and perseverance.

May the strength of the Holy Spirit guide us to do His holy will, and to be ready to offer our sufferings in union with that great sacrifice of Your Son, Jesus Christ. Amen.

### *Roles of Religious Personnel and Religious Institutes*

Third, similar to some other studies, the findings show that religious personnel and

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<sup>25</sup> The prayer can be found in the website of the Diocesan Vocation Commission (<http://dvc.catholic.org.hk>)

religious institutes can take measures to foster religious vocations. In this study, it is suggested that apart from their walk and talk, religious personnel should be faithful to their callings, lead a joyful life and inspire youngsters to consider and have the courage to respond to a religious vocation. This echoes Pope Francis's advice of the need for consecrated men and women to be with a joyous heart to withstand the tensions of life so as to fully live the Gospel (Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, 2017). As quoted by Schwietz (2001), the CARA Vocation Survey of Youth and Parents in 1997 found that large numbers of young people think about church vocations, noting that "youth who are seriously considering vocations say they know priests, sisters, or brothers relatively well, but may say they have never been personally encouraged by a priest, sister or brother to pursue a vocation" (pp. 9–10). The findings aligned with this study in pointing out the importance of making priests and religious visible among the young, helping them believe they can make a difference and nurture a spiritual life, as well as personally promoting vocations among the latter.

Regarding the religious institutes, the findings indicate a need to improve some arrangements in the formation of novices. This matches with the demand for the religious family to revise her identity, lifestyle and relative ecclesial mission to find new formative itineraries that would be suitable for her nature and charisma with adaptations to the necessities of the apostolate, the demands of the culture, and social and economic circumstances (Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, 2017).

### *Role of Youngsters*

Fourth, the findings share the idea of understanding the deepest desires of young people as a prerequisite to initiating actions that will attract them to enter religious life.

Young people are open to transcendence and are capable of becoming passionate about

causes of solidarity, justice and freedom (Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, 2017). They are willing to go forth from their comfort zone to pursue consecrated life in the Church to accomplish a meaningful mission for the good of all humanity if the Church is for the good of all humanity (Pope Francis's Apostolic Letter to all consecrated people on the occasion of the Year of Consecrated Life on November 21, 2014). Similarly, young people will be attracted to entering priestly life with the understanding that the sacred as well as the irreplaceable role performed by the priests requires a distinctive lifestyle, as they are the providers of sacraments (Hoge & Wenger, 2003).

Moreover, the study points clearly to the importance of engaging youngsters in spiritual development, providing them with opportunities for faith experiences and introducing them to religious life and various religious institutes to prompt them to think about a religious vocation and prepare them for positive responses to God's calling, if any.

### *Role of Social Media*

Lastly, similar to another study (Schwietz, 2001), the findings show that there is an increasing trend of deploying technology in the promotion of religious vocations, as websites are quick and easy for their visitors but may be labour-intensive for their hosts. In view of the fact that online efforts involve high costs, Schwietz proposed that dioceses and religious institutes pool their efforts to operate a quality yet economical site. This may be a good idea for social media in Hong Kong, as the parties involved are still small in number; thus, a synthesising effort should be explored and further developed.

### **Overview of the Religious Vocation Issue in Hong Kong**

Based on the findings and insights gained from the above discussion, this section attempts to map out a framework to address the issue of the declining population of religious personnel, despite an expansion of the Catholic lay population in Hong Kong. In general, this study has identified nine key stakeholders—DHK, parishes, DVC, family, schools,

youngsters, religious institutes, religious personnel and social media—who have either played a role or exerted contextual influences on one’s response to a religious vocation in the territory. These nine parties can be conceptualised as three clusters to coordinate with each component within the cluster and interact among other clusters, with a view to making a concerted effort to foster religious vocations so as to address the issue.

In terms of the three clusters, they are: Cluster 1, comprising DHK, parishes and DVC; Cluster 2, comprising family, schools and youngsters; and Cluster 3, comprising religious institutes, religious personnel and social media. Details of their respective responsibilities for fostering religious vocations were mentioned in Chapter 6 and will not be repeated here. This part is to highlight the possible division of work among the three clusters and the internal coordination of each component within the same cluster.

#### *Division of Work Among Clusters*

Cluster 1 is responsible for cultivating favourable soil for the growth of vocation seeds by means of formation provided at parishes for all walks of life of the faithful, as well as those promoting religious vocations carried out by the DVC with steering from the DHK at the central level. Cluster 2 is involved in the nurturing and education of the Christian faith from both family and schools to the children and students in their respective ends. The youngsters’ vocation seeds under their upbringing from childhood may become strong and have a desire to seek God’s will in one’s life. Cluster 3 is to inspire these vocation seeds to be open and to respond to God’s calling with generosity and perseverance through the attraction of joyful religious personnel and the fraternity of religious institutes. The impact of the inspiration may be enhanced with publicity by social media. As a result, the message of a religious vocation can be cultivated and nurtured, as well as penetrate a person’s life at all stages, and children of every age need to hear about vocations, so that vocation seeds are able to germinate early (Schwietz, 2001).

Having recognised the respective nature and functions of the clusters, I would like to label Clusters 1, 2 and 3 as Cultivation Cluster, Nurture Cluster and Inspiration Cluster in this framework. When viewing these dynamics from the angle of education, the Nurture Cluster can be regarded a formal setting, while the Cultivation Cluster and the Inspiration Cluster may be more informal in nature in the form of formation programmes and influences through motivational efforts.

*Internal Coordination of Components within a Cluster*

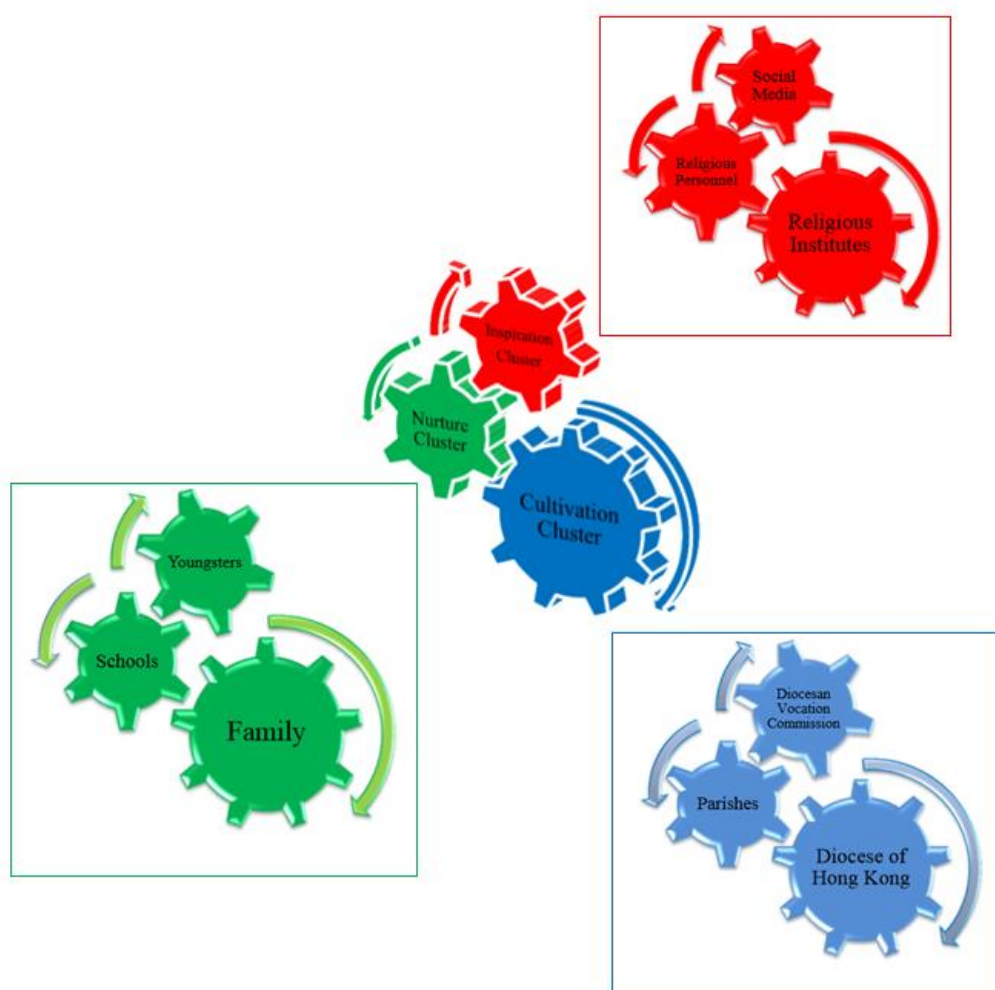
Apart from the interplay of the three clusters, good internal coordination of the components within the same cluster can also make the suggested measures to foster a religious vocation more effective. Using the Cultivation Cluster for illustration, the DHK has to disseminate the message to parishes for implementation on the formation front and give direction for the DVC to run the promotional activities in relation to religious vocations. Parishes have to provide feedback and information about the needs of the faithful at the district level to the DHK and give support to the programmes organised by the DVC. The DVC has to liaise closely with the DHK and parishes in reviewing the effectiveness of the promotional programmes so as to make continuous improvements.

Similarly, family in the Nurture Cluster must nurture children's faith and maintain close contact with schools on this concern, rather than focusing only on their academic performance, as whole-person development of their children is equally important. Schools have to join hands with families in the faith transmission to their students and mobilise teachers to help students identify their vocation in life, as teachers' connectedness and care towards students are very important, and they seem to have internalised a spiritual framework for their teaching (Marshall, 2009). Youngsters have to receive the faith transmission with open hearts, share their faith experiences with their families and teachers, and approach them with related enquiries.



Regarding the Inspiration Cluster, religious institutes have to interact closely with their religious personnel, so as to provide the latter with a good formation and community life, and make use of social media to promote the religious vocation for their institutes. Religious personnel have to build a strong team spirit to increase their attractiveness in drawing people/youngsters to join their institute for religious life and to contact youngsters through social media in this digital world to make themselves more visible.

The dynamics of the interplay of the three clusters and the internal coordination of the components within the same cluster are shown in Figure 8.

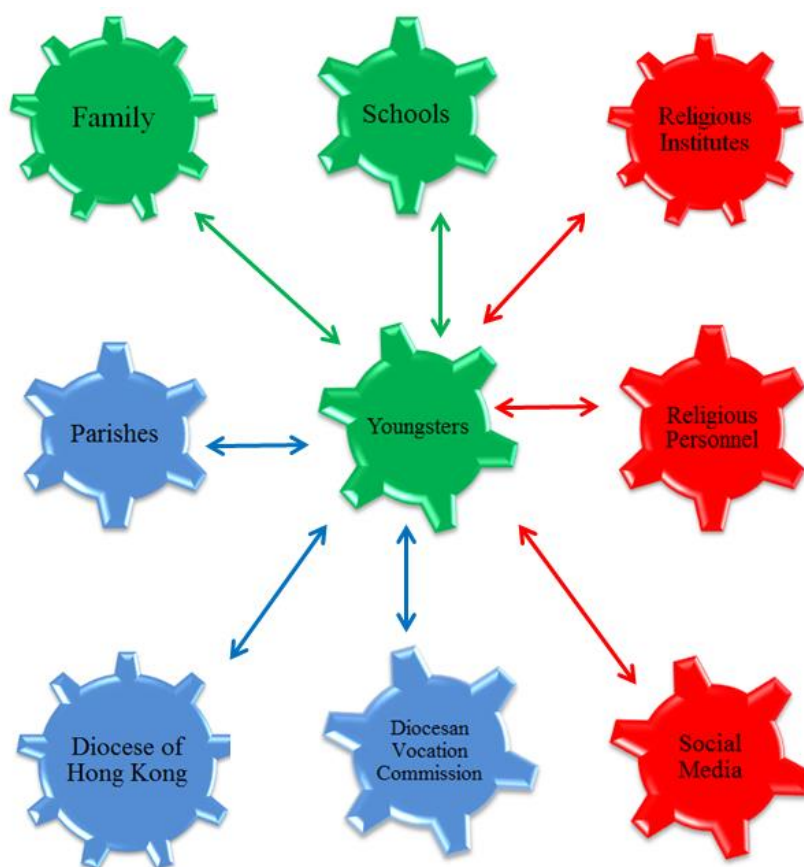
**Figure 8***Dynamics of the Three Clusters**Cross-cluster Interactions Among Individual Components*

The close coordination of the components within the same cluster, as well as inter-cluster coordination illustrated in Figure 8 above, does not prevent cross-cluster interactions among individual components. However, each of the nine components in these clusters can link with the other eight components simultaneously, resulting in one-to-many connections. For instance, the DHK, besides working closely with the DVC and parishes on the formation programmes within the Cultivation Cluster, may liaise with religious institutes (component of the Inspiration Cluster) serving in the territory on the overall plan to promote

religious vocations using social media (component of the Inspiration Cluster), so that the messages of faith, related formation programmes, and the visions and missions of religious institutes can be accessible to more people, including non-Catholics. The DHK can also mobilise religious personnel (component of the Inspiration Cluster) and schools (component of the Nurture Cluster) to promote religious vocations, and invite some families (component of the Nurture Cluster) or youngsters (component of the Nurture Cluster) to share their faith on some special diocesan occasions.

In this study, youngsters can be regarded as the chief characters, since they are the major potential respondents to religious vocations. The links that the youngsters have with the other eight components in relation to religious vocations may connect at different stages of their life and with various intensities. The transmission of the Catholic faith and religion seeds start and are sown by the family from their childhood. Their knowledge of the faith and religious vocation then increases during schooling, through their attendance at Sunday school in parishes, and/or participation in formation programmes organised in the DHK. The influences of the components of the DVC, religious institutes, religious personnel and social media may emerge once the youngsters start seeking, searching, responding and making discernments of their religious vocations.

The dynamics of the youngsters' interactions with the eight other components at their respective fronts in fostering religious vocations are shown in Figure 9.

**Figure 9***Interactions of Youngsters with the Eight Other Components*

Regardless of whether the key players are conceptualised from the interplay of three clusters or the connection of nine components, one point for sure is that their concerted efforts in fostering religious vocations for priestly/consecrated life are what count.

This chapter summarised the key findings of the study, and critically discussed their implications for the literature and understanding religious vocation journeys with a sample of religious personnel and laity in the Hong Kong context. It also presented the participants' perspectives on the reasons for the declining trend of responses to religious vocations and measures to foster religious vocations in the territory. Moreover, the chapter integrates the findings and insights from the discussion to map out a framework, in the form of three

clusters and nine components, to address the issue of the declining population of religious personnel, despite an expansion of the Catholic lay population in Hong Kong. The next chapter shares the researcher's spiritual journey in response to the calling to conduct this study with the discernment undergone, target participants selected, barriers encountered, coping strategies adopted, supports received as well as the pains and gains.



## CHAPTER 8: SPIRITUAL JOURNEY OF THE RESEARCHER

Undertaking this qualitative research study has been a spiritual journey. The interviews with the 14 participants over a period of 7 months and accumulating approximately 46 hours of interviews in total have led me through this wonderful spiritual journey. In the after-the-fact reconstruction, this researcher did experience spiritual transformation, self-transcendence and spiritual growth (Rosenblatt, 2001). This chapter aims to share the fruits that I gained from the inspirations of the participants' religious vocation journeys. With self-reflections and interactions/sharing with the participants during the interviews, I experienced spiritual enlightenment, which will be illustrated with a metaphor of a BIKE-FIT Cross. This researcher's spiritual journey and enlightenment resulting from this study are described in the following paragraphs.

### **Spiritual Journey Undergone in Conducting This Study of Religious Vocations**

In the pursuit of a religious vocation journey, the participants had unique experiences in their responses to God's calling, discernment processes and selection of religious institutes, barriers encountered, coping strategies adopted and support received. Nevertheless, they share some similarities. In conducting this study and writing the thesis, I have also undergone a similar journey as those experienced by the participants and realise it has been a kind of spiritual transformation for me.

#### *God's Invitation through a Messenger and Thy Will be Done*

Initially, I had the desire to study 'The Role of Ignatian Spirituality<sup>26</sup> in Connecting Educators with Self, Students and Subjects in the Teaching Profession' by conducting life

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<sup>26</sup> Ignatian Spirituality is a way of spirituality introduced by St Ignatius of Loyola (1491–1556), founder of the Society of Jesus. Its key principle and foundation are 'human beings are created to praise, reverence, and serve God our Lord, and by means of doing this to save their souls' (Fagin, 2013, p. 29) and 'finding God in all things' or 'seeking God in all things' (Mooney, 2009, p. 206). The ideal of human being's fullest development is for the 'greater glory of God' (*ad maiorem Dei gloriam* in Latin; Kolvenbach, 1993, p. 39) and 'more' ('magis' in Latin means 'of greater value'; The International Commission on the Apostolate of the Jesuit Education, 1986, p. 21).

history interviews with a sample of teachers in secondary schools in Hong Kong. However, I encountered tremendous difficulties identifying the target participants for the interviews and felt it was a no-go research. Right at that time (in June 2017), a professor from the Education University of Hong Kong contacted me, enquiring if I was interested in studying the contributing factors and deterrents of Hong Kong youngsters' responses to religious vocations. The study was intended to be a balanced qualitative–quantitative approach, and my focus would be on the qualitative side. I expressed strong interest in this suggestion, as the declining number of religious personnel serving in the territory has long been a concern of mine. In view of the stumbling blocks in studying Ignatian Spirituality, I decided to shift my research topic to religious vocations, for which I received a green light. I later found that the quantitative part of the professor's intended research did not kicked off but had changed its focus to the moral and spiritual education of primary and secondary students. I, therefore, regarded the professor as a messenger sent by God, inviting me to undertake this study. Similar to the experiences of Father Benedict and Sister Joy, I had to do God's will, but not my self-desire, in taking up this research.

*Looking Upward to God to Cope with Barriers Encountered*

Once the topic was set, a hurdle was placed right in front of my path. I encountered difficulties in seeking agreements from religious personnel for the research. Out of 10 religious personnel, half of them (4 priests and 1 religious sister) had declined my invitations. I was upset by their responses, as this study aimed to let people understand more about their religious vocation journeys so as to boost religious vocations among youngsters. I recalled having a 1-hour telephone conversation with a priest, who considered my research meaningful, but he was unwilling to participate in it. He asked me to invite some other priests instead. I tried my best to persuade him to be one of the participants, but it was in vain. I later found that my approach was aggressive. On the contrary, I should be more humble as well as

respectful of others' decisions, as it was an invitation. I then sought God's assistance and put trust in Him through praying and waiting.

Believe it or not, my prayer was heard. My godmother passed away before Easter 2019. The chance of finding a priest to preside over the funeral liturgy was slim, as the priests would be busily engaged in masses/liturgies relating to upcoming Easter celebrations. I called my godmother's parish anyway. The parish secretary told me that Father Abraham, the parish priest, was free that morning only. However, my godmother's relatives in mainland China would not be able to arrive in the morning. When I was about to give in, the parish secretary called again, telling me that Father Abraham was available in the afternoon. I was relieved.

In fact, I had tried to invite Father Abraham to participate in the study in August 2018 but was unable to reach him. Since then, I had not contacted him. He is, to me, a very devoted priest. I never expected to meet him again and, especially, on that occasion. I grasped this God-sent opportunity and approached him once again. To my surprise, he accepted my invitation right away. Life is full of surprises, indeed.

I have come to realise that this study is under the blessing and caring of our God. He will provide whatever is needed in His appointed time, according to His tailor-made plan for each and every one of us. It is exactly like what Mr King experienced; God led me down a detour by taking away my pride and letting me learn to be humble in the process.

#### *Going Inward to the Individual Self to Cope with Barriers Encountered*

The other barrier that I faced was the preparation of the interview transcripts for the participants' review. I conducted the interviews in Cantonese and had to record and transcribe verbatim in Chinese. Each of the 10 religious personnel participants would be interviewed twice, and the transcript of the first interview would be sent to these participants for review before the second was conducted. For the four lay participants, one interview was conducted for each of them. A total of 24 pieces of transcripts had to be produced for the 14 participants.



The total number of Chinese characters captured in the 24 pieces of transcripts exceeded 635,500 with an average of 26,480 characters per piece. I am not good at inputting the Chinese characters and experienced great difficulties in providing the transcripts to the participants for review in a timely fashion. I had to learn software to enhance my efficiency in this regard. Finally, I managed to complete 11 pieces by myself and sought assistance from my niece for another 11 and a friend for the remaining 2. This barrier gave me a chance to improve my Chinese inputting skills, and I persevered in doing the time-consuming transcript verbatim.

### *Support from God Above*

I received supports from God above, the individual self from within and the environment from outside. Through prayers to God, I received His unfailing support. I always prayed for God's grace to lead me through the study while attending masses and contemplating through Eucharistic Adoration. At home, I usually prayed with the following famous quote of St Teresa of Calcutta, which reminds me of the close relationship of prayer with silence, faith, love, service and peace: "The fruit of Silence is Prayer. The fruit of Prayer is Faith. The fruit of Faith is Love. The fruit of Love is Service. The fruit of Service is Peace" (The quotes of St Teresa, <http://bilquote.com/files/t/teresa/teresa1.html>).

As I consider that God invited me to engage in this study, I regard Him as its owner or my partner. Through prayer, I experience an intimate relationship with God, who grants me the fruits of faith (putting trust in Him), love (to God and others), service (to the Church) and peace (to my inner self). I, thus, believed that He would steer me and send me 'angels' in the form of people around me to help me at the right time as the study proceeded.

### *Supports from the Individual Self Within*

In the course of the study, I encountered various difficulties ranging from identifying literature for review, inviting participants for interviews, recording transcripts under a tight

schedule and collecting data for analysis to the thesis writing itself. All of this made me feel helpless and incompetent at times. However, I learnt to let go of my pride and to rely on God more. In anticipation of the huge amount of data for collection and analysis, I spent most, if not all, of my weekends either interviewing the participants or thesis writing. In order to complete the study within the timeframe, I refrained from joining my friends' gatherings or outings for a long period of time. My perseverance and efforts paid off. Nevertheless, I did not feel lonely; I enjoyed the solitude, which brought fruitful ideas and inspiration to my thesis writing.

### *Supports from Parties in the Outside Environment*

Regarding the supports from the outside environment—my family, friends, the faith community, supervisors and the participants of this study—I have to extend my heartfelt appreciation to these parties for their understanding, encouragement and assistance. My family, my elder sister, in particular, relieved me from housework, and this helped me focus on the study after heavy office commitments. My friends showed understanding to my hiding from gatherings, sending me warm greetings from time to time. The faith community referred to here are the faithful, whom I became acquainted with in the parish or through my participation in religious activities in the diocese. These faithful gave me positive encouragement and, most importantly, offered prayers to my study. I am particularly indebted one individual, who generously gave her time and energy to review the drafts of my thesis and provide me with feedback before submitting it to my supervisors for comments. My two kind-hearted supervisors gave me professional direction and valuable advice throughout the study, especially on the thesis writing. Their encouragement and kind words gave me the energy to move on. Last but not the least is the support rendered by the 14 participants, who attended the interviews, reviewed the transcripts and shared their heartfelt experiences with me during the interviews.

The participants' pseudonyms used in this study are a mixture of figures/verses in the Sacred Scripture, names of saints<sup>27</sup> and good qualities of Christians in the Church. They reminded me of the proper attributes/attitudes in undertaking this study, and they provided me with comfort/momentum whenever I got lost on the journey. Their reminders are:

Pseudonym	Inspiration and Learning Points
Abraham	He is 'father of all who believe' and is famous for his strength in faith.
Benedict	The saint regarded prayer and work partners and considered the need to balance the two in religious life. He also believed in combining contemplation with action.
Christopher	The saint is the patron of travelling. He was significant in physical strength and a spiritual giant for the Christian faithful.
David	He was the second king of Israel and was significant in the history of the chosen people as king and psalmist. He, however, fell into the sins of adultery and murder. God pardoned him as he repented for the sins and his contrition was so sincere.
Emmanuel	Emmanuel means 'God is with us' (Matthew 1:23).
Faith	Faith is one of the three supernatural virtues granted by God to mankind. The other two are hope and charity. By faith, man completely submits his intellect and his will to God (CCC No. 143).
Grace	Grace is favour, the free and undeserved help that God gives mankind to respond to his call to become children of God, adoptive sons, partakers of the divine nature and of eternal life (CCC No. 1996).
Humble	As invited by Jesus Christ, we who labour and are burdened, to come to Him and learn from Him as He is meek and humble of heart; and we will find rest for ourselves (Matthew 11:28-29).
Icon	Icon is a religious work of art, most commonly a painting, serving as a sacred image used in religious devotion and as a tool for contemplation.

<sup>27</sup> The information about the saints is from Saints & Angels of the Catholic Online (<https://www.catholic.org/saints/>).

Pseudonym	Inspiration and Learning Points
Joy	Joy is one of the nine fruits of the Holy Spirit. <sup>28</sup> The remaining eight are love, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23).
King	The Christian faithful through baptism have been constituted as the people of God and have to participate in the three offices (priest, prophet and king) of Christ (CCC No. 783). In exercising kingship, the Christian has to make oneself the servant of all upholding the principle of not to be served but to serve (CCC No. 786).
Luke	The saint wrote the Gospel of Luke, which is the third of the four canonical Gospels <sup>29</sup> telling the origins, birth, ministry, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ with highlights of God's mercy (《聖經辭典》).
Mary	She is Our Blessed Mother, the patron of all humanity and believed by many to be the greatest of all Christian saints as she is the good collaborator of God's plan.
Noel	Noel means the birth of Christ from which salvation is brought to mankind.

### *Companionship of Sacred Scripture and Saints*

‘Rejoice always. Pray without ceasing. In all circumstances give thanks, for this is the will of God for you in Christ Jesus’ (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18) is my favourite verse of the Sacred Scripture and serves as the motto of my life. As experienced with God's blessing and caring in the study, I find the verse of ‘I am with you always, until the end of the age’ (Matthew 28:20) equally important to me. In writing the thesis, I had a close companionship with three saints, namely our Blessed Mother Mary, St Teresa of Avila and St Cecilia. I looked upon Our Blessed Mother to guide me in making use of this study to collaborate with God's plan for me, so that I can be His instrument to transmit His love and mercy to mankind in the world. I prayed to St Teresa of Avila, the patroness saint of writers, to give me

<sup>28</sup> In the profession of faith, Christians must believe in no one but God: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. The one God includes the almighty Father, the Creator; his Son Jesus Christ, the Lord and Saviour; and the Holy Spirit, the Sanctifier in the Holy Church (Catechism of the Catholic Church, Nos. 14 and 178). The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit form the Holy Trinity.

<sup>29</sup> The four canonical Gospels are Gospel of Matthew, Gospel of Mark, Gospel of Luke and Gospel of John.

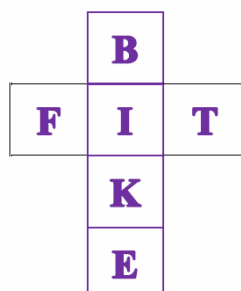
inspiration to write the thesis. I requested of St Cecilia, the patroness saint of music, to teach me to sing a song of praise to our God and thanksgiving to His glory.

### **Spiritual Enlightenment as Illustrated in the Metaphor of the BIKE-FIT Cross**

Rosenblatt (2001) mentioned that the spiritual growth he experienced was because of the ways the people he interviewed collaborated with him in constructing his identity, values and sense of self. My interactions with the participants and their wisdom displayed in the interviews enlightened and inspired me with a kind of spirituality in the form of an icon of a ‘BIKE-FIT’ Cross (see Figure 10). This spirituality helps me enhance my connection with the self, others and God, and leads me on a fulfilled Christian life with peace and joy.

**Figure 10**

*The BIKE-FIT Cross*



The BIKE-FIT Cross comprises two parts: BIKE and FIT. **BIKE** stands for **B**alance (of Self), **I**ntity (of Self), **K**indness (to Others) and **E**ntrustment (to God). **FIT** illustrates one’s close relationship with God, bearing the meaning of **F**aith (in God), **I**mage (of God) and **T**hanksgiving (to God). On the part of BIKE, I will make use of the participants’ experiences on their religious vocation journeys, my sharing some life events with them during interviews and my reflections on the religious lessons that can be drawn from the analogy of riding a bike. Regarding the message of FIT, I will demonstrate my desire to exercise myself spiritually so as to achieve a leap of faith in my Christian life.

### *Balance of Self*

Miss Noel admitted that her inability to reconcile the tension between her desires for the divine and letting go of human weaknesses made her leave the community. She later found that such difficulties could be overcome by means of integration through which one had to balance one's life, one's appetites and one's emotional reactions to things. Sister Grace realised that prayer life and missionary work were complementary to one another, and she had to balance them in her religious life. They both considered the practice of balance important for sailing smoothly on one's religious vocation journey.

In order to concentrate on completing the study within the timeframe, I declined my friends' invitations for gatherings or outings. A friend of mine who lives in an elderly centre and is wheelchair bound asked me to accompany her to an optical shop to buy glasses. I did not accede to her request right away, as it would take me at least a half-day to complete the task, but I found myself restless. I shared this experience with Sister Joy during my interview with her. She raised the issue of discernment in making choices even on minor matters in our daily life. Hence, we had to be sensitive to our emotions. Finally, I took my friend to buy the glasses, followed by a meal with her. I found her satisfied and enjoying my companionship. For me, I felt peaceful in my heart and realised the need to strike a balance in my life in the midst of focusing on writing the thesis.

In riding a bike (Figure 11), the point of balance or golden mean is also of paramount importance. In fitting a bike, there are five key contact points (connection points) between the cyclist and their bike.<sup>30</sup> These five connection points are the left and right hands, the pelvis and the left and right foot, which are linked to a bike's handlebars, saddle and pedals, respectively. The location of the hands, pelvis and feet dramatically impact the cyclist's

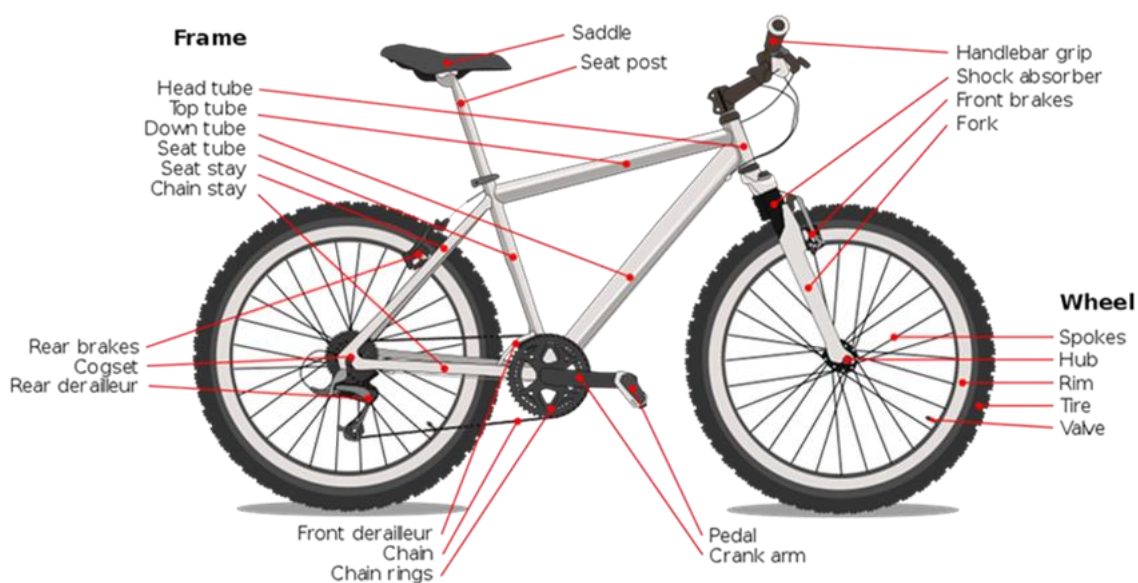
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<sup>30</sup> The reference material on fitting a bike is from 'How to Fit a Road Bicycle Overview: Body Contact Points' on the website of BIKEFIT (<https://blog.bikefit.com/how-to-fit-a-road-bicycle/>)

comfort and efficiency on riding the bike. There is, therefore, a need for the cyclist to assess and fine tune each specific connection to get the ideal position.

**Figure 11**

*Picture of a Bike with Its Basic Components*<sup>31</sup>



At BikeFit, the focus is on the feet as they are the foundation of comfort, power and efficiency, and most cycling pain and discomfort originate from the feet. To me, the feet-pedal connection triggers the movement of the wheels with the front wheel and rear wheel symbolising the idea of ‘love God’ and ‘love others’. The cyclist riding a bike is similar to a Christian living out the commandments of loving God and loving one’s neighbour in daily life. If a cyclist is better connected with the pedals as well as the two wheels, they will find the riding more stable and with less pressure.

Regarding the saddle, the cyclist may be concerned about its firmness or softness and the seat height. The cyclist will find it uncomfortable if the saddle is either too firm or too

<sup>31</sup> This picture of the bike is downloaded from Microsoft Word 2010.

soft and if it is set at too high or too low a level. This reminds me of the importance of positioning oneself right and adopting the golden mean in dealing with others.

For the handlebars, a cyclist should have a slight bend in the elbows to maximise comfort. The cyclist can control the direction and the speed of the bike by moving the handlebars as well as grabbing or releasing the left or right handlebar grips, which are linked to the front and rear brakes. This makes me think of the requirements of our exercising flexibility and making necessary adjustments.

The principle of keep moving is also significant in riding a bike. This is inspired by my seeing a picture of a bicycle printed on a T-shirt with the phrase, ‘Life is like riding a bicycle. To keep your balance, you must keep moving.’

### *Identity of Self*

On the part of identity, Mr King left the seminary during formation because he discovered that he was not called to become a priest. He later considered that God invited him to purify his relationship with Him, and His intention was for Mr King to pursue a religious life not by focusing on doing but by being himself. He now uses his identity as a faithful to serve the Church and bring God to others. In contrast, Father Abraham is satisfied and happy with his identity as a priest, who can bring God’s love to mankind through ministering the sacrament of the Eucharist and God’s mercy by means of the sacrament of Confession, in particular.

In conducting this study, I regard my identity as a candidate for a doctorate degree. My original purpose for getting this qualification was my understanding that it would enable me to serve a wider spectrum of the population in the Church. As a result, the research topic is only a means to an end. However, when I drilled down to the substance of a religious vocation, I discovered my own vocation. Instead of being a bystander arousing others’ concerns on the issue of the declining population of religious personnel in Hong Kong,



despite an expansion of the Catholic lay population, I began to commit myself to the mission of evangelisation and contribute my efforts to address the present plight, 'The harvest is abundant but the labourers are few' (Luke 10:2). Similar to the experience of Mr King, God purified my intention for the study and transformed me to know Him more (through the stories of the 14 participants), love Him deeply and follow Him closely. Like Father Abraham, I find myself blessed to have the identity of a lay Catholic who can be involved in this meaningful study. I, therefore, appreciate that my study is full of challenges, tears and pains, yet full of God's grace and joy with the ultimate goal of glorifying Him.

In riding a bike, I regard myself as a cyclist. Being a responsible cyclist, I have to fully know about the components of my bike and their basic functions, and I have to maintain them in good condition. Riding provides me with exercise opportunities, allows me to enjoy the scenery and generates ideas for the thesis writing. When riding, I must comply with related traffic regulations and pay attention to the environment, including both the ground and other road users (drivers, other cyclists and pedestrians). Only when I look far ahead and am attentive to others in the environment, instead of being self-centred and focusing only on my bike/myself, can I react better to the things happening around me and ensure the ride is safe.

### *Kindness to Others*

Mr Luke understood that everyone has their own weaknesses. He, therefore, learnt not to place excessive demands on others, and this helped him interact well with members in the institute. After experiencing God's acceptance of her weaknesses and giving her chances to improve, Sister Icon learnt to be more accepting of others' differences and be more understanding of others. They both indicated that kindness to others was the key to achieving harmony with one another.

I once invited a friend to attend catechesis class to learn more about the Catholic faith. The class meets once a week for 1 hour and 30 minutes, and the catechumen can be baptised

after approximately 18 months' catechumenate. After my repeated invitations, my friend attended one lesson and quit the class, saying that she did not feel like continuing. I tried all means to persuade her to stay on, but it was in vain. I was angry with her decision, thinking that she did not treat my invitation seriously, and this had adversely affected the harmony in our relationship. I shared this incident with Sister Grace during my interview with her. She said, 'It is God's calling that "pulled" your friend to become a catechumen but not your repeated invitations that "pushed" her to attend the class.' I was enlightened. Hence, in carrying out my mission of evangelisation, I have to be kind to others, show understanding and respect others' choices. Like St Paul and Apollos, my job is to keep planting and watering while God gives the growth (1 Corinthians 3:6). I must not claim credit if I succeed in helping people grow in faith, nor should I despair when I fail. The incident gave me the reflection of 'Pride does its own will; humility does the will of God' (St Augustine, Sermon on John). I, therefore, must have the humility to accept that converting human hearts is God's work, not mine.

The attitude of kindness to others is also useful when riding my bike. In the past, whenever I rode and came across some joggers and walkers using the cycle way, I felt a bit annoyed; I was afraid of bumping into them as my riding skill was not good. *Why aren't they using the pedestrian path? Aren't they afraid of getting hurt or liable to a fine of \$2,000 for using the cycle way?*<sup>32</sup> When I later contemplated that all people—cyclists, joggers and walkers—were all exercising in the open area for the sake of health, my anger lapsed. With this shift of thought in mind, I learnt how to accommodate their using the cycle way and view our joint usage from a harmonious perspective. I also found that my riding skills improved, in terms of managing the bike and responding to the activities of other users on the cycle way, which was an unexpected reward for me.

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<sup>32</sup> There are banners erected by the Hong Kong Police Force along the cycle way stating that 'Persons other than cyclists may be liable to a fine of \$2,000 for using the cycle way.'

*Entrustment to God*

Father Christopher and Sister Faith considered their putting trust in God gave them an anchor when needed and supplied them with fuel to sail along. Father Christopher remarked that people's assistance was temporary and might not be reliable, compared to that of God. In contrast, Sister Faith prayed to God, seeking assistance to help her unbelief, and God assured her that His trust would lead her through. They both entrusted to God by placing their religious lives in His hands.

In late June 2019, my younger sister was diagnosed with a brain tumour. After medical consultations, an operation was arranged in early August. During that period, I kept praying for my sister and requested friends to offer her prayers. Nevertheless, I still felt restless and uncertain, fearing whether the surgery would be successful. I shared my worry with Sister Icon during my interview with her. Sister Icon pointed out that my fear of my sister's operation was because I did not love God enough. This made me doubt if He would listen to my prayers and ensure she would recover. Sister Icon said that God had His time and plan, and she comforted me to entrust my sister to His lead and He would give her the best. According to Sister Icon, the most important thing for my sister to learn from this incident was to understand more about life and the limitations of human beings. It was, indeed, a valuable life lesson for me as well.

Unlike a car, a bike has no rear-view mirror. Therefore, a cyclist has to focus on the front and look far ahead while riding, instead of looking backward, which would make the ride dangerous. Similarly, if a person entrusts their future to God, they will have the courage to move forward in a steady manner with the belief that He will provide and take good care of everything. The image of no backward looking while riding symbolises that there is no need for a person to worry about or regret what happened in the past, as God is full of mercy in forgiving our faults whenever we repent for our sins and make sincere contrition. Also, when

we entrust to God, we must be humble, open and surrender to His lead with the attitude of ‘Lord, let me let you lead me’.

Having mastered a BIKE, a cyclist knows how to balance themselves, about their identity, be kind in dealings with others and entrust themselves to God. However, mastery of the skill is not enough to keep a person fit. They have to ride to maintain their physical fitness. When a person wishes to keep spiritually fit, they have to maintain a close relationship with God by having faith in Him, being the image of Him and giving thanks to Him.

Being a faithful, I always wish to know what God’s will is for me. My favourite verse of ‘Rejoice always. Pray without ceasing. In all circumstances give thanks, for this is the will of God for you in Christ Jesus’ (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18) seems to give me an answer. God wills me to be joyful, prayerful and thankful whenever and for whatever. These three elements coincide with the components of spiritually FIT: Faith in God, Image of God and Thanksgiving to God.

### *Faith in God*

The majority of the participants in the study approached God for support by means of prayers and placing trust in God, as one of their strategies to cope with barriers in their religious vocation journeys. Prayer is a faithful’s personal relationship with the living and true God (CCC No. 2558). The quote by St Teresa of Calcutta indicates that the fruit of prayer is faith. Hence, when I pray without ceasing, it helps me connect closely with God and have trust in Him. ‘Work Hard, Play Hard’ has been a life philosophy for many people in contemporary society. Being a faithful, I have to learn and practise ‘Walk Hard, Pray Hard’, meaning that I have to walk hard to follow Jesus’s teaching and to pray hard to request God’s lead and grace to fulfil His will.

### *Image of God*

In the study, some religious personnel participants considered joy the internal

disposition of religious personnel who were God's chosen ones to reflect His image, and this attribute helped attract others to pursue a religious life. It has always been known that God has the attributes of love, goodness and mercy, but there is no clear definition of His image. It is said that mankind alone is called to share in the dignity of the 'the image of God' (CCC No. 364). It is generally accepted that if a person has the fruit of the Holy Spirit (love, peace, joy, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control; Galatians 5:22-23), they possess a certain image of God. Joy is one of the fruits. If I rejoice always, I can reflect the image of God to some extent.

### *Thanksgiving to God*

Most of the participants in the study thanked God for the unfailing support rendered in their pursuit of a religious life. They also maintained that the barriers provided them with opportunities to grow, integrate with others and experience God's presence. Looking back, the four laity found that their gains outweighed the pains they experienced in leaving the religious vocation journey, as they realised personal growth and breakthroughs. They unanimously thanked God for His blessings and guidance throughout their journeys. The saying of 'a blessing in disguise' may help explain this phenomenon. Alternatively, God has His time and plan, which are beyond the understanding of mankind. It echoes what the Lord says, 'For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways. As high as the heavens are above the earth, so high are my ways above your ways and my thoughts above your thoughts' (Isaiah 55:8-9). This tells us to give thanks to God in all circumstances.

To conclude, the BIKE-FIT Cross reminds me that in leading a Christian life, I have to maintain **B**alance of myself and keep moving, uphold my **I**dentify, be **K**ind when interacting with others and **E**ntrust to God after I have put all my efforts into the assignments. In all circumstances, I should have **F**aith in God, be the **I**mage of God and express **T**hanksgiving to God. When focusing my eyes on the BIKE-FIT Cross at the front (Figure12),

I can ride with joy and peace in accomplishing tasks entrusted by God, though I may have to go through pains and setbacks, which will eventually bring/lead me to spiritual transformation, self-transcendence and spiritual growth. Being a cyclist, the practice of riding helps me perfect my skills. Being a Christian, the practice of loving God and loving others helps me perfect becoming God's beloved child; as the scripture says, 'So be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect' (Matthew 5:48).

**Figure 12**

*The BIKE-FIT Cross and the Bike Ride*<sup>33</sup>



This chapter shares the researcher's spiritual journey as experienced in the study. It also captures the researcher's spiritual enlightenment through interactions with the participants' on her own life events, as illustrated by the metaphor of the BIKE-FIT Cross. The next chapter concludes the thesis, and discusses the contributions of the study and avenues for future research.

<sup>33</sup> This picture of the bike is downloaded from Microsoft Word 2010.

## CHAPTER 9: CONCLUSION

The study aimed to explore the stories of Hong Kong-born Catholics regarding their choice to lead a religious life by understanding the responses made, discernments undergone, supports received, barriers encountered and coping strategies adopted. The research examined the trajectories of the religious vocation journeys of a sample of 10 religious personnel and 4 laity, and identified the similarities and differences among their pathways on the journeys. The study also offers the participants' perspectives on the reasons for the declining trend of responses to religious vocations and suggested measures to foster religious vocations in Hong Kong. The findings give insights to the DHK and religious institutes to address the issue of the declining population of religious personnel, despite an expansion of the lay population in the territory. This chapter provides a review of the study, discusses the idea of religious vocations for Christians as a whole, shares research lessons learned, highlights the study's contributions and suggests avenues for future research.

### **Review of the Study**

In reviewing the study, the purpose and work of the previous eight chapters are summarised to show the linkages in the emergence of the issue of a declining population of religious personnel, despite an expansion of the Catholic lay population in Hong Kong, in an effort to address the subject of concern. Chapter 1 introduced the background, stating the rationale for the study. It first presented the universal negative climate of decreasing Catholic religious vocations over the past four decades up to the present, leading to the plight of a shortfall of religious personnel in most parts of the world as well as in Hong Kong. The declining population of religious personnel in the territory has become an imminent issue because the pastoral needs of the Catholic lay population can hardly be met as its number expands. However, this issue has received little attention in the local literature. This study

was, therefore, initiated with two research questions developed to bridge the identified gap, and to understand religious personnel's responses to callings, the supports and barriers associated with their religious vocation journeys, and their coping strategies to overcome the barriers therein. It was considered that findings in these aspects might give insights into the declining trend of responses to religious vocations and signal measures to foster religious vocations in Hong Kong.

Chapter 2 reviewed the literature from the domain of work/career for insights into understanding people's responses to the calling to lead a religious life, as the existing literature on the development of Catholics' trajectories/pathways in becoming religious personnel was relatively sparse and insufficiently informative. It was also found that the delineation of the career/vocational development process helped identify the supports received, barriers encountered and coping strategies adopted by the religious personnel in their religious vocation journeys. Some studies on the discernment processes undergone by religious personnel and the challenges they faced throughout their religious vocation journeys were also presented. Finally, an analytical framework guiding the study was introduced.

Chapter 3 justified the use of a qualitative approach with narrative research by means of life history interviews for the study. It then detailed the procedures for recruiting the 14 participants, described the processes of data collection and analysis, and listed the measures to address the potential validity threats and ethical issues related to the research.

Chapters 4, 5 and 6 reported and analysed the data collected from the interviews. Chapter 4 captured the unique stories of the 14 participants who responded to a religious vocation and the discernment processes involved. First, it categorised the life events that triggered the participants' responses to a religious vocation into three dominant dimensions: direct encounter with God, God's invitation through messengers and desire from the individual self. Second, it showed the participants' usage of three tools to assist them in the



discernment process and ascertain God's will, namely the companionship of spiritual directors, visiting religious institutes and/or attending come-and-see programmes, and self-reflection. Third, it identified charisma/missionary work, community/prayer life and liturgical activities of the religious institutes as the participants' key criteria in deciding which one to enter.

Chapter 5 first showed that the barriers encountered by the participants were largely classified into three scenarios: deciding to pursue religious life, living community life and practising evangelical counsels (poverty, chastity and obedience). It then captured the participants' strategies to cope with barriers, mainly by means of looking upward to God and going inward to the individual self. It also summarised the supports received by the participants throughout their religious vocation journeys, including God from above, the individual self from within and the environment from outside, i.e. family, friends, the faith community and the religious institutes concerned. It finally recorded the participants' perceptions of the verses of Sacred Scriptures and saints that accompanied their religious life as well as the images that they found best described their religious vocation journeys.

Chapter 6 identified the reasons, from the participants' perspectives, for the declining trend of responses to religious vocations, falling under the purview of four parties: religious personnel, religious institutes, family and youngsters. Apart from these four parties, the chapter also found that five more parties—schools, DHK, parishes, DVC and social media—could be involved in fostering religious vocations in the territory, as each has its own role to play.

Chapter 7 summarised the findings of the participants' religious vocation journeys and critically discussed their implications in light of the relevant literature. It then provided an overview, showing the interrelation of the findings to the two research questions. By integrating the findings and insights from the discussion, the chapter finally mapped out a

framework in the form of three clusters—cultivation, nurture and inspiration—in an attempt to address the issue of the declining population of religious personnel, despite an expansion of the Catholic lay population in Hong Kong.

Chapter 8 shared the spiritual journey that the researcher herself experienced in conducting this study of the participants' religious vocation journeys. It highlighted the spiritual growth of the researcher, whose spiritual enlightenment gained was illustrated by means of the metaphor of a BIKE-FIT Cross.

### **Vocations for Christians as a Whole**

Regardless of the challenges faced by the participants pursuing religious vocation journeys in the context of the declining population of religious personnel, the expansion of the Catholic lay population in Hong Kong sheds light on the importance of religious vocations for the whole of the faithful. In view of this, Father Benedict surmised that there would be opportunities to enlarge the laity's participation in Church affairs. Father Abraham indicated that some female laity had engaged in teaching theology and sacred scripture in the HSSC of the DHK. It has been said that the benchmark of a religious vocation is subject to one's looking upward towards God, desiring communion with Him and pursuing the glory of God as the ultimate goal in life, irrespective of whether it is a religious life, celibate life or married life. Religious vocations for the laity and missionaries should therefore not be neglected, as the interpretation of religious vocation adopted by the DVC (1993) also covers these Christians apart from priests and the religious. Though the religious vocations of a celibate life or a married life are not the focus of this study, they are the major forms of life that Christians lead. As a result, their importance should also be boosted.

On this, I would like to share an inspiring prayer for vocation for Christians as a

whole, introduced by the Community of Our Lady of Walsingham in England,<sup>34</sup> as extracted below:

Hail Mary full of grace. Holy Mary Mother of our Redeemer.

Mother of Vocation, Our Lady of Walsingham, with great joy we call upon you.

Remember we are your children. Called to wholeness; Called to the fullness of joy; Called to realise our heart's deepest desire, God's dream for us.

Woman of all graces; Woman of all Amens; Woman who followed him. Teach us to live always in the presence of God, who wills us to become holy.

Sustain us, O Mother of Vocation, on our pilgrimage of faith. Help us to live the fullness of the call to life and love, wherever we find ourselves . . .

The prayer highlights that every Christian has a unique pilgrimage of faith and is called to become holy with wholeness and fullness of joy. The religious vocation of a person is to realise one's deepest desire, which is God's dream for one. Once a person finds and pursues their own religious vocation, they can live the fullness of the call to life and love. It is thus believed that religious vocations for Christians as a whole are equally important in the eyes of God and for the growth of vocation seeds in the Church.

### **Research Lessons Learned**

The researcher encountered great difficulties in recruiting participants for the study. Out of the target pool of 26 religious personnel, 16 could not be engaged to participate in the research. Apart from studying abroad (four) and serving overseas (three), the other target participants either could not be contacted (five) or declined the invitation (four). With the benefit of hindsight, the researcher considered that there might be a higher chance of getting the contact information of those 'other' target participants and securing their agreement for participation if support for the study from the Church hierarchy could be solicited in advance.

<sup>34</sup> A full version of the prayer can be found on the website of the Community of Our Lady of Walsingham ([www.walsinghamcommunity.org](http://www.walsinghamcommunity.org)).

If a similar project was to be carried out in future, the researcher could approach the bishop of the diocese concerned and/or superiors of relevant religious institutes at the very beginning to gain their assistance in this regard and/or other support that might be required thereafter. In addition, the researcher could take into account the views/feedback provided by the bishop or superiors, if any, to suitably fine-tune the research design. This might increase the reference value of the subsequent findings of the study to the diocese/religious institutes involved.

### **Contributions of the Study**

This study makes several contributions to the literature on the religious vocations in Hong Kong and beyond in the aspects of (a) the responses; (b) the supports, barriers and coping strategies involved in the journey; (c) the declining trend of responses; and (d) the suggested measures to foster religious vocations. The aspects of (a) and (b) touch on the unique stories of those who responded to a religious vocation, whereas (c) and (d) provide a macro perspective, accounting for the declining trend of responses to religious vocations and suggesting measures to foster them with findings from those individual narratives.

In terms of responses to religious vocations, the study offers an in-depth understanding of the reactions and concerns that a sample of Hong Kong-born Catholics experienced in their journeys. The study enriches the elements and interpretation of a religious vocation, and provides a further breakdown to the dimensions of callings that triggered each individuals' pursuit of a religious life. Moreover, the study sheds light on the black box of discernment, which is seldom explored in the literature. This study reveals the discernment processes and identifies tools that help individuals decide to lead a religious life and select a religious institute. The findings are of rich reference value to candidates searching for a religious vocation and the parties involved in the discernment.

In terms of the supports, barriers and coping strategies, the study supplements the

local literature on these three areas by providing a comprehensive picture of the pathway an individual travels on their religious vocation journey. Although the research confirms the findings of some similar studies, it also provides new insights into various perspectives. In deciding to commit to the pursuit, the study argues that supports from the individual self and from God above play important roles, apart from the traditional social supports from the outside environment. On the part of barriers, the local religious personnel, unlike their counterparts mentioned in Western studies, did not consider practising the evangelical counsels a major challenge in pursuing a religious vocation. The findings on coping strategies not only provide some concrete measures/wisdom for religious personnel to apply when facing their own difficulties on their journeys; they also offer a kind of psychological preparation for those youngsters who have a desire to lead a religious life. The study also shows that supports received are often closely related to the coping strategies adopted, and the two overlap at times.

In terms of the declining trend of responses to religious vocation, this study enhances our understanding of the reasons behind which have not been visited systematically, though it has posed serious concern in the territory. Moreover, four laity participants have offered valuable insiders' views on the reasons for leaving the religious institutes, as there are neither statistics nor studies on the religious personnel who have abandoned the pursuit of religious vocation. Their pains and gains have also provided a wide angle on the pathways of religious vocation journey.

In terms of the suggested measures to foster religious vocations, the study deepens our knowledge on the subject, as the findings are largely parallel to those discussed in other similar studies, in particular, with reference to the roles of the nine parties involved. The focuses differ slightly in terms of both breadth and depth, however. Moreover, by conceptualising the respective responsibilities of these parties into nine components under

three clusters, the study introduced a framework displaying the dynamics of inter-cluster coordination and cross-cluster interactions, with a view to suggesting measures to foster religious vocations. The measures can provide insights to the DHK and religious institutes to tackle the plight of ‘The harvest is abundant but the labourers are few’ (Luke 10:2) in the territory, which is facing a declining population of religious personnel, despite an expansion of the lay population.

### **Avenues for Future Research**

The avenues for future research can point in two directions: (a) coverage of the study and (b) selection of the target population. On the coverage of the study, embracing the sociocultural factors in the local context and the global trend of the Catholic Church would widen the horizon in understanding one’s religious vocation journey and provide insights into measures to foster religious vocations in Hong Kong.

The present study showed the participants’ precious experiences in their religious vocation journeys on a personal level. The calling to the religious vocation does not occur in a vacuum unaffected by the social and cultural contexts. The participants did not explicitly emphasise sociocultural factors during the interviews, in which an open-ended approach was adopted to collect their views without leading them towards a specific answer. Nevertheless, some findings contained certain elements of these two factors in influencing the participants’ responses to the calling and discernment process.

On the social aspect, a Maryknoll Father pointed out that the three most respected professions in the 1950s were in the order of priesthood, medicine and law. Currently, the priests in Hong Kong do not possess such a high status; therefore, parents have reservations about consecrating their children to lead a religious life, even if they may have such a calling. Also, today’s women generally have a higher educational level than their counterparts had in past decades. In response to a calling, the women laity may look for other opportunities

during discernment, instead of considering life as a religious sister as the only option to serve God. On the cultural factor, the findings show that the parents' objections to/non-support of the participants' choice of a religious life were greatly influenced by traditional Chinese family values, in which sons and daughters should get married, bear children and render financial support to their families.

Future work of this kind could embrace the impact of sociocultural factors in motivating one's response to the calling and subsequent discernment. The study may also explore how Hong Kong Catholic believers overcome various barriers to serve God within the unique Chinese context, and under the present challenges of Hong Kong society in and after the social incident and the evolving Sino-Vatican relationship and, thus, offer a more comprehensive understanding of the subject.

In fostering a religious vocation, the participants identified the respective roles played by the nine parties in Hong Kong. It is speculated that getting rid of external criticisms and the call for radical reforms in the Catholic Church may provide more insights in this regard. Examples of external criticisms of the Catholic Church include allegations of sexual misconduct and child-abuse scandals, and the call for radical reforms may refer to (a) equating the holiness of the religious and the laity; (b) lowering the status of priests from leaders to servants; and (c) eliminating the traditional demand on the religious for celibacy and obedience.

In the study, the participants did not explicitly mention that the external criticisms of the Catholic Church had impacted their religious vocation journeys. Also, they did not consider themselves superior over the laity but regarded the latter as siblings in the church. They were positive about the rising trend of collaborating with the faithful in the face of the decreasing number of religious personnel. The participants, however, did consider the demand for a celibate lifestyle appropriate for devoting oneself totally to serving the faithful.

Nowadays, obedience is not adopted blindly, as some institutes have begun to practise mutual listening with the religious personnel to ‘listen’ to God’s voice.

In future studies of this type, researchers could explore if removing external criticisms and addressing the call for radical reforms in the Catholic Church in the global world would motivate individuals to respond to the divine calling and, thus, foster a religious vocation. Future studies could also examine if the scandals and controversies of the Catholic Church had affected or can account for the local situation of religious vocation journeys.

In the direction of selecting the target population, the findings of this study can inspire some avenues for future research in Hong Kong and elsewhere. First, this study presents a number of features of the 14 participants in the course of their religious vocation journeys, including dimensions of responses, discernment processes, supports received, barriers encountered and coping strategies adopted. However, the prevalence of these features remains unknown, as the current study is an exploratory one based on qualitative methods and purposive sampling. Future studies can conduct a representative survey, in terms of a quantitative approach, to test whether the features found in this study are prevalent across the entire religious personnel population in Hong Kong.

Second, the study provided participants’ perspectives on the reasons for the declining trend of responses to religious vocations and their suggested measures to foster religious vocations in Hong Kong. Using the participants’ ideas as the framework, future studies in these two areas can also be conducted by collecting the views of all religious personnel serving in the territory, so that more wisdom and practical solutions to the issue can be tapped.

Third, the participants recruited for this study included those priests and religious who were ordained or proclaimed their final vows after 2010. The rationale for selecting those who are junior in terms of years of service in the priesthood, religious brotherhood or



religious sisterhood is because their experiences are more recent and, thus, of more reference value to the present situation. Future studies comparing and contrasting the different years of service among religious personnel may not only provide more room for reflection but also a longitudinal angle on the features of the religious vocation journey, reasons for the declining trend of responses to religious vocations and suggested measures to foster religious vocations in the territory. It would be interesting to investigate if the issues or challenges encountered by the participants in the present study existed before, and if so, were they bothersome to religious personnel and/or deterrents to consider/continue a religious vocation.

Lastly, this study involved 10 religious participants who were from four groups, comprising 2 diocesan clergy, 1 religious priest, 2 religious brothers and 5 religious sisters. Future studies can be conducted on a larger group of the same religious personnel for a more in-depth understanding. It would be interesting to explore if any unique findings emerge within a particular group of religious personnel or if religious personnel as a whole share any commonalities.

Academically, this study may give an in-depth understanding of religious vocations and provide insights into avenues for future research. Personally, I am eager as well as have a strong passion to invite you, as a reader of this thesis, to examine your story, reflect on your heart's deepest desires, find out your dreams and give some thought to your vocation or mission in life, even though you may be an atheist. I am sure you will have a wonderful and fruitful journey once you commence the search as 'ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you', which is Jesus's teaching of God's answers to man's prayers (Matthew 7:7). May God bless you, guide you and keep you along the journey. Amen!

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## APPENDICES

## Appendix A: Number of Religious Personnel in Hong Kong (from 1967 to 2016)

Year <sup>1</sup>	Diocesan Clergy (Chinese)	Diocesan Clergy (Other) <sup>2</sup>	Priests of Institutes (Chinese)	Priests of Institutes (Other) <sup>2</sup>	Religious Brothers (Chinese)	Religious Brothers (Other) <sup>2</sup>	Religious Sisters (Chinese)	Religious Sisters (Other) <sup>2</sup>	Total
1967	52	63	113	114	48	62	396	360	1,208
1968	55	61	117	115	45	65	395	366	1,219
1969	61	60	122	113	77	83	370	417	1,303
1970	68	62	126	101	55	70	447	357	1,286
1971	55	66	65	147	52	65	436	361	1,247
1972	59	63	72	146	42	61	457	336	1,236
1973	60	62	123	92	44	50	463	330	1,224
1974	58	62	66	158	44	47	447	324	1,206
1975	62	2	59	215	33	50	453	317	1,191
1976	64	2	59	207	49	62	470	311	1,224
1977	67	1	60	220	41	60	491	267	1,207
1978	70	1	63	216	41	51	441	336	1,219
1979	70	1	55	212	38	48	467	330	1,221
1980	70	1	62	208	34	45	449	329	1,198
1981	74	1	59	203	37	45	457	307	1,183
1982	75	1	63	205	32	45	476	316	1,213
1983	75	1	67	207	47	37	445	310	1,189
1984	73	1	70	208	30	41	438	300	1,161
1985	72	1	66	201	35	44	449	296	1,164
1986	73	1	69	201	28	49	458	292	1,171
1987	75	1	66	200	35	45	450	281	1,153
1988	73	1	68	195	30	47	444	264	1,122
1989	73	2	67	211	31	38	407	263	1,092
1990	73	3	67	202	33	46	412	255	1,091
1991	71	2	60	193	28	36	384	248	1,022
1992	70	1	62	199	33	34	381	224	1,004
1993	72	1	75	187	45	46	379	220	1,025
1994	70	1	69	178	43	42	373	203	979
1995	70	1	63	192	32	41	369	190	958
1996	70	1	67	199	38	35	367	190	967
1997	69	1	66	198	47	38	365	165	949
1998	69	1	63	188	39	28	366	163	917
1999	69	1	61	185	35	32	361	171	915
2000	67	1	58	181	26	34	354	171	892
2001	68	1	57	183	27	33	354	165	888
2002	68	1	59	171	31	35	359	170	894
2003	68	1	56	172	31	35	361	155	879
2004	67	1	56	165	35	37	358	150	869
2005	65	1	60	164	34	38	354	154	870
2006	67	1	57	166	33	35	347	155	861
2007	67	1	59	173	37	39	337	154	867

2008	69	1	59	177	32	28	344	152	862
2009	68	1	63	177	27	27	344	145	852
2010	68	1	63	173	35	30	345	146	861
2011	68	1	63	174	37	38	343	138	862
2012	67	1	66	167	39	30	335	156	861
2013	66	1	68	163	32	32	334	147	843
2014	66	2	67	156	41	27	333	141	833
2015	66	2	64	156	34	24	327	142	815
2016	68	3	66	161	35	25	318	138	814

*Source: Catholic Hong Kong Diocesan Archives online (<http://archives.catholic.org.hk>).*

Note:

1. The period of coverage of the statistical data varies among certain years, as follows:
  - (a) From 1967 to 1980, the period covers 30 September of the current year to 1 October of the next year.
  - (b) From 1981 to 1985, the period covers 31 August of the current year to 1 September of the next year.
  - (c) For 1986, the period covers 1 August of the current year to 30 September of the next year.
  - (d) From 1988 onwards, the period covers 1 September of the current year to 31 August of the next year.
2. 'Other' stands for Other Nationalities.

### Appendix B: Catholic Population in Hong Kong (from 1967 to 2016)

Year <sup>1</sup>	Local residents <sup>2</sup>	Non-residents (Filipinos) <sup>3</sup>	Non-residents (Other Nationalities) <sup>4</sup>	Total
1967	235,937			235,937
1968	241,813			241,813
1969	247,961			247,961
1970	252,803			252,803
1971	259,713			259,713
1972	261,890			261,890
1973	265,806			265,806
1974	260,015			260,015
1975	250,197			250,197
1976	256,938			256,938
1977	258,817			258,817
1978	266,843			266,843
1979	259,817			259,817
1980	263,405			263,405
1981	266,508			266,508
1982	269,798			269,798
1983	269,324			269,324
1984	267,249			267,249
1985	267,321			267,321
1986	263,270			263,270
1987	255,629			255,629
1988	258,209			258,209
1989	253,362			253,362
1990	250,605			250,605
1991	249,182			249,182
1992	254,134			254,134
1993	257,457			257,457
1994	237,416			237,416
1995	242,491	120,000		362,491
1996	239,683	120,000		359,683
1997	227,086	120,000		347,086
1998	229,723	141,000		370,723
1999	236,327	135,000		371,327
2000	224,156	131,000		355,156
2001	239,402	128,000		367,402
2002	240,362	113,000		353,362
2003	242,513	105,000		347,513
2004	243,866	103,000		346,866
2005	246,877	102,000		348,877
2006	248,939	104,000		352,939
2007	259,596	107,000		366,596
2008	353,000	110,500		463,500
2009	357,000	128,000	45,000	530,000
2010	363,000	120,000	18,000	501,000
2011	368,000	139,000	40,000	547,000
2012	374,000	147,000	42,000	563,000
2013	379,000	154,000	42,000	575,000



2014	384,000	160,000	37,000	581,000
2015	389,000	166,000	36,000	591,000
2016	394,000	171,000	36,000	601,000

Source: Catholic Hong Kong Diocesan Archives online (<http://archives.catholic.org.hk>).

Note:

1. The period of coverage of the statistical data varies among certain years, as follows:
  - (a) From 1967 to 1980, the period covers 30 September of the current year to 1 October of the next year.
  - (b) From 1981 to 1985, the period covers 31 August of the current year to 1 September of the next year.
  - (c) For 1986, the period covers 1 August of the current year to 30 September of the next year.
  - (d) From 1988 onwards, the period covers 1 September of the current year to 31 August of the next year.
2. Excludes non-resident Filipinos and other nationalities living in Hong Kong. Data captured before year 2007 were consolidated from the actual figures reported by the parishes and data thereafter were captured in a computer record with projections mainly based on the number of baptisms performed each year.
3. Data were available from year 1995, and the number of Filipino migrant workers serving as domestic helpers was estimated. Owing to the difficulty of obtaining accurate statistics, the estimated figure is based on information supplied by the Government.
4. Estimated data was available from year 2009.

## Appendix C: Invitation Letter for Interviews (Chinese Original)

親愛的\_\_\_\_神父 / 修士 / 修女:

### 「聖召之旅：回應、支持與障礙 - 香港神父、修士及修女的故事」

我是香港教育大學國際教育與終身學習學系的博士研究生，現正進行一項有關香港神父、修士及修女聖召之旅的論文研究項目。我曾於 2018 年 7 / 8 月聯絡您，您表示接受邀請及樂意參與這項研究。香港教育大學近日已通過了我這項目的論文建議書！故此，我現在可以就上述研究項目進行訪談。

我準備由今年 3 月起展開訪問，預計今年年底至明年年初完成相關的訪談。因此，我想知道您在 2019 年 3 月至 12 月期間，那些月份方便進行該兩次的訪談？如您覺得這段時間不太方便，請提出您方便的。另外，您亦可建議適合進行訪談的日期(例如週末或週日)、時間(例如上午或下午)及地點(例如您的工作地方)等，我會盡量配合。

如可以，請您於本月底前給我回覆，好讓我可嘗試編製一個方便您及其他受訪者的時間表。謝謝！

在此，附上受訪同意書及有關此項研究的目的和程序資料(中文及英文版)，供您細閱。

如您想獲得更多有關這項研究的資料，請致電 \_\_\_\_\_ 或電郵直接聯絡我。

謝謝您慷慨回應參與這項研究。

天主保佑！

香港教育大學國際教育與終身學習學系  
博士研究生  
麥燕珍

\_\_\_\_\_年 \_\_\_\_\_月 \_\_\_\_\_日

## Appendix D: Invitation Letter for Interviews (English Version)

Dear Father/Brother/Sister,

### **‘The Religious Vocation Journey: Responses, Supports and Barriers– Stories of Chinese Priests, Religious Brothers and Religious Sisters in Hong Kong’**

I am an EdD student from the Education University of Hong Kong (EdUHK), and I am conducting a research project about the religious vocation journey of Chinese priests, and religious brothers and sisters in Hong Kong. I approached you in July/August 2018, and you kindly accepted my invitation to participate in this study. The EdUHK has recently endorsed my thesis proposal. I therefore can commence the related interviews.

I am preparing to conduct the interviews and plan to complete them by late 2019 to early 2020. In relation to this, I would like to know about your availability for the two interviews during the period of March to December 2019. If you find the proposed period inconvenient, please let me have your suggestions. In addition, please propose the dates (weekends or weekdays), time (am or pm) and venue you consider suitable for the interviews so that I can fit them in as much as possible.

I would be grateful if you could reply by end of this month, so that I can prepare a schedule that is convenient to both you and the other participants.

Enclosed please find the consent form and information sheet (both Chinese and English versions) about the aims and procedure of this study for your perusal.

If you would like to obtain more information about this study, please feel free to call me at \_\_\_\_\_ or by email.

Thanks for your generosity in participating in this study.

God Bless!

Sincerely,

Miss MAK Yin Chun  
EdD Student  
Department of International Education and Lifelong Learning  
The Education University of Hong Kong

## Appendix E: Interview Protocol (Chinese Original)

### 訪談內容大綱

根據研究問題，受訪者將在訪談中透過回答以下四個方面的問題，從而提供他們回應聖召旅程的背景 -

- (i) 個人回應聖召之旅的獨特體驗，重點在於召叫的向度 / 性質 / 內容及箇中辨別的過程；
- (ii) 支持（促成因素 / 助力），重點關注受訪者的職業發展 / 選擇召叫過程和促進推動聖召的動力和方法；
- (iii) 障礙（威懾者 / 阻力），重點關注受訪者在追求聖召時遇到的障礙（在決定回應 / 進入聖召旅程之前及之後）；和
- (iv) 受訪者在克服當中障礙的應對策略，以及有關各方解決神父、修士和修女數目下降的問題。

在詢問（ii）至（iv）方面的問題時，研究員將探討受試者本身的因素以及情境的影響：包括環境（例如天主、家庭、學校、朋友/同輩、教會、修院/修會培育、社交媒體、社會情況等）和關鍵的生命事件。

研究員在採訪中會邀請受訪者回答以下一系列的問題：

#### I. 回應

（關注於探討受訪者聖召的起源/性質/內容及箇中辨別的過程）

- (a) 受訪者回應聖召之旅的獨特體驗
  - 第一召叫（即首先選擇追求奉獻生活的決定）  
[會問及何時？在哪裡？什麼？如何？為什麼？有這個決定]
  - 什麼聖經的經文在回應過程中是特別偏好或重要？^
  - 那位聖人給予您最大的啟發？^  
^ 如果在這部分訪談中有死氣沉沉的話，研究員會向受訪者提問這類問題
- (b) 關於回應聖召（來源/向度）時的生命目標、信仰、價值觀和願望等  
\*受訪者對「聖召」和生命召叫的解釋；及對聖召/職業/工作的渴望
  - (i) 從指導力量（從上而來）
    - 從上主的召喚
    - 宗教的自我效能
    - 對信仰的承諾
    - 宗教和信仰，基督徒的價值觀，生命的方向

(ii) 來自個人自我（來自內心）

- 明確的目標和使命感
- 在所選職業中感受到的目標和意義
- 自我的個性 / 價值觀 / 能力

(iii) 為他人的益處（來自外部）

- 利他性傾向（更大的良好動機和親社會意圖）
- 任何特定的群體對象（如窮人，社會的少數人士等）

(c) 第二次召叫（即召叫中的召叫）

[會問及為什麼選擇加入教區或修會團體；當中涉及受訪者的選擇 / 辨別過程] 屬於修會的神父、修士和修女，會問及他們的選擇是否受所屬修會創辦人的吸引或是受修會的魅力/靈修方向或是所涉及的事工/職務的影響。

(d) 關於受訪者的基本個人資料：性別、年齡、教育程度、家庭背景，宗教生活及活動（如祈禱、參與感恩祭 / 彌撒及領受聖事等）

## II. 支持（促成因素 / 助力）

（關注受訪者的職業發展/選擇召叫過程和促進推動聖召的動力和方法）

(a) 受訪者主體（內在因素）

- 個人渴望和努力 / 動機 / 意志力
- 自我效能（自我信念、結果期望和目標等）

(b) 情境影響（外在因素）

(i) 環境

- 天主與受訪者主體的關係，如天主賜予的愛和恩寵（要求受訪者提供具體的例子）
- 家庭（包括父母/兄弟姐妹/親戚等）
- 學校（包括校長/老師/同學等）
- 朋友/同輩
- 教會（教區/堂區/修會的神父、修士、修女、執事或平信徒等）
- 修院/修會培育
- 社交媒體
- 社會狀況（例如「佔領中環」事件發生後，可能使一名年輕男子在回應聖召時，會選擇進入香港教區而不是修會團體，因為選擇前者的，年輕人可以繼續留在香港。）
- 其他

(ii) 生命事件

- 受訪者認為這些事件對於其選擇追求奉獻的生活至關重要

受訪者認為主體本身和情境影響的互動下，對其選擇成為神父、修士、修女的決定產生鼓勵和支持作用。

- (c) 受訪者在回應聖召旅程中獲得了那些支持？而那些支持又如何幫助他們繼續回應這召叫？
- (d) 受訪者有否知道他們所認識的神父、修士、修女，在聖召旅程中獲得甚麼支持以鼓勵他們在路上前進？
- (e) 受訪者認為香港有甚麼非常有效措施使他們追求獻身生活？據他們認知，香港天主教教區採取了那些措施來支持促進聖召呢？
- (f) 受訪者認為教區和/或修會團體，可以採取什麼措施在香港培養氣氛或土壤來促進聖召？

### III. 障礙（威懾者 / 阻力）

（關注受訪者在選擇追求獻身生活時遇到的各種障礙）

#### A. 在決定回應/ 進入聖召旅程之前

受訪者認為以下的主體本身和情境影響，對其選擇成為神父 / 修士 / 修女的決定產生負面的後果。

- (a) 受訪者主體
  - 面對追求奉獻生活的障礙時的個人強項 / 不足（例如自信，堅持不懈）
- (b) 情境影響
  - (i) 環境
    - 天主與受訪者主體的關係
    - 家庭（包括父母/兄弟姐妹/親戚等）
    - 學校（包括校長/老師/同學等）
    - 朋友/同輩
    - 教會（教區/堂區/修會的神父、修士、修女、執事或平信徒等）
    - 修院/修會培育（可能在團體生活的磨合中遇到困難）
    - 社交媒體
    - 社會狀況（例如世界和香港的性文化鬆懈可能會減少年輕人對聖召的回應，因為獻身生活需要守貞潔聖願。）
    - 其他
  - (ii) 生命事件
    - 受訪者認為這些事件不利於他們追求奉獻生活的回應

## B. 在決定回應 / 進入聖召旅程之後

受訪者認為以下的主體本身和情境影響，對他們不斷追求奉獻生活產生負面的後果。

- (a) 受訪者主體
  - 面對追求奉獻生活的障礙時的個人強項 / 不足（例如自信，堅持不懈）
- (b) 情境影響
  - (i) 環境
    - 天主與受訪者主體的關係
    - 家庭（包括父母/兄弟姐妹/親戚等）
    - 學校（包括校長/老師/同學等）
    - 朋友/同輩
    - 教會（教區/堂區/修會的神父、修士、修女、執事或平信徒等）
    - 修院/修會培育（可能在團體生活的磨合中遇到困難）
    - 社交媒體
    - 社會狀況（例如世界和香港的性文化鬆解可能會減少年輕人對聖召的回應，因為獻身生活需要守貞潔聖願。）
    - 其他
  - (ii) 生命事件
    - 受訪者認為這些事件不利於他們追求奉獻生活的回應
- (c) 受訪者在聖召旅程中遇到有那些障礙 / 挑戰（例如神貧、貞潔和服從的聖願以及奉獻生活的性質，如培育和團體生活方面）？他們如何克服這些困難，從而持守聖召的回應？  
[對於教區神父來說，他們不需要公開宣發這三個聖願。然而，他們幾大程度上採取這種生活方式？]
- (d) 受訪者有否知道一些人士因為未能克服障礙，而最終退出回應聖召，沒有成為神父、修士、修女？
- (e) 受訪者認為甚麼是對聖召回應數目減少的原因？
- (f) 受訪者認為可以採取甚麼措施來解決聖召的下降趨勢，以促進年青人回應聖召？

## IV. 應對策略

（關注於受訪者在克服當中障礙的應對策略，以及有關各方解決神父、修士和修女數目下降的問題）

- (a) 受訪者主體
  - 克服追求獻身生活的障礙的個人渴望和努力

## (b) 情境影響

## (i) 環境

- 天主與受訪者主體的關係
- 家庭（包括父母/兄弟姐妹/親戚等）
- 學校（包括校長/老師/同學等）
- 朋友/同輩
- 教會(教區/堂區/修會的神父、修士、修女、執事或平信徒等)
- 修院/修會培育（可能與受訪者主體個人發展因素混在一起）
- 社交媒體
- 社會狀況
- 其他

## (ii) 生命事件

- 受訪者體驗到這些生命事件，能夠幫助他們應對困難，從而繼續追求奉獻的生活

V. 整體總結 / 整合

四大組件	分享 / 心路歷程
回應	請以一個圖像 / 一個字 / 一句話 / 一本書 / 一首歌 / 一幅畫，來形容您的回應聖召旅程的感受！
支持	可以/能夠在聖召的路上行走，您最想多謝誰曾給您的支持/鼓勵？及向祂/他/她說什麼？或點一首什麼歌曲給祂/他/她？
障礙	您覺得最難克服的障礙是什麼？
應對策略	您的心得/錦囊？或是最了得的應對策略/方法是什麼？

- 結束 -



## Appendix F: Interview Protocol (English Version)

### An Outline of the Interview Protocol

Following the research questions, the participants will be asked to provide background about their journeys towards priesthood, religious brotherhood and religious sisterhood in response to the religious vocation by answering questions on four aspects during the interviews:

- (i) unique experience(s) in responding to the religious vocation with the focus on the dimension/nature/content of the calling and the discernment process;
- (ii) supports (contributing factors) with the focus on the career development/vocation choice process and promoting a religious vocation;
- (iii) barriers (deterrents) with the focus on the kinds of barriers that the interviewees encountered (before as well as after deciding to respond to the religious vocation/entering the vocation) in pursuing their religious vocation; and
- (iv) coping strategies with the focus on interviewees' coping strategies to overcome the barriers therein and the parties concerned in addressing the issue of the decline in the number of religious personnel.

In asking questions on the aspects in (ii) to (iv), exploration will be made on the impacts from the subject person and contextual influences: environment (God, family, school, friends/peers, church, religious formation, social media, social situation, etc.) and crucial life events.

The set of questions for the participants to answer in the interview is appended below.

#### **I. Responses**

(Focus is on the origin/nature/content of the calling and discernment of the vocation)

- (a) Interviewees' unique experience(s) in responding to the religious vocation

– This is the First Calling for pursuing a consecrated life

(Will ask about 'When? Where? What? How? Why?' the decision was made)

– What Bible scripture was of particular preference or importance in the responding process?^

– Which Saint inspired you most?^

^ Participants will be given this type of sample prompt question in case there is dead air during the interview on this part.

(b) Life goals, faith, values and aspirations for the religious vocation

(sources/dimensions)

\*Interviewees' interpretations of 'Religious Vocation' and their sense of life calling; aspirations towards a religious vocation/career/work

(i) From guiding force (from top)

- Calling from God from above
- Religious self-efficacy
- Commitment to faith
- Religion and beliefs, Christian values, direction of life

(ii) From individual self (from inner)

- Clarity of purpose and sense of mission
- Sense of purpose and meaningfulness perceived in the selected vocation
- Personality/values/capacity

(iii) For others' good (from outside)

- Altruistic dispositions (the greater good motivation and pro-social intention)
- Any particular target groups (e.g. the poor, minorities in the community, etc.)

(c) Second Calling (or Calling among the Calling) for choosing the diocese or religious institute (participants' choice/discernment process). For the priests, religious brothers and religious sisters under the religious institute, were they attracted by the founder/foundress, the charisma or the spirituality of that particular religious institute or the ministry involved?

(d) Information on the demographic backgrounds of the interviewees: gender, age, educational level, family background, religion and livelihood, and religious practices (prayer, mass, sacraments)

## **II. Supports** (Contributing factors)

(Focus is on the career development/vocation choice process and promoting a religious vocation)

(a) Subject Person (inner)

- personal desire and effort/motivation/will power
- self-efficacy (self-beliefs, outcome expectations and goals, etc.)

## (b) Contextual Influences (outside)

## (i) Environment

- God’s relationship with the subject person, God’s love and grace  
(request participants to provide concrete examples for illustration)
- Family (including parents/siblings/relatives, etc.)
- School (including principals/teachers/classmates, etc.)
- Friends/peers
- Church (religious personnel in diocese/parish/religious institute)
- Religious formation
- Social media
- Social situation, e.g. the incident on the ‘Occupying the Central’ may  
make a young man enter the Hong Kong Diocese instead of a religious  
institute, because by choosing the former, the young man can remain in  
Hong Kong.)
- Others

## (ii) Life Events

- Interviewees regard these events as crucial in their response to pursue a  
consecrated life

Interviewees regard the dynamic interaction of subject person, and the contextual influences give them encouragement and support their choice of the priesthood or religious brotherhood/sisterhood as their career/vocation choice.

- (c) What supports did the participants receive in their religious vocation journeys? And how did they help them to continue on with their religious vocation?
- (d) Do the participants have any knowledge about the support they received from their fellow priests, religious brothers and religious sisters, which encouraged them to continue walking on their religious journey?
- (e) In their opinion, what measures here in Hong Kong were very effective in encouraging the interviewees to pursue the consecrated life, and according to their

knowledge, what measures have the Catholic Diocese of Hong Kong taken to provide support to foster religious vocation?

- (f) In their opinion, what measures can be done to cultivate the atmosphere or ground in promoting religious vocations in the Hong Kong context at the diocese and/or religious institute level?

### **III. Barriers** (Deterrents)

(Focus is on the kinds of barriers that the interviewees encountered while pursuing their religious vocation)

#### **(A) Before Deciding to Respond to/Enter the Vocation**

*Interviewees regard the following person and contextual influences as providing them with negative impacts in their choice of the priesthood and religious brotherhood/sisterhood as their career/vocation/way of livelihood.*

##### **(a) Subject Person**

- personal strength/inadequacy, e.g. self-confidence, perseverance, to face the barriers on their journey of pursuing a consecrated life

##### **(b) Contextual Influences**

###### **(i) Environment**

- God's relationship with the subject person
- Family (including parents/siblings/relatives, etc.)
- School (including principals/teachers/classmates, etc.)
- Friends/peers
- Church (religious personnel in the diocese/parish/religious institute)
- Religious formation (may have difficulties in community life of the group)
- Social media
- Social situation, e.g. lack of a sexual culture in the world and in Hong Kong may make less young people respond to the religious call, in which chastity is required
- Others

###### **(ii) Life Events**

- Interviewees regard these events as unfavourable in their response to pursue

a consecrated life

(B) After Deciding to Respond to/Enter the Vocation

*Interviewees regard the following person and contextual influences as providing them with negative impacts in their continuous pursuit of their religious life.*

(a) Subject Person

- personal strength/inadequacy, e.g. self-confidence, perseverance, to face the barriers on their journey of pursuing a consecrated life

(b) Contextual Influences

(i) Environment

- God's relationship with the subject person
- Family (including parents/siblings/relatives, etc.)
- School (including principals/teachers/classmates, etc.)
- Friends/peers
- Church (religious personnel in the diocese/parish/religious institute)
- Religious formation (may have difficulties in community life of the group)
- Social media
- Social situation, e.g. lack of a sexual culture in the world and in Hong Kong may make less young people respond to the religious call, in which the chastity is required
- Others

(ii) Life Events

- Interviewees regard these events as unfavourable in their response to pursue a consecrated life

- (c) What barriers/challenges, e.g. vows of poverty, chastity and obedience and the nature of the consecrated life in terms of formation and community life [diocesan priests are not required to proclaim these three vows publicly; to what extent does he adopt this way of life?] have the interviewees encountered in their religious vocation journeys? And how did they overcome these difficulties so as to keep up with the religious vocation?

- (d) Do you have any knowledge about another priest-to-be, religious brother-to-be or religious sister-to-be, whom you know, who did not overcome the barriers and finally quit the religious vocation?
- (e) In your opinion, what are the reasons for the decreasing number of responses to religious vocations?
- (f) In your opinion, what measures can be taken to address the declining trend of religious vocations so as to promote them?

#### **IV. Coping Strategies**

(Focus is on interviewees' coping strategies to overcome the barriers therein and the parties concerned in addressing the issue of the decline in the number of religious personnel)

- (a) Subject Person
  - personal desire and effort in overcoming the barriers on the journey of pursuing a consecrated life
- (b) Contextual Influences
  - (i) Environment
    - God's relationship with the subject person
    - Family (including parents/siblings/relatives, etc.)
    - School (including principals/teachers/classmates, etc.)
    - Friends/peers
    - Church (religious personnel in the diocese/parish/religious institute)
    - Religious formation (may be mixed with subject person's human development factor)
    - Social media
    - Social situation
    - Others
  - (ii) Life Events

- Interviewees' experiences with life events that helped them cope with the difficulties in their responding to and remaining in their pursuit of a consecrated life

## **V. Conclusion/Overview**

<b>Four Building Blocks</b>	<b>Sharing/Experience</b>
Responses	Please use a metaphor/a word/a phrase/a book/a song to describe your feelings in your response to the religious vocation journey
Supports	Whom would you like to thank most for giving you support/encouragement on your journey? What would you like to say to them? What song would you like to sing for them?
Barriers	Which barrier do you consider was the most difficult to overcome in your journey?
Coping Strategies	What are your tips? What strategy/measure do you consider was most effective in coping with the difficulties you encountered?

- END -

## Appendix G: Informed Consent Form (Chinese Original)

香港教育大學  
國際教育與終身學習學系

### 受訪同意書

「聖召之旅：回應、支持與障礙 -  
香港神父、修士及修女的故事」

本人同意接受由麥燕珍女士就上述博士論文研究項目所進行的訪談，並理解：

1. 我是自願參與這項研究；
2. 我已充分了解所附資料有關此項研究的目的和程序；及
3. 我明白訪談資料會在論文或其他學術出版物中發表。

本人理解我有權在研究過程中提出問題，並在任何時候決定退出研究，更不會因此而對研究工作產生的影響負有任何責任。

受訪者姓名：

受訪者簽名：

日期：

年

月

日



## Appendix H: Informed Consent Form (English Version)

### THE EDUCATION UNIVERSITY OF HONG KONG Department of International Education and Lifelong Learning

#### *CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH*

#### *‘The Religious Vocation Journey: Responses, Supports and Barriers– Stories of Chinese Priests, Religious Brothers and Religious Sisters in Hong Kong’*

I hereby consent to participate in the captioned research conducted by Miss MAK Yin Chun and I understand the following:

1. My participation in the project is voluntary;
2. The aims and procedure of this research set out in the **attached** information sheet have been fully explained; and
3. The interview data obtained from this research may be published.

I acknowledge that I have the right to question any part of the procedure and can withdraw at any time without negative consequences.

Name of participant: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of participant: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_



## Appendix I: Information Sheet (Chinese Original)

### 有關資料

#### 「聖召之旅：回應、支持與障礙 - 香港神父、修士及修女的故事」

我是香港教育大學國際教育與終身學習學系的博士研究生，現正進行一項有關香港神父、修士及修女聖召之旅的論文研究項目，並想邀請您參加。以下是研究簡介。

#### 研究目的

- 探討香港神父、修士及修女於追求奉獻生活聖召的回應，並辨認旅程中所遇到的支持和障礙，以及克服當中障礙的應對計策。

#### 研究對象

- 在 2010 年之後，晉鐸的神父或是宣發終身聖願的修士及修女。
- 會有十位神父、修士及修女參與這項研究。

#### 研究方法

- 對在/曾在/嘗試在/鐸職或度獻身生活中服務的神父、修士及修女進行深入訪談。

#### 訪談程序

- 與受訪者進行一至兩次，每次約 1.5 至 2 小時的深入訪談；及
- 訪談過程將會全程錄音，以利詳細記錄資料及製作逐字稿。

#### 訪談內容

- 個人回應聖召之旅的獨特體驗，重點在於聖召的回應及箇中辨別的過程；
- 選擇獻身生活時所遇到的支持和障礙，以及克服當中障礙的應對計策，並透過個人因素，環境影響和生命事件作說明；
- 不斷追求獻身生活時所遇到的支持，障礙和應對策略，並透過個人因素，環境影響和生命事件作說明；及
- 基本個人資料（例如年齡、教育程度、家庭背景）

#### 訪談資料處理

- 所有與您相關的一切資料將會保密，並且只可以通過代碼識別。
- 每次訪談結束後，我會儘快把逐字稿給您檢閱，以求資料的正確。
- 我會將分析訪談資料，並把資料以不記明方式在論文或其他學術出版物中發表。

### 注意事項

- 由於訪談內容涉及您的個人經歷，所以讀者可能會從本研究的出版物中識別您的身份，敬請見諒。然而，我會設法（例如通過用化名等）確保研究資料的匿名性，保障您的私隱。
- 您有權在研究過程中隨時選擇退出，而不會因此對研究工作產生的影響負有任何責任。

如您對這項研究的操守有任何意見，可隨時通過電子郵件與香港教育大學人類實驗對象操守委員會聯絡（電郵: [hrec@eduhk.hk](mailto:hrec@eduhk.hk)）或通過郵件或親自前往研究與發展辦公室（地址：香港教育大學研究與發展事務處 D4-1 室/F-21）。

如您想獲得更多有關這項研究的資料，請致電 \_\_\_\_\_ 或電郵  
直接聯絡我。

謝謝您有興趣參與這項研究。

香港教育大學國際教育與終身學習學系  
博士研究生  
麥燕珍

首席指督教授：方睿明博士  
(香港教育大學社會科學系副教授)

## Appendix J: Information Sheet (English Version)

### INFORMATION SHEET

#### **‘The Religious Vocation Journey: Responses, Supports and Barriers– Stories of Chinese Priests, Religious Brothers and Religious Sisters in Hong Kong’**

I am an EdD student from The Education University of Hong Kong, and I invite you to participate in my thesis research project about the religious vocation journeys of Chinese priests, religious brothers and religious sisters in Hong Kong. Below are the highlights.

#### **Aims of the Project**

- To explore the responses of Chinese priests, religious brothers and religious sisters, who are Hong Kong-born, to the religious calling to pursue a consecrated life and identify the supports and barriers associated with their respective vocation journeys as well as their coping strategies to overcome the barriers therein.

#### **Target Participants**

- Priests who have been ordained in the priesthood and religious brothers/sisters who have proclaimed their final profession in the religious brotherhood/sisterhood in recent years, say after 2010.
- Ten Chinese religious personnel will be invited to participate in this project.

#### **Research Method**

- Conduct autographical interviews with religious personnel who are/have been/tried to be involved in service in the priesthood/religious brotherhood/sisterhood.

#### **Interview Procedure**

- Every respondent will be interviewed one to two times. Each time will last approximately 1.5 to 2 hours.
- Every interview will be tape recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim.

#### **Scope of the Interview**

- Personal unique experiences in response to the religious vocation journey with the focus on the calling and discernment process;
- The supports, barriers and coping strategies in their choice of consecrated life with illustrations of personal factors, environmental influences and life events;
- The supports, barriers and coping strategies in the continuous pursuit of the consecrated life with illustrations of personal factors, environmental influences and life events; and
- Basic demographics, e.g. age, educational level and family background.

#### **Interview Data**

- All the information related to you will remain confidential and will be identifiable by codes known only to the researcher.
- Your interview transcripts will be given back to you as soon as possible to seek your feedback.
- The information obtained from this research may be used in future research and may be published.

**Notes**

- Since the interviews touch on your personal experiences, readers may recognise your identity in publications of this research. Please be assured that I will try my best to protect your identity through means such as pseudonyms.
- You have every right to withdraw from this study before or during the research process without negative consequences.

If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research study, please do not hesitate to contact the Human Research Ethics Committee by email at [hrec@eduhk.hk](mailto:hrec@eduhk.hk) or by mail or in person at the Research and Development Office (room D4-1/F-21), The Education University of Hong Kong.

If you would like to obtain more information about this study, please call me at my telephone number                      or contact me through email

Thank you for your interest in participating in this study.

Miss MAK Yin Chun  
EdD Student  
Department of International Education and Lifelong Learning  
The Education University of Hong Kong (EdUHK)

Principal Supervisor: Dr FAIRBROTHER, Gregory Paul  
(Associate Professor, Department of Social Sciences, EdUHK)

## Appendix K: Sample Transcript Excerpt

115	研究者	你正話講嗰兩個經驗裏面，你都係主要同天主祈禱啦，同埋有個長上真係幫到你啦，可唔可以從呢兩個角度作闡述？
116	受訪者	<p>第一係祈禱啦，天主叮我啦。</p> <p>第二個，真係你開放去講，係恩典呢、恩賜嘅，即係如果有一個咁開明嘅長上呢，咁我都可能走咗。</p>
117	研究者	<p>明白，所以正如你所講都係恩賜呢。</p> <p>所以當你拆解呢啲障礙嘅時候，都係透過祈禱同埋，或者係透過側邊嘅人嘅啟迪，可唔可以咁講呀？</p>
118	受訪者	可以。我覺得同我個人嘅性格都有關。
119	研究者	點解呢？
120	受訪者	<p>正如剛才你所講，如果我係同人比，或者我有啲特質，係我有一份恩寵，就係話我會去睇，透過呢啲咁阻難嘅嘢，我唔單止睇負面，我會睇正面，經過呢樣嘢，原來我學多咗、知道多啲咩嘢叫做修道、咩叫做三願、咩叫做奉獻生活。</p> <p>我唔單只睇我自己裙拉褲甩個個樣，我多睇一樣係，我覺得我自己有恩寵，同埋我嘅性格係咁嘅。</p> <p>有啲人會話，我唔得㗎喇，我係抓住呢樣嘢，你一係減我工作，你唔減我工作，我就走喇。喂，得個㗎，有啲人係咁固執嘅，我慶幸我唔係咋㗎。</p>
121	研究者	即係個人嘅素質都可以幫返……
122	受訪者	係呀，係自己個性格都有幫助，有啲人係冥頑不靈，係都唔肯，淨係同你講數嘅啫，唔係同你講我嘅困難。

## Appendix L: Conceptual Framework (Thematic Nodes)

- (A) Religious Vocation Journey and the Discernment Process
  - 1. Definition of Vocation for Christians
  - 2. Definition of Religious Vocation from Participants
  - 3. Characteristics of a Religious Vocation from God
  - 4. Life Events in Response to the Calling
    - 4.1 Personal Encounter with God
    - 4.2 God's Invitation through Messengers
    - 4.3 Desire from Individual Self
    - 4.4 Intention for Others' Good
  - 5. Discernment Process
    - 5.1 Companionship of Spiritual Director(s)
    - 5.2 Come-and-See Programme
    - 5.3 Self-reflection
  
- (B) Barriers, Coping Strategies, Supports on the Journey
  - 1. Barriers in Deciding to Pursue Religious Life
    - 1.1 Individual Self
    - 1.2 Family
    - 1.3 Friends
    - 1.4 Faith Community
  - 2. Barriers in Living Community Life
    - 2.1 Challenges in the Formation
    - 2.2 Interactions with Community Members and Laity
    - 2.3 Conflicts between Personalities and Community Requirements
  - 3. Barriers in Practising Evangelical Counsels
    - 3.1 Poverty
    - 3.2 Chastity
    - 3.3 Obedience
  - 4. Coping Strategies by Looking Upward to God
    - 4.1 Prayer to God
    - 4.2 Trust in God
    - 4.3 Sacrament/Liturgical Life
  - 5. Coping Strategies by Going Inward to Individual Self
    - 5.1 Deepen Relationship with God
    - 5.2 Improve Self
    - 5.3 Accept Others
  - 6. Supports of God from Above
    - 6.1 Prayer to God
    - 6.2 Trust in God
    - 6.3 Intimate Relationship with God
    - 6.4 All Sorts of Support from God
  - 7. Supports of Individual Self from Within
    - 7.1 Personal Character/Efforts
    - 7.2 Letting Go of Self Desire/Pride

8. Supports of Environment from Outside
    - 8.1 Family
      - 8.1(a) Catholic
      - 8.1(b) Non-Catholic
    - 8.2 Friends
    - 8.3 Faith Community
      - 8.3(a) Spiritual Directors
      - 8.3(b) Faithful in Parishes
      - 8.3(c) Priest at Workplace
    - 8.4 Religious Institute of Participants
      - 8.4(a) Superior
      - 8.4(b) Religious Comrade
      - 8.4(c) Elderly Religious
      - 8.4(d) Community Members
  9. Supports of Church Treasures
    - 9.1 Sacred Scripture
    - 9.2 Saints of Catholic Church
  10. Images of the Journey
- (C) Stories of the Laity who Quit the Religious Vocation Journey
1. Pains
  2. Gains
  3. Current Lives
- (D) Participants' Perspectives on Reasons for the Declining Trend of Responses to Religious Vocations
1. Religious Personnel
  2. Religious Institute
  3. Family
  4. Youngsters
- (E) Participants' Perspectives on Measures to Foster Religious Vocations
1. Family
  2. Schools
  3. Diocese of Hong Kong
  4. Parishes
  5. Diocesan Vocation Commission
  6. Religious Personnel
  7. Religious Institutes
  8. Youngsters
  9. Social Media



## Appendix M: Samples Extracted from the Data of Interview Transcripts Using NVivo

### Sample 1: Data Relating to the Life Events in the Response to the Calling

Religious Vocation Journey.mvp - NVivo 12 Pro

Interview\_Sister Humble (2019030)

Click to edit

4 受訪者 係類似嘅嘢出現囉，我唔知點解好細個，就有呢樣嘢出現。

5 研究者 咁就係好似將來大個著修女衫呀，咁樣嘅嗎？

6 受訪者 類似嘅，因為我記得嗰陣時有一次去，嗰時大球場呢，咁有啲嘢就節嘅強嘅，咁係一日咁見到好多修女嘅，咁我就開始覺得，我大個要過呢種生活。

7 研究者 咁另外喇，除咗你話要過呢種生活嘅，咁有冇第三者嘅力量，例如話，有啲人話做修女好呀，可以服務呀可以貢獻，有冇呢種嘅動力呢嘅陣時？

8 受訪者 我又覺得服務，咁你好多人都服務嘅，唔使一定做修女我覺得，呢樣嘢係我嘅主因呀。

9 研究者 唔係你主因？

10 受訪者 係嘅。

11 研究者 個主因就係你冥冥中覺得有啲嘢，你係有個渴求。

12 受訪者 我冥冥中覺得係有種聲音牽動我。

13 研究者 係，牽動你，好嘅，牽動你時候呢，譬如話講返啲，你話個個助力。

其實我再睇返呢，其實你屋企個個成長，尤其是媽咪個個培育係好得嘅，非尋常。

Codes: 44 References: 108

### Sample 2: Data Relating to the Supports of Environment from Outside

Religious Vocation Journey.mvp - NVivo 12 Pro

Interview\_Sister Path (20190718)

Click to edit

306 受訪者 佢地開心啲，係呀，即係大家其實，佢地唔反對呀，佢地好 support 佢其實。

307 研究者 咁朋友之間呢？你屋企最重要家人話唔反對，或者婆婆好支持，朋友之前對於你咁個咁決定，會唔會好支持，或者俾你冷水咁樣呀。

308 受訪者 嗰啲朋友絕大部份，都係青年活動嘅朋友嘅。

309 研究者 咁所以我記得我第一次話要入修院嘅時候，聯嘉諾撒嘅時候呢，我嘅慈員係好支持嘅，到我返咗出嚟呢，聯咗咗，一年之後，返咗出嚟，佢地反而鼓勵返我，唔緊要嘅，好好笑，我聯返啲紙仔（因為佢地寫咗D信鼓勵我）。

310 受訪者 所以朋友係好支持嘅，因為佢地知道我會入修院嘅，有D就覺得佢入修院呀，佢覺得好真嘅，因為佢地知道我讀咗咗，咁咁到囉。

311 研究者 青委嘅，就最好嘅，有人入，咁好呀咁，因為佢地係咁嘅朋友嘅。

312 受訪者 堂區呀。

313 受訪者 堂區當然支持嘅，園內出咗個聖召喇，引以為榮嘅，學校……等我聽下先。

314 研究者 係囉，學校呢？

315 受訪者 中學……等我聽下先，喇老師都好開心嘅，佢都有一次請過我返去分享嘅。

Codes: 27 References: 61

## Appendix N: Codes Relating to the Two Research Questions Created on NVivo

### Code 1: Codes Relating to Research Question 1

Name	Files	References	Created On	Created By	Modified On	Modified By
RQ1		0	1/27/2020 12:33 PM	YC	1/27/2020 12:33 PM	YC
Life Event		3	1/27/2020 12:34 PM	YC	2/13/2020 12:21 PM	YC
From Guiding Forces (from Above)		1	1/27/2020 1:44 PM	YC	1/27/2020 5:31 PM	YC
Voice from God		7	1/27/2020 1:45 PM	YC	2/13/2020 12:29 PM	YC
Feeling from God		9	1/27/2020 1:45 PM	YC	2/9/2020 6:17 PM	YC
By means of Human Messenger		1	1/27/2020 1:46 PM	YC	1/29/2020 12:06 PM	YC
To One in Particular		8	1/27/2020 1:46 PM	YC	2/13/2020 12:29 PM	YC
Without addressing to a Particular Target		4	1/27/2020 1:47 PM	YC	2/9/2020 12:32 PM	YC
From Individual Self (from Inner)		13	1/27/2020 1:44 PM	YC	2/13/2020 12:21 PM	YC
For Others' Good (from Outside)		5	1/27/2020 1:45 PM	YC	2/9/2020 12:35 PM	YC
Discernment Process		6	1/27/2020 12:34 PM	YC	2/9/2020 6:19 PM	YC
For Pursuing Consecrated Life		17	1/27/2020 1:41 PM	YC	2/13/2020 12:51 PM	YC
For Entering Diocese or a Particular Institute		9	1/27/2020 1:42 PM	YC	2/9/2020 12:43 PM	YC
One Religious Institute only		5	1/27/2020 1:42 PM	YC	2/3/2020 4:06 PM	YC
More than one Religious Institute (Active)		13	1/27/2020 1:43 PM	YC	2/13/2020 12:47 PM	YC
More than one Religious Institute (Passive)		2	1/27/2020 1:43 PM	YC	2/9/2020 3:56 PM	YC
Definition of Religious Vocation		2	1/27/2020 12:34 PM	YC	2/13/2020 12:33 PM	YC
RQ2		0	1/27/2020 12:33 PM	YC	1/27/2020 12:33 PM	YC
More understanding on Participants_Leavers		0	1/27/2020 12:39 PM	YC	1/27/2020 12:42 PM	YC
Spiritual Journey for Researcher		0	1/27/2020 12:44 PM	YC	1/27/2020 12:45 PM	YC

### Code 2: Codes Relating to Research Question 2 (First Level)

Name	Files	References	Created On	Created By	Modified On	Modified By
RQ1		0	1/27/2020 12:33 PM	YC	1/27/2020 12:33 PM	YC
RQ2		0	1/27/2020 12:33 PM	YC	1/27/2020 12:33 PM	YC
Support		0	1/27/2020 12:34 PM	YC	1/27/2020 12:34 PM	YC
Barriers (in General)		2	1/27/2020 12:35 PM	YC	2/9/2020 1:13 PM	YC
Coping Strategies to Barriers in general		0	1/27/2020 12:35 PM	YC	1/27/2020 12:35 PM	YC
Barriers (in form of Three Vows)		8	1/27/2020 12:36 PM	YC	2/9/2020 12:57 PM	YC
Declining trend of religious vocation		1	1/27/2020 12:37 PM	YC	2/9/2020 4:17 PM	YC
Promotion of religious vocation		0	1/27/2020 12:37 PM	YC	1/27/2020 12:37 PM	YC
Overview or Image of Journey		0	1/27/2020 12:37 PM	YC	1/27/2020 12:37 PM	YC
Scripture in Journey		1	1/27/2020 12:38 PM	YC	1/27/2020 5:17 PM	YC
Saints for Model		13	1/28/2020 12:19 PM	YC	2/9/2020 6:26 PM	YC
More understanding on Participants_Leavers		0	1/27/2020 12:39 PM	YC	1/27/2020 12:42 PM	YC
Spiritual Journey for Researcher		0	1/27/2020 12:44 PM	YC	1/27/2020 12:45 PM	YC

### Code 3: Codes Relating to Research Question 2 (Supports and Barriers in General)

Name	Files	References	Created On	Created By	Modified On	Modified By
RQ1	0	0	1/27/2020 12:33 PM	YC	1/27/2020 12:33 PM	YC
RQ2	0	0	1/27/2020 12:33 PM	YC	1/27/2020 12:33 PM	YC
Support	0	0	1/27/2020 12:34 PM	YC	1/27/2020 12:34 PM	YC
God	13	26	1/27/2020 1:47 PM	YC	2/9/2020 6:23 PM	YC
Subject Person	9	13	1/27/2020 1:48 PM	YC	2/9/2020 6:23 PM	YC
Contextual Influence in Environment	0	0	1/27/2020 1:48 PM	YC	1/27/2020 1:48 PM	YC
Family (Active Support)	7	14	1/27/2020 1:49 PM	YC	2/13/2020 12:50 PM	YC
Family (Passive Support)	13	15	1/27/2020 1:49 PM	YC	2/3/2020 4:12 PM	YC
Friends	4	5	1/27/2020 1:49 PM	YC	2/3/2020 9:10 PM	YC
Church Community	8	15	1/27/2020 1:49 PM	YC	2/9/2020 6:24 PM	YC
Religious Congregation	11	23	1/27/2020 1:50 PM	YC	2/9/2020 1:10 PM	YC
Barriers (in General)	2	7	1/27/2020 12:35 PM	YC	2/9/2020 1:13 PM	YC
Before entering the diocese or religious institutes	0	0	1/27/2020 1:51 PM	YC	1/27/2020 1:51 PM	YC
Subject Person (inner self)	3	9	1/27/2020 1:51 PM	YC	2/13/2020 12:51 PM	YC
Contextual Influences	0	0	1/27/2020 1:52 PM	YC	1/27/2020 1:52 PM	YC
Family	12	19	1/27/2020 1:52 PM	YC	2/13/2020 12:49 PM	YC
Religious Congregation	2	2	1/27/2020 1:52 PM	YC	2/8/2020 11:06 AM	YC
Friends	6	10	1/27/2020 1:52 PM	YC	2/13/2020 12:50 PM	YC
Church Community	2	6	1/27/2020 2:44 PM	YC	1/29/2020 12:16 PM	YC
During or after Formation	1	1	1/27/2020 1:51 PM	YC	1/31/2020 3:40 PM	YC
Subject Person (inner self)	8	26	1/27/2020 1:53 PM	YC	2/9/2020 1:12 PM	YC
Community Life	9	12	1/27/2020 1:53 PM	YC	2/13/2020 12:52 PM	YC
In General	7	12	1/27/2020 1:53 PM	YC	2/8/2020 12:11 PM	YC
Interaction with Companion in the Community	7	11	1/27/2020 1:54 PM	YC	2/8/2020 3:13 PM	YC
In Congregation of Inter-nationality	3	7	1/27/2020 1:54 PM	YC	2/8/2020 11:01 AM	YC
Religious Institute vision and mission	7	17	1/27/2020 3:43 PM	YC	2/13/2020 12:53 PM	YC
Nature and Interpretation	10	17	1/28/2020 12:11 PM	YC	2/9/2020 3:57 PM	YC
Coping Strategies to Barriers in general	0	0	1/27/2020 12:35 PM	YC	1/27/2020 12:35 PM	YC

### Code 4: Codes Relating to Research Question 2 (Coping Strategies and Barriers of Three Vows)

Name	Files	References	Created On	Created By	Modified On	Modified By
RQ1	0	0	1/27/2020 12:33 PM	YC	1/27/2020 12:33 PM	YC
RQ2	0	0	1/27/2020 12:33 PM	YC	1/27/2020 12:33 PM	YC
Support	0	0	1/27/2020 12:34 PM	YC	1/27/2020 12:34 PM	YC
Barriers (in General)	2	7	1/27/2020 12:35 PM	YC	2/9/2020 1:13 PM	YC
Coping Strategies to Barriers in general	0	0	1/27/2020 12:35 PM	YC	1/27/2020 12:35 PM	YC
God (Looking Upward)	18	39	1/27/2020 1:56 PM	YC	2/13/2020 12:56 PM	YC
Subject Person (going Inward)	5	13	1/27/2020 1:56 PM	YC	1/30/2020 6:07 PM	YC
Deepen Self Relation with God	10	25	1/27/2020 1:57 PM	YC	2/13/2020 1:13 PM	YC
Improve Oneself	16	32	1/27/2020 1:57 PM	YC	2/13/2020 12:57 PM	YC
Interaction with Others	16	44	1/27/2020 1:57 PM	YC	2/13/2020 12:56 PM	YC
Contextual Influences	0	0	1/27/2020 1:57 PM	YC	1/27/2020 1:57 PM	YC
Family	5	7	1/27/2020 1:57 PM	YC	2/2/2020 5:38 PM	YC
Religious Congregation	14	40	1/27/2020 1:58 PM	YC	2/13/2020 12:57 PM	YC
Friends or Others	4	6	1/27/2020 1:58 PM	YC	2/8/2020 11:40 AM	YC
Barriers (in form of Three Vows)	8	10	1/27/2020 12:36 PM	YC	2/9/2020 12:57 PM	YC
Poverty	0	0	1/27/2020 2:01 PM	YC	1/27/2020 1:59 PM	YC
Nature or Interpretation	7	11	1/27/2020 2:01 PM	YC	2/13/2020 1:02 PM	YC
Challenges or Ways to Overcome	12	20	1/27/2020 2:01 PM	YC	2/13/2020 12:59 PM	YC
Chastity	0	0	1/27/2020 1:59 PM	YC	1/27/2020 1:59 PM	YC
Nature or Interpretation	10	15	1/27/2020 1:59 PM	YC	2/13/2020 1:15 PM	YC
Challenges or Ways to Overcome	12	26	1/27/2020 2:00 PM	YC	2/13/2020 1:04 PM	YC
Obedience	0	0	1/27/2020 1:59 PM	YC	1/27/2020 1:59 PM	YC
Nature or Interpretation	12	19	1/27/2020 2:00 PM	YC	2/23/2020 2:40 PM	YC
Challenges or Ways to Overcome	14	29	1/27/2020 2:00 PM	YC	2/13/2020 1:05 PM	YC
Declining trend of religious vocation	1	1	1/27/2020 12:37 PM	YC	2/9/2020 4:17 PM	YC
Promotion of religious vocation	0	0	1/27/2020 12:37 PM	YC	1/27/2020 12:37 PM	YC
Overview or Image of Journey	0	0	1/27/2020 12:37 PM	YC	1/27/2020 12:37 PM	YC
Scripture in Journey	1	1	1/27/2020 12:38 PM	YC	1/27/2020 5:17 PM	YC

### Code 5: Codes Relating to Research Question 2 (Declining Trend of Religious Vocations)

Name	Files	References	Created On	Created By	Modified On	Modified By
Support	0	0	1/27/2020 12:34 PM	YC	1/27/2020 12:34 PM	YC
Barriers (in General)	2	7	1/27/2020 12:35 PM	YC	2/9/2020 1:13 PM	YC
Coping Strategies to Barriers in general	0	0	1/27/2020 12:35 PM	YC	1/27/2020 12:35 PM	YC
Barriers (in form of Three Vows)	8	10	1/27/2020 12:36 PM	YC	2/9/2020 12:57 PM	YC
<b>Declining trend of religious vocation</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1/27/2020 12:37 PM</b>	<b>YC</b>	<b>2/9/2020 4:17 PM</b>	<b>YC</b>
Difficulties Encountered at Present	0	0	1/27/2020 2:02 PM	YC	1/27/2020 2:02 PM	YC
Religious Personnel or Religious Institutes	11	31	1/27/2020 2:04 PM	YC	2/13/2020 1:10 PM	YC
Family	6	13	1/27/2020 2:05 PM	YC	2/9/2020 4:10 PM	YC
Youth	6	11	1/27/2020 2:05 PM	YC	2/13/2020 1:12 PM	YC
Others	9	18	1/27/2020 2:05 PM	YC	2/13/2020 1:14 PM	YC
Possible Reasons for Discontinuing the Journey	0	0	1/27/2020 2:03 PM	YC	1/27/2020 2:03 PM	YC
Case Mary	1	8	1/27/2020 2:05 PM	YC	1/27/2020 5:20 PM	YC
Case King	1	19	1/27/2020 2:06 PM	YC	1/28/2020 4:45 PM	YC
Case Luke	1	12	1/27/2020 2:06 PM	YC	1/29/2020 10:02 AM	YC
Case Noel	1	9	1/27/2020 2:06 PM	YC	1/28/2020 12:07 PM	YC
Others	7	28	1/27/2020 2:06 PM	YC	2/8/2020 3:42 PM	YC
Pains and Gains of Leavers	0	0	1/27/2020 2:04 PM	YC	1/27/2020 2:04 PM	YC
Gains	2	7	1/27/2020 2:06 PM	YC	1/29/2020 10:07 AM	YC
Relation with God	4	7	1/27/2020 2:08 PM	YC	1/29/2020 10:55 AM	YC
Relation with oneself	4	21	1/27/2020 2:09 PM	YC	1/29/2020 10:40 AM	YC
Relation with Others	3	6	1/27/2020 2:09 PM	YC	1/28/2020 4:44 PM	YC
Present Status	1	4	1/27/2020 2:07 PM	YC	1/29/2020 10:15 AM	YC
Case King	1	9	1/27/2020 2:09 PM	YC	1/28/2020 5:00 PM	YC
Case Luke	1	7	1/27/2020 2:09 PM	YC	1/29/2020 10:56 AM	YC
Case Mary	1	13	1/27/2020 2:10 PM	YC	1/27/2020 5:51 PM	YC
Case Noel	1	6	1/27/2020 2:10 PM	YC	1/28/2020 12:43 PM	YC
Way Forward	3	20	1/27/2020 2:08 PM	YC	1/28/2020 4:59 PM	YC
Pains	3	12	1/27/2020 4:15 PM	YC	1/28/2020 4:47 PM	YC

### Code 6: Codes Relating to Research Question 2 (Promotion/Fostering Religious Vocations)

Name	Files	References	Created On	Created By	Modified On	Modified By
RQ1	0	0	1/27/2020 12:33 PM	YC	1/27/2020 12:33 PM	YC
RQ2	0	0	1/27/2020 12:33 PM	YC	1/27/2020 12:33 PM	YC
Support	0	0	1/27/2020 12:34 PM	YC	1/27/2020 12:34 PM	YC
Barriers (in General)	2	7	1/27/2020 12:35 PM	YC	2/9/2020 1:13 PM	YC
Coping Strategies to Barriers in general	0	0	1/27/2020 12:35 PM	YC	1/27/2020 12:35 PM	YC
Barriers (in form of Three Vows)	8	10	1/27/2020 12:36 PM	YC	2/9/2020 12:57 PM	YC
Declining trend of religious vocation	1	1	1/27/2020 12:37 PM	YC	2/9/2020 4:17 PM	YC
<b>Promotion of religious vocation</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>1/27/2020 12:37 PM</b>	<b>YC</b>	<b>1/27/2020 12:37 PM</b>	<b>YC</b>
The Religious Personnel	17	62	1/27/2020 1:00 PM	YC	2/13/2020 1:11 PM	YC
Family	6	11	1/27/2020 1:01 PM	YC	2/9/2020 4:13 PM	YC
School	10	23	1/27/2020 1:01 PM	YC	2/13/2020 1:08 PM	YC
Parish	9	17	1/27/2020 1:01 PM	YC	2/13/2020 1:08 PM	YC
Hong Kong Diocese Vocation Committee	10	26	1/27/2020 1:01 PM	YC	2/13/2020 1:09 PM	YC
Youth	0	0	1/27/2020 1:01 PM	YC	1/27/2020 1:01 PM	YC
Know more about Youth	6	8	1/27/2020 1:02 PM	YC	2/9/2020 4:16 PM	YC
Engage Youth in Spiritual Development	7	25	1/27/2020 1:03 PM	YC	2/8/2020 3:07 PM	YC
Introduce Youth with Religious Institutes	12	27	1/27/2020 1:03 PM	YC	2/13/2020 1:09 PM	YC
Social Media	3	4	1/27/2020 1:01 PM	YC	2/8/2020 3:26 PM	YC
Religious Institutes	3	3	1/27/2020 1:02 PM	YC	2/3/2020 11:53 AM	YC
Good Practice in Formation	13	40	1/27/2020 1:04 PM	YC	2/13/2020 1:06 PM	YC
Areas suggested for improvement	11	25	1/27/2020 1:04 PM	YC	2/13/2020 1:12 PM	YC
Church	11	27	1/29/2020 2:30 PM	YC	2/13/2020 1:13 PM	YC
Overview or Image of Journey	0	0	1/27/2020 12:37 PM	YC	1/27/2020 12:37 PM	YC
Scripture in Journey	1	1	1/27/2020 12:38 PM	YC	1/27/2020 5:17 PM	YC
God's love	4	5	1/27/2020 12:57 PM	YC	2/9/2020 6:25 PM	YC
Relationship with God	7	10	1/27/2020 12:58 PM	YC	2/9/2020 6:25 PM	YC
Follow God	5	5	1/27/2020 12:58 PM	YC	2/8/2020 12:04 PM	YC
God's Promise	2	2	1/27/2020 12:58 PM	YC	2/9/2020 1:06 PM	YC
Saints for Model	13	30	1/28/2020 12:19 PM	YC	2/9/2020 6:26 PM	YC