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Edith Stein's Phenomenology of Empathy in Parish Ministry

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to apply Edith Stein's phenomenology of empathy to offer a paradigm for understanding the human person, which can help to enhance relationships in Catholic parish ministry. People in parish ministry are known for their various functions as ministers called in by the Church to serve the pastoral needs of other people in the parish community. However, the value of individuals and relationships in parish ministry seems to be compromised by certain issues of abuse that occur in the Church, which are detrimental to the growth of the parish community. To help alleviate these issues, this paper demonstrates that empathy can be a way to value the human person and relationships in the parish community. Using phenomenological hermeneutics, accounts of empathy are applied to navigate the interpersonal character of this paper, inviting and suggesting rather than imposing interpretations in the people's experiences in parish ministry. Stein's accounts of empathy as the essential experience of the other and the foundation of intersubjectivity offer a holistic understanding of the human person at the psycho-physical and spiritual levels. Thus, the relevance of empathy is integral in many aspects of service in the parish ministry, especially in helping to better enhance relationships among people in the Church and in

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fostering values in every activity of the parish community, including interpersonal and pastoral communications.

Keywords: *pastor-priest, lay ministers, parish community, human person, interpersonal relationships*

1. Introduction

Empathy is usually described as putting oneself in another's shoes. We practice empathy, for example, when we try to feel ourselves in the situation of other people who experience joy or pain. In Edith Stein's phenomenology, she offered a more arduous yet profound understanding of this phenomenon. For her, "empathy is the experience of foreign consciousness in general, irrespective of the kind of the experiencing subject or of the subject whose consciousness is experienced" (Stein 1916, 11). This notion of empathy for Stein paves the way for the experience of intersubjectivity to foster values in human relationships. In the essay "Empathy as Intersubjectivity: Edith Stein's Approach to Peaceful Interpersonal and Community Experience," Solomon Oballa (2015, 23) mentions, "Empathy, when embraced as a model for community living will necessarily lead to the avoidance or peaceful resolution of many unwanted conflicts among friends, family members, neighbors, and colleagues." These are possibilities in which empathy gives to the community. However, the question now comes of how empathy is experienced in a community where human relationships are formed by individuals with diverse backgrounds who share common values of serving in the ministry, such as the parish community.

In parish ministry, the experience of empathy is necessary to develop people's interpersonal relationships. It has been acknowledged that "the ability to empathize with the emotions of another person is an extremely helpful trait for building interpersonal and social relationships," (Pierzchala 2022, 301). Given that the parish priest and lay ministers encounter different personalities, minds, and emotions from the people they serve in the Church, empathy plays a role in the daily interactions of these individuals as they serve in their parish community, especially in their pastoral communications and interpersonal relationships. Empathy also

plays a significant role in the pastoral activity of the Church, which should include a great deal of “openness” and “readiness” to listen to people’s needs and messages (Pierzchala 2022, 302).

Thus, Edith Stein’s phenomenological accounts of empathy as the essential experience of foreign consciousness and the foundation of intersubjectivity help enhance the awareness of interpersonal relationships in the parish community and better appreciate the value of the human person in parish ministry.

2. Edith Stein’s Phenomenology of Empathy

Edith Stein’s works are thriving in various academic research and practice fields. Her works are increasingly introduced by practitioners and scholars in psychology, philosophy, and theology, particularly in Jewish and Catholic studies. Yet despite the growing interest in Stein’s works, she remains little known as a philosopher (Kukar 2016, 5). In the book *Contemplating Edith Stein*, Joyce Avrech Berkman remarks, “[at] the outset of the twenty-first century, Stein the brilliant philosopher is not widely recognized. Rather, Stein, the nun Sister Benedicta a Cruce, murdered at Auschwitz on August 9, 1942, and canonized by Pope John Paul II on October 11, 1998, stirs popular interest and debate,” (2006, 2).

Her uniqueness as a philosopher is remarkably seen in her doctoral dissertation, *On the Problem of Empathy* (1916), under the supervision of Edmund Husserl at the University of Freiburg-im-Breisgau (Germany). In this work, she tried to arrive at her investigation of the problem of empathy by analyzing Theodore Lipps’s works and transforming her historical interpretations into the systematic analysis of methodical questions using Husserlian phenomenology (Jani 2015, 20). In her autobiography, *Life in a Jewish Family*, Stein mentions that Husserl emphasized that the world’s reality is constituted intersubjectively “through a plurality of perceiving individuals who relate in a mutual exchange of information. Accordingly, the experience of other individuals is a prerequisite. To this experience, an application of the work of Theodore Lipps, Husserl gave the name *Einfühlung* (Empathy)” (1986, 269). Thus, Stein profoundly discussed her phenomenological accounts of empathy in her dissertation with such precise and careful investigations that led her to arrive at a clarified experience of empathy.

Stein begins to discuss her phenomenological accounts of empathy by providing an example to illustrate the nature of the act of empathy. She says, “A friend tells me that he has lost his brother and I become aware of his pain. What kind of awareness is this?” (1916, 6). Here, Stein is not concerned with the external countenance of inferring the pain nor how we become aware of the person’s pain. She is more interested in knowing what “this awareness is in itself” (Stein 1916, 6), and this awareness can only be investigated from within.

The words above connote that empathy is not “outer perception.” This term refers to acts in which physical expressions, bodily gestures, material movements, and other concrete beings or events that belong to space and time come to us in embodied givenness. The pain we infer in the person based on one’s sad facial expression and sorrowful words is not an act of empathy but rather an experience of outer perception. Here, empathy occurs when we can feel and understand the pain of the other; that is when we become the subject of the experience in the original subject’s place (Stein 1916, 10). It’s because, in principle, we can never get an “orientation” where the pain is primordially given (Stein 1916, 7). In contrast, empathic perception takes a step back and is thus reflective and non-primordial (Pughe 2019). However, this does not mean that empathy has no primordially. Empathy is “an act that is primordial as present experience though not primordial in content” (Stein 1916, 10). Since, for Stein, all our present experiences are primordial (1916, 7), empathy is primordial in experience because it deals with grasping what is here and now.

Stein places the distinction between the “act of experiencing” (primordial) and the content experienced (non-primordial) at the center of her dissertation on empathy (Borden 2003, 28). The primordial experience of empathy is an original encounter of the person empathizing with the other. It is primordial in the sense that the self immediately experiences the person’s act of understanding. At the same time, the non-primordial experience of empathy is an original experience of the other. The given content of the other’s experience is non-primordial to the person who empathizes because that content is immediately experienced by the other, not the person who empathizes. For example, John understands that Peter is joyful because he successfully defended his thesis. John’s act of understanding is primordial to him, but Peter’s joy is non-primordial because that experience of joy comes from him, not John. So, the act of

empathizing is primordial, while the content of empathy is non-primordial. This makes empathy unique in contrast to other acts of comprehension like memory, expectation, and fantasy because its experience is primordially given to the self. Still, the content of empathy is non-primordially given by the other.

The acts of remembering, anticipating, and imagining do not have their object bodily present or what Stein calls “givenness.” They do not have the embodied object given now of the experience of memory, expectation, and fantasy. For example, the memory of pain is primordial since the act of remembering the pain is given in the present experience. Yet, the pain itself, which is the object of memory, is remembered as a past and not a present experience, so the content of memory is non-primordially given. So, in the act of memory, there are two I’s involved: the I of the present and the I of the past. The I of the present is the subject doing the act of remembering, while the I of the past is the object being remembered. In the case of fantasy, however, Stein sees no distance in time between the two involving I’s. The fantasizing I and the fantasized I is filled with continuous experiences that stretch throughout the present time granted that I am not fantasizing about memory or expectation. Yet, Stein recognized that there is also a distinction of I’s in fantasy. The I dealing with fantasy is primordial, while the I being imagined is non-primordial.

Anna Janni claims that parallel to these mental acts, “the act of empathy has a temporal dimension both as an acting process and its experience” (2015, 22). This connotes the primordial element of empathy because the acting process is carried out in the present experience of the I who empathize. However, the difference between empathy and memory, expectation, and fantasy is that its content comes from another I, not the same I who empathizes. The “other” is the foreign I that is being empathized and carries the non-primordial content of empathy. Thus, two individual I’s are involved in empathy: the empathizing I and the empathized I. There are two individual I’s in its experience. The self-I primordially experiences empathy, while the other-I experiences empathy’s non-primordially. So, by its very nature, Stein claims that “empathy is a kind of act of perceiving *sui generis*” (1916, 11), a one-of-a-kind phenomenon.

Opposed to this idea is sympathy, which we can see as happening when a person feels sadness as a response to a similar feeling in another (Escaño 2022, 2). Emerita Quito carefully distinguishes these phenomena based on

Stein's accounts. She says, "Empathy is not sympathy, which is from the Greek *sym* (with) and *pathe* (suffer, feel) whereas empathy is from the Greek *im* (in) and *pathe* (suffer, feel), so, to feel with and to feel in are not the same" (2001, 55). Quito also posits that it is easy to sympathize or to feel the joy or sorrow of the other person, but to empathize is a difficult task, for it means assuming the I of another to experience their joy or sorrow. For instance, acknowledging that the other is feeling down and supporting them by giving inspirational words or comforting gestures renders an act of sympathy. At the same time, understanding the pain that the other experiences by realizing a similar experience or putting oneself in the other's shoes is an act of empathy. Here, empathy is much deeper than sympathy because the feeling of the other is given to us, and we are placed in a position to understand the other as the original subject of empathy. The content of sympathy is primordial since it is from the self. In contrast, empathy is non-primordial in content because it comes from the other.

Although empathy is not a homogenous phenomenon, with no absolute definition, we can still see that for Stein, empathy is "dynamic and multidimensional" (Kukar 2016, 6). Here, Stein identifies three levels of accomplishment of empathy to help us understand its process "the emergence of the experience, the fulfilling explication, and the comprehensive objectification of the explained experience" (1916, 10). With these, Stein places the other or foreign person as central to the experience of empathy. In the last two chapters of her dissertation, *The Constitution of the Psycho-Physical Individual* and *Empathy as the Understanding of Spiritual Person*, she places the individuality of the other as the focal point of her investigation of empathy.

2.1. Psycho-physical Level of Empathy

At the psycho-physical level, we come to know ourselves and other people as distinct and unique individuals. We distinguish the selfness of our I and the otherness of the foreign I because each of us has our own "peculiar experiential content" that shifts over the stream of consciousness (Stein 1916, 11). This experiential content is any occurrence that contextualizes our experience as individuals. Now, the unity of each stream of consciousness that people experience individually as belonging to their "I" and not to another "I" is the soul [*Seele*]. For Stein, this substantial unity is "my" soul when the experiences in which it is apparent are "my" experiences or acts wherein my pure "I" lives (1916, 40). The soul grants

us the reason to say that these or those experiences are “mine” and not from other people who also have “their” own peculiar experiences. The soul causes the unity of the stream of experience and gives life to the physical body, making it “alive” to constitute it as a “living body” [Leib] (Stein 1916, 41). Thus, the soul, together with the living body, forms the “psycho-physical individual” (Stein 1916, 50).

As we empathize with the psycho-physical individual, the knowledge we grasp from the other is given in terms of sensation and feelings (Stein 1916, 44-50). By our experience of sensation and feelings, we become “present” to ourselves as the center or “zero point” of all psycho-physical activities (Stein 1916, 43). In empathy, the zero point orientation of the person who empathizes begins with themselves and gradually transitions to the foreign consciousness’s own zero point. (Macariola 2022, 47). The “I” have its zero point as the other also experiences their own zero point orientation. This orientation, therefore, is the other’s relative viewpoint from which the individual perceives the world (Macariola 2022, 47). So, as we empathize with others, we have access to their sensations and feelings from their zero point of orientation. Hence, we gain knowledge of them as foreign psycho-physical individuals. These, however, are not the only knowledge we learn in empathy. Stein believes that empathy can still bring us to another level of understanding of the human person, and that is the spiritual level wherein we comprehend ourselves and others as spiritual persons through feelings and values.

Understanding others as spiritual persons in empathy differs from understanding people as religious, divine, or holy. On this level, the knowledge we acquire from the spiritual person through empathy is no longer grasping natural causality but grasping meaning context or “motivations.” Here, Stein sees motivation in the lawfulness of spiritual life and claims that the experiential context of spiritual subjects is an experienced “totality of meaning and intelligible as such” (1916, 96). The experiences of others are comprehensible to us in empathy because they are motivated by the laws of reason. As such, “consciousness as a correlate of the object world is not nature, but spirit” (Stein 1916, 91). On this account, Stein argues that the basis for the “realm of the spirit” is constituted through feeling contrary to the physical realm, which is made known through perceptual acts. In empathy, such an experience of feeling is already an act of knowing.

2.2. Spiritual Level of Empathy

Stein says that in every literal act of empathy, which, for example, in every comprehension of an act of feeling, we have already penetrated the realm of the spirit; for as physical nature is constituted in perceptual acts, so a new object realm is constituted in feeling which is the “world of values” (Stein 1916, 92). On this level of spirit, grasping other people’s motivation becomes possible. Since, for Stein, motivation is the “meaning-content” of an experience, every motivation that comes from the person’s feeling is understood only on the level of the spirit and not on the level of physical nature. Here, “motivation is what an individual understands in other persons, who, as persons, are essentially constituted as spiritual” (Esaño 2022, 4). In this sense, empathy gives us a deeper knowledge of the other because grasping motivation is, at the same time, a feeling into the other person’s values (Hernandez 2012, 97).

Empathy, therefore, grants us a more holistic understanding of the other as an individual and person at the psycho-physical and spiritual levels. Recognizing the other through empathy means seeing the foreign living body as a person having sensations, feelings, soul, and values. This is the knowledge we grasp from our experience of the people through empathy. Now, empathy may become a catalyzing force in understanding the human person in a community of diverse individuals such as the parish community.

3. On Parish Ministry

In the context of the Catholic Church, the “parish” is described as a local community of faith that exists in a diocese where people meet their spiritual and temporal needs. The 1983 Code of Canon Law (Canon 515) describes the parish as: “a specific community of the Christian faithful established, in a particular Church (diocese) whose pastoral care, under the authority of the bishop, is entrusted to a priest-pastor, who is its proper shepherd” (Catechism of the Catholic Church - CCC 1994, 2179, 585). Pope Francis also describes the parish as “a community of communities... center of missionary outreach, environments of living communion and participation” (*Evangelii Gaudium* 2013, No. 28). However, the territorial concept of the parish is no longer a geographical space only but also the context wherein people express their lives in terms of relationships, service, and traditions (Congregation for the Clergy - CC 2020 No. 16).

The people form relationships in the parish, where they gather to worship and serve as one in the “parish community.” The Church describes that “the parish community is the human context wherein the evangelizing work of the Church is carried out, where Sacraments are celebrated and where charity is exercised” (CC 2020, No. 19). Given that the parish community lives in the Church, “the subject of the missionary and evangelizing action of the Church is always the People of God as a whole” (CC 2020, No. 27). For this reason, the individuals living in communion with the parish are also subjects of the Church’s life and mission in parish ministry.

In this paper, “parish ministry” is defined in terms of various leadership functions carried out as a form of service in the Church at the parish level, both by the pastor and the layperson. Parish ministry is derivative from the word “parish” as the community of the Christian faithful and “ministry” as the authorized service of individuals in the Church. In the *Modern Catholic Dictionary* (2000), ministry is defined as the “authorized service of God in the service of others, according to specified norms revealed by Christ and determined by the Church.” In this sense, the parish community consists of specific individuals authorized by the Church to serve the parish’s pastoral needs. Thus, following Christ, the ultimate source of ministry in the Church (CCC 1994, 874, 254), every individual in parish ministry plays an integral role in sharing the mission of Christ through their acts of service in the Church.

The center of every service in the parish is neither the priest, lay ministers, nor the community, but Christ, himself the source of ministry in the Church. For this reason, the priest, lay ministers, and the community partake in Christ’s ministry in the Church. In realizing their various roles in parish ministry, they are configured to show exemplary leadership and service to the community as ministers of Christ. However, despite the noble mission of the Church to form the people according to her norms and values, the parish is still susceptible to human fallibilities.

Here, Stein sees the danger that may threaten us if we take the self as standard “we lock ourselves into the prison of our individuality; others become riddles for us, or still worse, we remodel them into our image and so falsify historical truth” (1916, 116). It happens in many forms of abuse in society, such as misuse or overuse of one’s power and privilege. It covers various damaging acts that affect the value of human persons and interpersonal relationships in the parish community, allowing potential

issues to emerge, such as distrust, misunderstanding, and fear. In turn, it shows its harmful effect on the emotional or mental life of individuals since abuse also influences the emotional connection of the people being served aside from the misuse or overuse of the Church's temporal goods (Abellanosa 2020, 363). From the experiences of people in the parish nowadays, the lack of empathy among parish leaders perpetuates such abuses in the parish community.

The lack of empathy is one of the many reasons people experience abuse that demeans the value of human persons in parish ministry. Consequently, subjects are turned into objects, as people are reduced by autonomy when a leader fails to practice empathy. An example is the verbal abuse that young ministers experience from their parish priest or lay leaders, who take pleasure in scolding and embarrassing them, especially when they commit mistakes at the holy mass or any parish activities. Here, the verbal abuse that these young ministers experience towards them may cause emotional damage. Hence, the presence of others is reduced to the mere experience of subject manipulation, such as "creeping emotional blackmail" (Abellanosa 2020, 365). It implies that "in all religions or religious groups, abuse is a reality," and it is not peculiar to the Church precisely because "where power and privilege go together, there is abuse" (Abellanosa 2020, 370).

In parish ministry, the abuse of power is usually seen among the pastors and lay leaders who misuse or overuse their authority to the people they serve in the parish community. However, the abuse of power is not only prompted by the leaders of the Church. Instead, abuse is a possibility that happens to anyone who does not recognize the value of others' presence. It results in the experience of indifference, apathy, exclusion, and the like growing among the parish community members. Now, let us see how the Church describes these people as opposed to any forms of abuse in their ministry. It is to help us understand that the experience of abuse is still not amenable to the service of the Church, especially to the relationships of the priest and lay faithful in the parish community.

4. Contemporary Issues in Parish Ministry

The significance of parish ministry in the Church's life is seen and understood in the organic communion between the priest and the lay faithful. They form relationships with respect for their rights and roles as

members of the Church and mutual recognition of their respective capabilities and responsibilities as individuals. It is why the pastor who is in close communion with his Bishop and the community should avoid introducing into his priestly ministry in the parish any forms of “authoritarianism” and “democratic administration” that go contrary to the profound reality of the ministry (CC 2002, No. 18, Para. 3). However, such authoritarianism occurs when the priest imposes his authority on the parish as the absolute maker of decisions without taking the time to listen to the opinions of the parish community. Besides, the presence of the priest as the parish community’s spiritual leader is diminished when he only focuses on asserting his managerial role as the administrative leader of the parish. In this case, the priest perceives the people as subjects of his authority rather than subjects of Christ’s ministry.

In truth, the Church relies trustingly on the priest’s presence in the parish community through his daily fidelity to care for the people without succumbing to authoritarian and self-governing ways. The problem, however, is when the daily tasks of the priest in parish ministry are confronted with secular affairs that are alien to the profound meaning of his priestly ministry. Although it is natural to feel tired at work, what disappointments, it must be stated, are experienced when the winds of secularism often choke the seeds sown with such noble daily effort (CC 2002, No. 29, Para. 6). For this reason, the Church recognizes that “priests can be overwhelmed by structures which overpower them and are not always necessary, or which induce negative psycho-physical consequences detrimental for the spiritual life and for the very ministry itself” (CC 2002, No. 29). Here, given the internal dangers that a priest experiences in his ministry in the parish, his presence as a psycho-physical individual may be affected by negative values that could harm his spiritual life. However, these potential issues in the priestly ministry of the pastors are implied to them and to the lay ministers, who can be susceptible to the dangers of structural prejudices in society.

An issue in the Church common to the clergy is the experience of clericalism that creeps in the lay leaders and parish members. Pope Francis recognizes that people have often given in to the temptation of thinking that committed lay people only work with the priest. However, this unknowingly generated a lay elite, believing that committed lay people are only those who work in the matters of priests, and we need to remember and look at the believers who strive to live the faith (Francis 2016, Para. 11).

He added, “These are the situations that clericalism fails to notice because it is more concerned with dominating spaces than generating initiatives” (Francis 2016, Para. 11). It alerts us to the danger that the laity clericalizes themselves by insisting that they only truly fulfill their calling to serve by involving themselves in ecclesiastical ministries (Fitzgibbon 2020, 16). Certain lay groups or individuals in the parish fall into this experience of elitism when they think having positions in the parish or working with the priest poses a high-standing status to their image as ministers.

Although the problem of clericalism is seen in various people’s experiences, it is still essential for us to ponder whether clericalism may be caused by the lay members’ lack of understanding of their roles as non-ordained ministers in parish ministry. The distinction of their roles and duties should be oriented appropriately to avoid misinterpretation or lessen the misconduct of people concerning their clericalist mindset. Nevertheless, due to the long history of this issue in the hierarchical structures of the Church seen both by the clergy and the lay faithful, the experience of clericalism is perpetuated. Abellanosa claims that “although clericalism has been identified as a common factor that contributes to abuse however, it is here argued that it is just a symptom of a more serious pathology of the Church, and that is elitism” (2020, 362).

Lay ministers, together with the parish priest, seen in cohorts of influential politicians, well-known business individuals, and rich people, also practice elitism when they tend to place themselves as the privileged ones in the parish community, favoring only their interests. Given the structural bias of the hierarchical system in the Church, the experience of elitism by the ordained leaders also influences the lay leaders. It perpetuates this problem in the parish, making it more difficult to overcome this issue nowadays. “Precisely, why clericalism as the concrete face of elitism within the Roman Catholic Church is also a difficult reality to deconstruct because even the lay faithful are themselves oriented to such a clericalist culture” (Abellanosa 2020, 369). In the *Evangelii Gaudium*, the Church recognizes that “if part of our baptized people lacks a sense of belonging to the Church, it is due to certain structures and the occasionally unwelcoming atmosphere of some parishes and communities, or to a bureaucratic way of dealing with problems...in the lives of our people” (2013, No. 63). In consequence, several members opt to stop serving in the parish because of certain abuses that make them feel unwelcome and overwhelmed to be part of the ministry.

Thus, the challenge we seek to consider not only for the parish leaders to realize but also for every Christian member is to make their presence be felt and known through their leadership and service that is more inclusive, appreciative, and communal. In this way, we can make our experience of relationships in the parish community open and welcoming, like the life of the early Christians who serve as living examples for the parish community today. Now, let us profoundly understand the phenomenological implications of empathy in parish ministry. Through this, we can reflect on what it means for leaders and ministers to be servant-leaders of Christ.

5. Phenomenological Implications of Empathy in Parish Ministry

5.1. Empathy as a Spiritual Attitude: An Awareness of Presence

We based our consideration of empathy as a spiritual attitude on Stein's claim that consciousness is not nature but spirit; in every literal act of empathy, in every comprehension of an act of feeling, we have penetrated the realm of spirit (1916, 91). As we penetrate the people's spiritual realm, we also enter their realm of values. Empathy as a spiritual attitude is an approach that leads us to become aware of one's presence in our spiritual state, which involves the experience of feelings and values. This empathy approach helps us understand the presence of the human person, especially in our personal and communal relationships with people.

Empathy as a spiritual attitude is experienced by showing openness and readiness to listen to the needs and messages of the people. Our ability to listen is a spiritual act in which we grasp the experiences of others using comprehension. Practicing empathy as a spiritual attitude helps parish leaders focus their pastoral consciousness on experiencing the emotions and values of the people they serve. By making empathy the way to encounter the inner feelings of the people in need, parish leaders profoundly experience the presence of these people as subjects of their ministry. Since Stein places the presence of the "other" as the center of empathy, putting other people in service makes the ministry of parish leaders "other-centered" rather than self-centered. In this way, the experience of authoritarianism that prompts the abuse of power can be reduced or overcome when parish leaders relate with the people as subjects of their ministry and not as subjects of their authority.

Thus, by understanding the needs and messages of the people through empathy, parish leaders open themselves to be ready to take action to help the people they serve. Empathy as a spiritual attitude becomes a way to allow the presence of others to be seen and felt consciously by making them the center of leadership and service in parish ministry.

5.2. Primordial and Non-primordial Experiences in Parish Ministry

In the context of parish ministry, we relate the primordial and non-primordial experiences of empathy to the experiences of serving individuals in the Church. Since all our present experiences are primordial (Stein 1916, 7), every role and function of ministers in parish ministry are primordial to them. The experiences of the pastor who is bestowed with duties of “teaching, sanctifying, and governing” the people in the parish are primordial to his priestly ministry as an ordained individual (CC 2002, No. 19). In contrast, the experiences of the lay ministers who “assist” and “collaborate” with the pastor in caring for the people are primordial to their lay ministry as non-ordained individuals. Given the various roles and experiences of the priest and the lay ministers in parish ministry, their presence is also primordial to their constitution as individuals.

As we have seen, empathy is primordial in experience but non-primordial in content; these elements of empathy can lead individuals to realize their roles and experiences in parish ministry. By empathy, the parish leaders may recognize that they have their primordial roles to live as individual ministers, which are non-primordially given to the people they serve. These primordial and non-primordial experiences of the priest and lay ministers are realized when empathy becomes the basis of interaction. In this way, empathy may hinder any sense of power subjugation and abuse of privilege in the ministry when people can understand each other’s role as primordial to them through their various callings to serve in the Church as centered in Christ and not to themselves alone.

5.3. Empathy as *Sui Generis*: A Unique Experience of Christ and the Other’s Presence

Based on Stein’s assertion that empathy is an act of perceiving as *sui generis*, empathy can be a way for us to experience the unique presence of other people in parish ministry. In empathy, the other becomes the focus of our service in parish ministry. By making empathy the basis of service, the

presence of the other in need is perceived and felt. Even though the other's mental state is non-primordially given, the experience of becoming aware of it, focusing on it, and then comprehending it is primordial; thus, it is in this tension between which can and cannot be directly experienced that makes empathy unique (Kukar 2016, 6-7).

The instances of awareness, focusing, and comprehension of the other's needs are drawn from the process of empathic experience in which we approach the other by the acts of our mental and emotional states, allowing the feeling of care to emerge in our knowledge of the other. Although empathy is a means to understand the other from within and not necessarily to respond to the needs of the other, empathy may serve as the motivation to inspire acts to help people in need. However, empathy is the process of understanding the inner life of another, but in no way the response to that inner life (Kukar 2016, 7). So, our experience of others in parish ministry begins by understanding their mental and emotional states. Since empathy is a unique type of perception, our knowledge of empathy can also make us aware of God's presence in the Church through the presence of the people we serve in the ministry. Thus, through empathy as the basis of service in parish ministry, we experience Christ's presence when our service is centered in Him in the presence of others.

5.4. Empathic and Sympathetic Service

We consider the terms "empathic service" and "sympathetic service" to emphasize the relevance of these phenomena to our experience of people in the parish ministry. Since these two structures help direct human emotions toward the "other" (Nweke and Okeke 2021, 63), both are similar but perform different functions regarding how we relate with others. Empathic service is experienced when the content comes from other people's experience. It asks how we can understand the needs of others based on their perspective as the subjects of our service. On the other hand, sympathetic service is experienced when the content of the service begins from the perspective of the self toward the other. It asks how we can communicate ourselves as the subject of service to other people.

In parish ministry, empathy is paramount in helping to understand people's problems, especially when confronted with emotional conflicts. Since sympathy points to a specific affective response in the manner of compassion or pity, empathy thoroughly encompasses effects in general (Nweke and Okeke, 2021, 64), either positive or negative ones, such as

fear, love, resentment, or gratitude. Here, it implies that empathy is not always but often experienced as a neutral phenomenon. Empathy, as a neutral experience, does not inherently dictate a moral judgment or approval of someone's actions. Understanding another person's perspective allows us to choose our own response, positive or negative. Empathy does not remove our ability to decide whether our actions will be helpful; its primary focus is on deeply understanding the inner lives and experiences of others. While empathy involves comprehending feelings, thoughts, and experiences, it does not dictate how we should respond to them. Here, we hold on to Stein's words that "we are only dealing with the general essence of empathy and not with its effect" (1916, 18). Thus, these two-sided service experiences are necessary for developing parish ministers' pastoral consciousness. By having empathy and sympathy in service, parish ministers can direct their consciousness to focus attentively on the needs of others.

Parish ministers can practice empathic service to understand the feelings and experiences of the people they serve. In parish activities such as outreach programs, spiritual counseling, and visiting the sick, parish ministers apply empathic service when they understand the needs of the people based on their experiences or stories in life and not from their own experiences. Parish ministers can practice sympathetic service by acknowledging the feelings and experiences of the people they serve based on their responses to others' experiences. Parish ministers apply sympathetic service when they recognize and respond to their needs by showing the same feelings or taking action to help the people. Here, empathy and sympathy differ in experience but have similar goals of making other people the focus of service. However, it is only through empathy that we first understand other people's feelings and experiences before responding to their needs with love, mercy, and compassion, which comes through sympathy.

5.5. Empathy and Unity: On the "We" Phenomenon in the Parish Community

In the parish community, the experience of unity is made possible with a mutual understanding of their similarities and differences. As an organic community, members in the parish can experience the feeling of oneness or unity when their similarities and differences are appreciated and recognized through empathy. It implies the recognition of their presence as

individuals that, despite their diverse feelings, thoughts, and experiences, they form a community where everyone can attain a “we” experience. It comes to life in our feelings, and from the “I” and “you” arises the “we” as a subject of a higher level of experience in empathy (Stein 1916, 17). In the “we” experience, people do not disassemble their individualities to form an association of people. Instead, the “we” experience grants their individuality to transcend through empathy as they encounter each other’s presence in the community.

Here, individualism can be overcome when people realize the value of their presence as individuals from their experience of the “we” in the community. However, without empathy, there could be no “we,” only competing “I’s” (Burns 2017, 127-142). The experience of unity in the parish community is hardly possible without empathy. This is because it is not through the feeling of oneness but through empathizing that we experience others; the feeling of oneness and the enrichment of our own experience become possible through empathy (Stein 1916, 18). The “we” experience in the parish community is integral to forming the people of God. The parish priest and lay ministers experience the “we” phenomenon when they recognize each other as collaborators and partakers of Christ’s ministry in the Church.

By recognizing their commonalities and differences, the priest and lay ministers share a mutual understanding that bridges their individualities to form a community that prioritizes the needs of the “we” rather than the “I”. It is essential in helping to avoid or resolve damaged relationships of individuals in the parish community, particularly among priests and lay ministers who have interpersonal conflicts due to personality clashes and misunderstandings. Empathy can serve as a bridge, inspiring mutual appreciation by recognizing that everyone has their own limitations and unique experiences. Empathy is not merely a tool for understanding; it is a way of acknowledging that not all experiences can be fully comprehended by others (Kukar 2016, 7).

Thus, through empathy, people in the parish community can have similar experiences amid diversity, regardless of their roles and experiences as individuals. With this realization, a more fruitful interaction can be experienced in the parish community when empathy becomes a way to experience unity in parish ministry.

6. On the Limits and Further Considerations of Empathy in Parish Ministry

Empathy is relevant to the parish community's continuing development of human relations. However, empathy is not the only key to preventing abuse and interpersonal issues in the parish community. It is because empathy, in essence, is a means to perceive the foreign consciousness or others' experiences and not to make an end to moral issues that people experience. Empathy extends beyond merely understanding positive or negative emotions; it does not necessarily require action to address a specific problem or situation. In other words, pro-social behavior (helping others) is not a prerequisite for empathy (Nweke and Okeke 2021, 64). It does not oblige the person to act and experience the same experiences as others, either positive or negative.

Moreover, people experience the limit of empathy when parish leaders over-rationalize the experiences of others, which is detrimental to their cognitive level as psycho-physical individuals. It happens when they ignore the feelings of the people they are helping. For example, a priest who is always too academic in approaching the people and dealing with their problems can cause confusion and resentment from the people, especially in remote areas of the Church like barrios and *gimongs* (Basic Ecclesial Communities). Likewise, parish leaders who are too emotional with their relationships with others, especially when confronting interpersonal issues, can cause exhaustion and burnout to their affective level as spiritual persons. It happens when they decide to help others out of emotional impulse without proper deliberation. For instance, a social action minister who always gives donations out of pity without taking time to evaluate the situation can be abused by individuals who take advantage of the Church. Here, empathy reaches its limit when there is no holistic understanding of the other in the cognitive and affective levels of the human person.

As ministers of the Church, parish leaders need empathy to balance their intellectual and emotional capacities because empathy is neither about emotions nor reason alone. Instead, the fusion of reason and emotion is at work in empathy. This is why parish leaders are encouraged to hone their intellectual and emotional capacities to understand the experiences of others. It can be done through active listening to the people's concerns and messages that foster healthy interpersonal relationships and pastoral communications. Empathy enhances pastoral communication and

interpersonal relationships of people through sincere dialogue and participation in the regular activities of the parish community that involve social interactions. In this way, pastoral communication becomes a key for the interpersonal relationships of people to experience healthy dialogue and interaction in parish community. To give a few examples, parish pastoral meetings, liturgical and formation seminars, visiting the sick, outreach programs for people experiencing poverty and victims of calamities, catechisms for children, and barangay or *gimong* masses, are parish activities wherein ministers can develop their intellectual and emotional capacities. Given these activities of people in parish ministry, the experience of empathy can dynamically create a more holistic framework for parish leaders by incorporating other approaches, such as care ethics and servant leadership, that foster healthy interpersonal relationships and community building.

Empathy is conducive to applying care ethics to serve the needs of people in the parish community. A central feature of care ethics is its emphasis on discerning and meeting others' needs, those others with whom one is in relation (Bennett 2023, 627). So, care ethics can be accompanied by the practice of empathy since it helps to guide the moral decisions of parish leaders as they serve the needs of the people. The implication of empathy towards ethics of care can be seen from the good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), who decided to help a wounded stranger. This example shows the significance of empathy towards ethics of care, which parish leaders are encouraged to practice as they serve various people regardless of their racial and social boundaries. Here, practicing the ethics of care through empathy can help parish leaders deepen their understanding of pastoral care in terms of the *care of souls*, the *care of persons*, and the *care of people as communities* (Claver 2009, 6). If care in parish ministry is motivated by empathy, servant leadership is carried out genuinely in the parish community.

Empathy also inspires servant leadership to be practiced in parish ministry. Servant leadership emphasizes increased service to others, a holistic approach to work, promoting a sense of community, and sharing power in decision-making (Sirisooksilp et al. 2017, 12). Empathy is necessary for the values parish ministers learn, such as humility, receptivity, and accountability, to be improved. The application of servant leadership is empowered by empathy through sharing ideas and experiences in decision-making, especially during parish council meetings, the

preparation of liturgical celebrations, and the planning of pastoral programs. Here, the practice of empathy in servant leadership molds the consciousness of parish ministers to lead in the parish community as servants who prioritize the needs of others rather than their personal needs. In this way, parish ministers become Christ-and-other-centered leaders instead of being self-centered individuals.

Edith Stein's phenomenology of empathy can be applied to parish leaders' pastoral communication and formation, especially for future priests and lay ministers whose ministries are focused on matters of social interactions. Integrating empathy into these individuals' pastoral training and education may help deepen their understanding of the human person and relationships in the community as they are prepared to lead and serve in the Church. Consistent communication in service, regular prayer meetings, Bible sharing and reflections, leadership programs and development, training of lay ministers, spiritual counseling, and others are parish activities that can help to cultivate the experience of empathy both by the clergy and lay faithful. Since these activities involve pastoral communications, empathy is a primary way to nourish their cognitive and affective understanding as they interact with others. In this way, people foster a culture of empathy wherein relationships are experienced in terms of the pastoral activities of the parish community.

A culture of empathy can be integrated into the parish's goals and objectives, guiding the development of pastoral activities aligned with the community's vision and mission. Examples of such activities include youth empowerment programs, liturgical seminars and training, prison apostolates, Sunday school programs, outreach initiatives, and visits to the elderly and sick. Pastoral activities in the parish are not meant to be imposed as agendas but are callings to serve others. Here, empathy can be a fundamental value for the parish community to apply when the goals and objectives of every pastoral activity are meant to serve Christ and others in the ministry.

7. Concluding Remarks

This paper has demonstrated, analyzed, and interpreted how the phenomenology of empathy, developed by Edith Stein, offers a paradigm to understand human consciousness, feelings, and experiences with other people, especially in a Catholic parish. Here, empathy can be a way to

enhance the experience of human relationships in parish ministry. This comes first from our comprehension of the essence of empathy as a phenomenon by its primordial and non-primordial experiences contrary to other acts of comprehension, the knowledge we grasp of the human person at the psycho-physical and spiritual levels, and the understanding of the roles and experiences of people in the Church. Through these ways, we arrived at our final consideration that empathy helps us to improve our interpersonal relationships in parish ministry by learning to understand, appreciate, and care for the people.

Empathy plays a crucial role in various aspects of leadership and service within parish ministry. It helps to strengthen relationships among Church members and fosters the development of values in all parish activities involving interpersonal and pastoral communications. However, given the prevailing issues that continue to challenge the value of the presence and relationships of people in the Church, what are other possible ways to help alleviate these issues through empathy? How can we ensure that our experience of empathy grants us valid knowledge of the people considering the experience of certain abuses that not only demean the value of human presence but also deceive people's consciousness in parish ministry? Is empathy adequate to enhance our knowledge and relationships with people in the Church?

This paper, therefore, encourages that since the experience of empathy appears in various ways of understanding, people in the parish community may consider adopting and integrating the given interpretations of empathy from this study into their personal and communal relationships as they serve and participate in parish activities of the Church. Thus, further research on empathy could deepen our understanding of the human person and the nature of relationships within parish ministry, ultimately contributing to the promotion of healthy and meaningful synodality.

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