

Lived Experiences of Lay Teachers in the Lasallian Mission of Education: A Phenomenological Exploration

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the lived experiences of lay teachers engaged in the Lasallian mission of education within the Philippine context. While lay educators increasingly sustain faith-based educational institutions historically founded by religious congregations, limited phenomenological research has examined how they interpret and embody this mission in practice. Guided by transcendental phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994) and informed by hermeneutic attentiveness to lived meaning (van Manen, 1990, 2014), the study investigates how experienced lay teachers describe the integration of vocation, professionalism, spirituality, community, and sociohistorical context in their educational work.

Nine lay educators from Philippine Lasallian institutions participated in written reflective narratives and in-depth interviews. Through phenomenological reduction, horizontalization, and imaginative variation, six interrelated themes emerged: professional and pedagogical commitment, vocational identity, socioeconomic consciousness, lived spirituality, community belonging, and culturally embodied expressions of mission. Participants described teaching not merely as employment but as a morally and relationally grounded vocation sustained by faith, collegial solidarity, and commitment to learners, particularly those from marginalized backgrounds.

The findings reveal that lay Lasallian educators experience their professional practice as an integrated whole in which pedagogical excellence, spiritual meaning, and communal responsibility are mutually reinforcing. While theological language surfaced in participant accounts, the analysis focused on describing the structures of lived meaning rather than advancing normative theological claims. A post-analytic symbolic model is proposed as a heuristic synthesis of the themes.

By offering a context-specific phenomenological account, this study contributes to scholarship on lay participation in faith-based education and demonstrates the value of distinguishing empirical description from theological reflection in qualitative research.

Keywords: Lasallian education, lay teachers, phenomenology, vocation, faith-based education, teacher identity, Philippines.

INTRODUCTION

Lay educators now constitute the majority of personnel in Lasallian schools worldwide. As the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools increasingly emphasizes shared mission, lay teachers assume not only pedagogical responsibilities but also the stewardship of a charism historically embodied by vowed religious. While theological and institutional documents articulate the ideals of “together and by association,” less is known about how experienced lay educators concretely live, interpret, and sustain this mission in specific cultural contexts.

Existing scholarship on Catholic and Lasallian education has examined lay formation, mission identity, and vocational commitment. However, much of the literature approaches these themes either normatively (through theological reflection and ecclesial documents) or through organizational and leadership frameworks. There remains a need for empirically grounded phenomenological accounts that describe how lay teachers themselves

experience the intersection of vocation, professionalism, spirituality, socioeconomic realities, and community within a particular cultural setting. In the Philippine Lasallian context—where faith traditions, socioeconomic mobility, and strong communal values intersect—such lived meanings warrant careful exploration.

This study therefore asks: **What is the lived experience of lay teachers engaged in the Lasallian mission of education?** More specifically:

1. How do lay teachers describe their professional and pedagogical commitment within the Lasallian context?
2. How do they interpret their role as vocation?
3. How are spirituality, community, and cultural context integrated into their lived practice?

To address these questions, the study adopts a transcendental phenomenological approach following Moustakas (1994), while remaining informed by van Manen's (1990, 2014) hermeneutic sensitivity to lived meaning. The research aims to describe the essential structures of the phenomenon as articulated by participants through written narratives and in-depth interviews.

Because the researcher is also a lay Lasallian educator, reflexive journaling and epoche were intentionally employed to bracket presuppositions and minimize conflation between personal theological reflection and participants' accounts. The study does not function as autoethnography; rather, it is an intersubjective phenomenological investigation grounded in participant narratives, with reflexive awareness of the researcher's situatedness.

By foregrounding participants' lived meanings, this study contributes an empirically derived description of lay Lasallian vocation in the Philippine context, offering insight into how faith-based educational missions are sustained through the integration of spirituality, professionalism, community, and sociohistorical realities.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Lasallian Mission and the Rise of Lay Participation

The Lasallian tradition, founded by St. John Baptist de La Salle, locates education within a spirituality of faith, service (zeal), and fraternity (communion). Contemporary Lasallian documents and reflections emphasize that the mission no longer belongs solely to the Brothers but is increasingly a shared vocation with lay partners; lay teachers are now central actors in maintaining and renewing the charism in diverse contexts (Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, 2015). Recent institutional reflections and studies of Lasallian practice highlight how values-based leadership and lay formation are integral to sustaining mission identity across schools and countries.

The literature on characteristics of Lasallian schools also stresses the pedagogical orientation of the tradition — education that “touches the hearts” and attends to the whole person — which provides a conceptual frame for understanding the meaning lay teachers make of their work in Lasallian settings (Van Grieken; Gros).

Lay Teacher Vocation, Identity, and Meaning

A growing body of scholarship in Catholic and faith-based education explores how lay educators construe their roles as vocational rather than merely occupational. Studies on novice Catholic school teachers and frameworks for lay educator faith formation argue that lay teachers often experience their work as a vocation grounded in religious upbringing, family influences, and ongoing faith formation; this vocational framing affects how they interpret challenges and sustain commitment (Fussell, 2021; Van Grieken; Cimmino annotated studies).

The tension between professional role and vocational identity is well documented: teachers in faith-based schools negotiate both the institutional expectations of educational professionalism and the existential, morally charged meaning of vocation (Buijs, 2005). Such tensions are central to studies of lay identity in historically

religious orders' schools — a key issue your phenomenological study seeks to illuminate as participants reflect on identity and belonging alongside the Brothers.

Professional and Pedagogical Commitment in Teaching

Research on teacher commitment and professionalism locates commitment as multi-dimensional — encompassing commitment to students, to the profession, and to the broader community (Wang, 2021; Low, 2022). Empirical studies indicate that professionalism in teaching is demonstrated through continuous learning, resilience in adverse conditions, and a pedagogical ethic focused on student growth — themes that appear in your participants' narratives (Wang, 2021). These findings align with phenomenological accounts that describe teaching as a moral-existential practice where intentionality and care are central (Moustakas, 1994).

In the Lasallian literature, the professional commitment of lay teachers is often framed as formation in the charism: pedagogical practice is inseparable from formation in values such as service and preferential option for the poor, which informs curriculum choices, mentoring, and student engagement (Guia, 2023).

Spirituality, Religious Experience, and Teaching Praxis

Teacher spirituality — defined broadly as the meaning-making resources that teachers draw upon to sustain purpose, resilience, and moral agency — is increasingly recognized as important to teacher well-being and classroom practice (Wartenweiler et al., 2022; Barsh & colleagues). In faith-based schools, spirituality often takes an explicitly Christian shape and functions as both motive and method: teachers' faith informs pedagogy, pastoral care, and commitment to justice (Fussell, 2021).

Within the Lasallian tradition, spirituality is lived through service to the marginalized and the cultivation of communities of accompaniment; lay teachers embody these values in everyday acts of presence, mentoring, and sacrifice (Van Grieken; Institute of the Brothers). Such spiritually-inflected praxis is a recurrent motif in studies of Lasallian educators and offers a direct link to the lived spiritual experiences your phenomenological analysis foregrounds.

Socioeconomic Context, Inculturation, and Cultural Expressions of Mission

Multiple studies and Lasallian resources emphasize the social justice orientation of Lasallian education: schooling is not neutral but seeks the human and Christian formation of the young, especially the poor (The Educational Service of the Poor; Lasallian cahiers). In many contexts, lay teachers bring personal histories of socioeconomic hardship into their pedagogy, shaping empathy, curricular priorities, and outreach practices. These sociohistorical conditions are important for understanding how teachers' lived experiences inform commitment and mission.

Inculturation — the expression of the Lasallian charism within local cultures and values — appears in the literature as a crucial process for mission vitality. Scholarship on Lasallian schools in diverse contexts documents how local cultural values (such as Filipino concepts of community solidarity and gratitude) are woven into expressions of Lasallian identity and practice, producing distinctive lived forms of the mission. This contextual texture is precisely the kind of phenomenon phenomenology seeks to describe.

Phenomenological and Narrative Approaches to Studying Lived Experience

Methodologically, phenomenology and narrative inquiry are well suited to research that aims to reveal the meaning structures of vocation, identity, and spirituality (Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 1990, 2014; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Vagle, 2018). These approaches prioritize first-person accounts, bracketing of assumptions (epoche), and processes such as horizontalization and imaginative variation to arrive at textural and structural descriptions of experience (Moustakas, 1994). Narrative inquiry adds that stories are primary sites of meaning construction; inviting participants to craft their own narratives enables access to the temporal flow and relational context of lived life (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Recent methodological literature also points to the value of combining written narratives and informal, in-depth interviews to generate rich, multi-layered data that phenomenological analysis can synthesize into essences and situated meanings (Vagle, 2018; van Manen, 2014). Your combined strategy of written story prompts plus conversational interviews is consistent with these recommendations and is well supported by both classic and contemporary sources.

Gap in the Literature and Contribution of the Study

Although there is a growing literature on lay participation in Catholic and Lasallian education and on teacher vocation and spirituality generally, there remain under-explored areas. These include richly textured phenomenological accounts of experienced lay Lasallian teachers with substantial years of service in specific cultural contexts (such as the Philippines), and integrative analyses that connect professional commitment, vocational meaning, spirituality, and socioeconomic histories in a single coherent account. Existing studies often treat these dimensions separately (formation, vocation, professional commitment), whereas a phenomenological narrative approach can illuminate their interpenetration and lived unity — precisely the contribution your study intends to make (Fussell, Van Grieken, Moustakas; recent Lasallian reflections).

METHODOLOGY

Although the researcher shares the institutional context of the participants, the study is not autoethnographic. Personal experience served as a reflexive background requiring bracketing rather than as primary data. The analytic focus remained on intersubjectively generated meanings derived from participant narratives. Reflexive journaling was used to monitor assumptions and prevent theological interpretation from overriding descriptive phenomenological analysis.

Research Design:

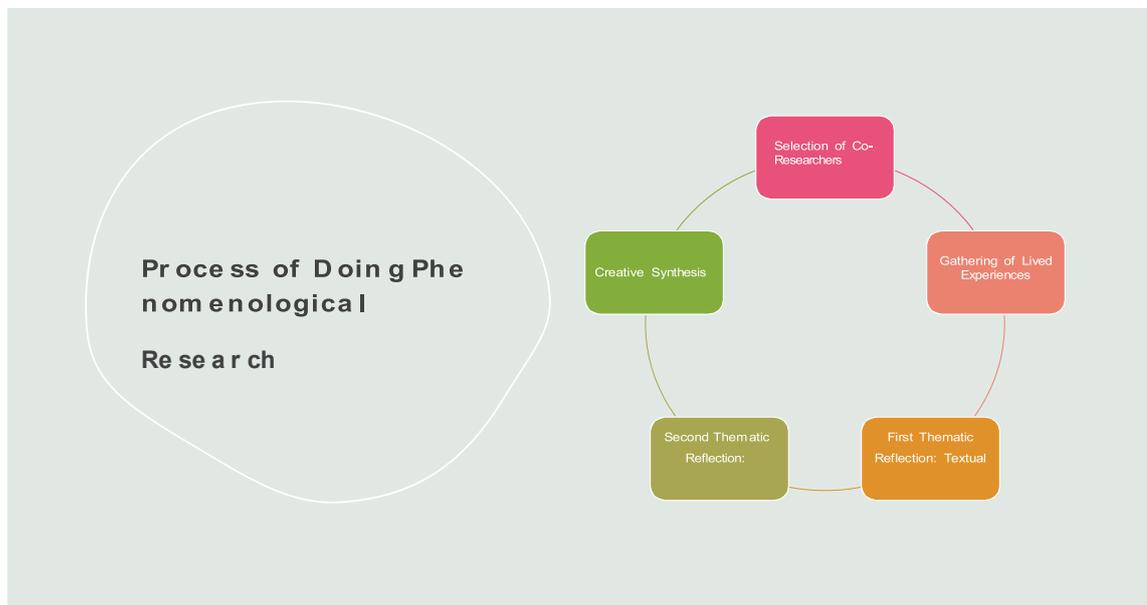


Figure 1: Doing Phenomenological Research

This study employed a phenomenological research design, specifically a transcendental-phenomenological approach as developed by Clark Moustakas (1994) and informed by the hermeneutic insights of Max van Manen (1990, 2014). The intent of phenomenology is to explore and describe the essence of lived experience—the meanings that individuals ascribe to their life-worlds as they live them. In the context of this study, phenomenology provides a way to illuminate how lay teachers experience and understand their participation in the Lasallian mission of education.

According to Moustakas (1994), phenomenology seeks to uncover the “*essences of experience*” through a systematic process of reflection, reduction, and imaginative variation. It begins with epoche—the researcher’s

conscious effort to set aside preconceived notions and biases in order to encounter the phenomenon as freshly as possible. As a lay Lasallian teacher myself, I engaged in this process of *epoche* by maintaining reflective journals and self-dialogues to bracket my assumptions, allowing the voices of the participants to emerge authentically.

Complementing this, van Manen (1990) emphasizes that phenomenology is not merely a method but a way of being oriented toward lived meaning. It involves a deep attentiveness to the “*lived world*” (*Lebenswelt*) and an interpretive stance that seeks to reveal the structure of experience through description and reflection. Thus, while Moustakas’ transcendental method guided the analytical procedures, van Manen’s hermeneutic sensibility informed the interpretive process, situating the meanings within the human and spiritual context of the Lasallian mission.

Participants

The participants of this study consisted of lay teachers currently serving in Lasallian schools within the Philippine Lasallian network. Using purposive sampling (Creswell, 2013), participants were selected based on the following criteria:

1. They are **non-religious lay educators** employed in Lasallian institutions.
2. They have served for at least **ten years** in the Lasallian educational mission.
3. They are willing to reflect deeply and share their lived experiences related to their Lasallian vocation.

Nine participants were invited in **in-depth phenomenological interviews**. This number was deemed sufficient to capture the variation and depth of the phenomenon without diluting its essence (Moustakas, 1994)

Table 1: Profile of the Participants:

CO-RESEARCHERS	YEARS IN LASALLIAN SCHOOL	HIGHEST EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT	EMPLOYMENT STATUS IN SCHOOL	AGE / GENDER (M/F)
CoR1	11	MA (doctoral student)	Permanent	52/F
CoR2	17	MA (doctoral student)	Permanent	50/M
CoR3	13	MA	Permanent	43/F
CoR4	15	PhD cand	Permanent	45/M
CoR5	15	MA (doctoral student)	Retired	67/F
CoR6	15	MA (doctoral student)	Permanent	48/F
CoR7	27	MA (doctoral student)	Permanent	57/M
CoR8	15	MA (doctoral student)	Permanent	53/F
CoR9	24	MA	Permanent	51/M
R (myself)	21	MA (doctoral student)	Permanent	57/M

Collection of Lived Experiences

In phenomenological research, the gathering of data is primarily a process of listening to and engaging with lived experience as it is expressed through personal stories (van Manen, 1990). In this study, the data collection centered on the gathering of narratives from lay teachers who live out the Lasallian mission of education in their

everyday practice. Following Moustakas (1994), I sought to enter into a *dialogical relationship* with participants, allowing them to articulate their experiences in their own voice, rhythm, and language.

To facilitate the unfolding of these narratives, I first invited participants to write or compose their own reflective stories based on a set of open-ended prompts. These prompts were designed to encourage them to freely express how they experience being a lay Lasallian teacher—their moments of joy, struggle, discovery, and transformation. The questionnaire served not as a rigid instrument but as a *guide to reflection*, enabling participants to craft narratives that reveal the meaning they ascribe to their vocation. As Clandinin and Connelly (2000) note, stories are “the closest we can come to experience itself,” and through storytelling, participants become co-authors of the meanings embedded in their lifeworld.

In addition to the written narratives, I conducted informal, in-depth individual interviews with each participant to deepen and clarify the stories they shared. These conversations were intentionally open and conversational rather than structured, in order to allow participants to revisit, expand, and reinterpret their experiences in a natural, reflective manner. This method aligns with van Manen’s (2014) view that phenomenological interviewing should “gather experiential accounts in which the person reflects on and gives shape to the meanings of lived experience.”

Each interview lasted approximately one hour and was held in a quiet, comfortable environment chosen by the participant. With permission, the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. I also took reflective notes after each encounter to capture nonverbal expressions, pauses, and emotional tones that enriched the meaning of their stories. These textual and contextual layers together formed the narrative corpus of the study.

In essence, the data collection process became a shared journey of reflection and storytelling, where participants were not merely sources of data but co-constructors of meaning (Vagle, 2018). Through their narratives, they disclosed the texture and depth of their lived experience as lay Lasallian teachers—the faith that grounds them, the relationships that sustain them, and the meanings that give their vocation life.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed Moustakas’ (1994) modified Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method of phenomenological reduction. The process included the following steps:

1. **Epoche/Bracketing:** The researcher set aside prior assumptions and engaged in reflective journaling to maintain openness to participants’ meanings.
2. **Horizonalization:** Each statement relevant to the experience was identified and treated as having equal value.
3. **Reduction and Elimination:** Overlapping or repetitive statements were clustered into **meaning units**.
4. **Imaginative Variation:** The researcher explored possible structural meanings by considering different perspectives and contexts of the experience.
5. **Textural Description:** A rich, first-person account of *what* the participants experienced was developed.
6. **Structural Description:** A synthesis of *how* the experience occurred was constructed, identifying the underlying dynamics and conditions.
7. **Essence Description:** The textural and structural descriptions were integrated into a composite essence that captured the universal meaning of being a lay teacher in the Lasallian mission.

While Moustakas’ method emphasizes description, van Manen’s (2014) interpretive insights guided the reflective writing process, allowing the researcher to engage with the data hermeneutically — that is, by entering into a dialogical relationship with the text to uncover deeper meaning. In this way, description and interpretation became intertwined in revealing the lived essence of the phenomenon.

Ethical Considerations

The main ethical considerations associated with using the phenomenological method include obtaining consent, maintaining confidentiality and anonymity, considering the potential impact on participants, addressing issues of representation and truth, and engaging in careful reflexive practices.

In keeping with phenomenological respect for the person, participants were treated as co-constructors of meaning, and their narratives were honored as expressions of their lived worlds (van Manen, 1990).

RESULTS

Phenomenological analysis of the participants' narratives revealed six core themes that embody the lived experiences of lay teachers in the Lasallian mission of education. Each theme captures a dimension of meaning that expresses how lay Lasallian educators understand their vocation, professional identity, and spirituality in the context of their educational mission.

1. Professional and Pedagogical Commitment (Professionalism)

The participants' stories reflect a profound sense of professional and pedagogical commitment, grounded in their belief in the value and transformative power of education. Teaching, for them, is not merely a career but a lifelong pursuit of growth, service, and self-giving. Many recounted how their early experiences as educators shaped their passion for teaching and inspired a strong work ethic marked by resilience, perseverance, and adaptability.

Participants described moments of struggle—large classes, limited resources, or personal exhaustion—but these challenges were framed as opportunities for growth rather than deterrents. They found fulfillment in witnessing student transformation, describing teaching as an “everyday mission field” where they could touch lives in concrete and spiritual ways. This deep sense of purpose sustains them despite professional pressures.

For many, their teaching career is a journey of meaning and becoming—a continuous process of formation “together and by association” with colleagues and students. Their commitment mirrors Moustakas' (1994) notion of *intentionality*, the directedness of human consciousness toward meaning, which in their case manifests through their devotion to both pedagogy and personhood.

2. Vocation of a Lasallian Teacher (Vocation)

The participants' experiences reveal that their engagement in the Lasallian mission is deeply vocational—a calling rather than a profession alone. Many traced their journey to early religious upbringing and family influences, where values of faith, kindness, and service were nurtured. They perceived their entry into the Lasallian educational environment as a form of Divine guidance, an unfolding path rather than a deliberate career plan.

Several participants described teaching as an act of faith, where their relationship with God animates their teaching practice. Challenges in teaching were often interpreted as moments of testing and renewal, strengthening their spiritual resolve. As one participant expressed, “God placed me here for a reason—to help form the young as He forms me.”

This sense of vocation resonates with van Manen's (1990) assertion that phenomenological reflection seeks to uncover “the pathic dimension of lived experience”—that is, the affective and moral weight of one's calling. The Lasallian teacher's vocation, as seen here, is lived as both gift and responsibility, uniting personal faith and professional mission.

3. Socioeconomic Condition Socioeconomic Condition (Living Standards)

Participants spoke candidly about their socioeconomic challenges, often recalling their humble beginnings and the hard work that enabled them to pursue education and stability. For many, their lived experience of economic struggle became a wellspring of empathy for their students, especially those from marginalized backgrounds.

Teaching, for them, is not only an intellectual pursuit but a moral and social responsibility to uplift others. They emphasized values such as perseverance, responsibility, and community solidarity, reflecting the Lasallian spirit of faith and zeal expressed through everyday sacrifice.

This theme illustrates how personal histories of poverty and perseverance shaped their moral compass and social awareness. Their stories echo van Manen's (2014) description of "lived relation" — the ways human experience is intertwined with others in shared worlds of care and responsibility.

4. Religious Experience and Lasallian Spirituality (Spirituality)

The spiritual dimension of participants' experiences forms the heart of their Lasallian identity. Their narratives consistently referenced the Lasallian core values of faith, zeal for service, and communion, which provide moral and spiritual grounding in their vocation.

They view teaching as a ministry and mission, not just a profession. The Lasallian charism inspires them to serve the poor, to see Christ in their students, and to make their classrooms spaces of compassion and transformation. Several participants described their spirituality as lived rather than professed, embodied through presence, patience, and a commitment to justice.

Through their spiritual engagement, they participate in what Moustakas (1994) calls *noema and noesis* — the fusion of experience (what is lived) and consciousness (how it is lived). Their faith becomes both meaning and method of teaching, a spiritual praxis rooted in daily encounter.

5. Community Spirit (Community)

The sense of belonging to the Lasallian community emerged as a deeply felt theme. Participants spoke of the fraternity and collegiality that characterize Lasallian institutions—relationships that nurture growth, support, and mutual care. Being part of a Lasallian community is not merely organizational; it is relational and spiritual.

For many, this community provided a sense of home, a shared space where their values and vocation were affirmed. Yet, some also recounted moments of disillusionment and betrayal in leadership, which tested their faith in the institution but ultimately deepened their understanding of service and humility.

This dialectic of joy and struggle reflects van Manen's (1990) view that lived experience is always ambiguous, simultaneously bright and shadowed. Within the Lasallian context, community is both a site of belonging and formation—a living embodiment of the Lasallian ideal of "together and by association."

6. Cultural Expressions of the Lasallian Mission (Cultural Expressions)

The participants also revealed that their Lasallian identity is shaped by Filipino cultural values—*pagmamalasakit* (compassion), *bayanihan* (community solidarity), and *utang na loob* (debt of gratitude)—which intertwine naturally with Lasallian spirituality. Their faith and religious expressions are thus culturally embodied, manifesting in relational warmth, generosity, and respect for others.

This theme highlights the inculturation of the Lasallian mission in the Filipino context, where education becomes both a humanizing and spiritual act rooted in local values. As Moustakas (1994) asserts, phenomenology seeks to describe not only universal essences but the contextual textures of lived experience. In this study, the Lasallian mission finds expression in distinctly Filipino ways of being, serving, and believing.

CONCLUSION

This study sought to describe the lived experience of lay teachers engaged in the Lasallian mission of education within the Philippine context. Through phenomenological reduction and imaginative variation, six interrelated themes emerged: professional and pedagogical commitment, vocational identity, socioeconomic consciousness, lived spirituality, community belonging, and cultural expression of mission.

Empirically, the findings indicate that lay teachers experience their work as an integration of profession and vocation. Professional competence and pedagogical excellence are not perceived as separate from faith commitments but are interpreted as concrete expressions of mission. Participants consistently described teaching as meaningful, relational, and morally charged, sustained through communal belonging and spiritual resources. Their socioeconomic histories also shaped their sensitivity toward marginalized learners, reinforcing alignment with Lasallian educational priorities.

Importantly, these findings are grounded in participant narratives and represent descriptive structures of lived meaning. While theological language appeared in participant accounts, the phenomenological analysis sought to articulate how such meanings function within lived experience rather than to evaluate their doctrinal validity.



Framing the “Cosmic Tree” Model

The “Cosmic Tree” presented in the study should be understood not as empirical data nor as a direct phenomenological finding, but as a **post-analytic theological synthesis**. It functions as a heuristic-symbolic representation integrating the themes into a coherent theological imagination. The tree symbolizes the Lasallian mission as a living organism; the roots represent the grounded experiences of teachers; the earth signifies sociohistorical context; and the cosmic expanse gestures toward participants’ transcendent horizon of meaning.

This model is interpretive and constructive. It emerges after phenomenological analysis as a way of synthesizing empirical themes within a broader theological anthropology. It should therefore be read as a reflective framework inspired by participant meanings rather than as a descriptive outcome of phenomenological reduction.

Contribution to Scholarship

This study contributes to scholarship in three ways:

1. It provides a context-specific phenomenological account of experienced lay Lasallian educators in the Philippines.
2. It demonstrates how professionalism, vocation, spirituality, and socioeconomic consciousness are lived as an integrated whole rather than discrete categories.

3. It offers a model for distinguishing empirical phenomenological description from subsequent theological synthesis in faith-based educational research.

Limitations and Transferability

Several limitations must be acknowledged:

- **Sample Size:** The study involved nine participants within a specific institutional network. While sufficient for phenomenological depth, the findings are not statistically generalizable.
- **Context Specificity:** All participants served in Philippine Lasallian institutions. Cultural values such as bayanihan and pagmamalasakit significantly shape the findings, which may not fully transfer to other cultural contexts.
- **Researcher Positionality:** Although reflexive bracketing was practiced, complete suspension of presuppositions is philosophically unattainable. The researcher's institutional belonging may have subtly influenced interpretation.
- **Transferability:** Readers are invited to determine applicability to other contexts based on the richness of description provided rather than claims of universal generalization.

Future research may include comparative studies across different Lasallian districts, longitudinal analyses of lay formation, or interdisciplinary approaches integrating phenomenology with organizational studies.

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