

## FINDING MEANING IN LIFE AMONG SELECTED FILIPINOS INSPIRED BY SAINT JOHN PAUL II

Jet Buenconsejo<sup>1, a</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Researcher, Letran Research Center, Colegio de San Juan de Letran-Manila

<sup>a</sup>jet.buenconsejo@letran.edu.ph

### ABSTRACT

*What is the meaning of life? Where and how can a person obtain it? Filipinos are renowned for their great love for Pope John Paul II, who was canonized as a Saint last April 27, 2014. Many have been inspired and were given hope because of his divine presence. This existential-phenomenological study aims to understand how selected Filipinos were able to find meaning in life through the inspiration brought by Saint John Paul II. Specifically, the objectives of this research are as follows: to identify the direct and indirect experiences of the participants with the late pontiff, to know how these experiences affected their way of finding meaning in life, and to determine the meaning in life that they have ascribed from these encounters. The researcher interviewed three Filipino Roman Catholics who experienced a spiritual rebirth, a transition from meaninglessness to finding meaning in life through Saint John Paul II. A detailed account of each case is provided. The thematic analysis yielded nine themes common among the participants' lived experiences: Personal Connection, Fatherly Relationship, Selflessness, Mission and Service, Christ-like Image, Call to Holiness, Suffering, Courage, and Christian Joy. Based on the results of this study, the phenomenon of finding meaning in life through Saint John Paul II can be summarized into four statements, (1) existential meaning is personally constructed; (2) it can be achieved by establishing relationships with the Divine and with others; (3) religion and spirituality play an important role in the meaning-making process; and (4) meaning can be obtained by performing one's vocation in life (creative source), experiencing a sense of awe, wonder, and transcendence (experiential source), and accepting suffering (attitudinal). The researcher concludes that an inspirational figure like Saint John Paul II can be a great source of meaning in life. Implications and recommendations are discussed.*

**Keywords:** *Finding Meaning in Life, Meaninglessness, Saint John Paul II, Religion and Spirituality, Existential Psychology, Logotherapy, Phenomenology*

### INTRODUCTION

What is the meaning of life? This question has troubled the hearts of men since time immemorial (Sadigh, 2010). Humans have looked for answers from different disciplines and fields of knowledge. From Philosophy to Psychology, man has searched for the meaning of his existence. But instead of satisfying his inquiring mind and restless heart, it has made him more anxious and worried. In Existential Psychology, this dilemma is called existential anxiety. Existential anxiety is the unavoidable result of being confronted with the "givens of existence"—death, freedom, choice, isolation, and meaninglessness (Lucas, 2005; Wulfing, 2008). According to Tillich (1952), existential anxiety involves apprehension about the ultimate meaning of life and death. He conceptualized existential anxiety as revolving around the three related domains of apprehension. The first domain is fate and death. The second domain is emptiness and meaninglessness.

And the third domain is guilt and condemnation. In this study, the researcher focused on the second domain of apprehension. Anxiety about emptiness and meaninglessness concerns the fate that there is no "ultimate concern", no ultimate importance in life that can give meaning to one's existence.

The core concepts of Existential Psychology, particularly that of freedom and responsibility (Pearce, 2011), courage (Tillich, 1952), and meaning (Frankl, 1997; Steger, et al., 2008) are very much evident in the life of Karol Wojtyla. The man who would become Pope John Paul II was 19 when the Germans invaded Poland in September of 1939 (Weigel, 2001). In spite of the tragedies that happened in his life, Karol Wojtyla was able to find meaning and purpose. He realized that he was being spared providentially for something else, for something greater.

He later discovered that he was chosen to fulfil a mission. It was during those times that he found his vocation – God’s call to the Priesthood (Weigel, 2011). His sufferings and torments became a fertile ground for his spiritual growth and maturity. Saint John Paul II was undaunted by the angst of death as his life was built on Christian hope (Sebastian, 2010).

Today, his tragic experiences, seen as an essential part of human existence, have allowed countless others to relate with him, thus, providing a means of understanding themselves more fully. Saint John Paul II inspired and continues to inspire a lot of people through the story of his life (Allen, 2011) – his way of finding meaning in life. Though he is no longer with us, his effervescent presence continues to live within the hearts of those whom he inspired (Blumenthal, 2005), people who were able to find meaning through his presence. Truly, the inspiration brought by Pope John Paul II continues to inflame the hearts of many. This study presents the experiences of the participants with the late Holy Father as their source of meaning in life.

### **Context of Current Research and Assumptions:**

Taking into account the individuality and subjectivity of the participants in terms of their experiences with Pope John Paul II, the researcher found it fitting to make use of phenomenology as the research design of this study. In phenomenological philosophy, particularly in the works of Heidegger, Husserl, and Merleau-Ponty, “experience” is more complex than it is usually taken in everyday use (Giorgi, 2010). Moreover, experience, that is, the being or existence itself, is “in-relation-to” the phenomenon and it is defined by qualities of directedness, embodiment, and worldliness, which are evoked by the term “being-in-the-world” (Von Eckartsberg, 2008).

In this research, the central phenomenon is the inspiration brought by Pope John Paul II to the participants. This inspiration must come from their personal experiences with him, either direct or indirect (see method section). However, this study does not answer the great existential questions of life. Rather, it suggests that encountering an inspirational figure can be a great source of meaning and purpose in life. Meaning is not something that is answered directly. It has to be experienced, it has to be felt, it has to be lived. And for as long as we continue to live, constantly opening to new life experiences, existential anxiety will continue to confront us, challenging us to find meaning in life. Our earthly life is a life of anxieties and worries. It is up to us to find meaning from these “givens of existence”, as St. Augustine of Hippo said, “You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.” (Lelen, 1997).

### **A. Finding Meaning in Life, an Existential Need**

Existential Psychology views the human person as the author of his own life, the captain of the ship, a free human being, which implies that he is responsible for the consequences of his actions and choices (Längle, 2005). He is free to find meaning in life, but he is also free to remain in the state of meaninglessness (Pearce, 2011). People experience existential anxiety as they become increasingly aware of their freedom and the consequences of accepting or rejecting that freedom (Claessens, 2009). Nevertheless, existential psychologists claim that anxieties like these can be a fertile ground for the development and growth of the human person (Wulfing, 2008). If a person learns to listen to the subtle messages of anxiety, he can dare to take the necessary steps to change the direction of his life (Corey, 2009). Thus, it can be said that accepting the reality of existential anxiety is beneficial and favorable because it motivates the person to change and strive for the better – a life with meaning, a meaningful life.

Viktor Frankl (1997), the founder of Logotherapy, noted the barriers to humanity’s quest for meaning in life – affluence, hedonism, and materialism. These obstructions corrupt one’s inner being until he becomes nonexistent. Meaninglessness in life can lead to emptiness and hollowness, or a condition that he calls existential vacuum (Corey, 2009). Existential vacuum is a widespread phenomenon in the twentieth century. It manifests itself mainly in a state of boredom (Fahlman, et al., 2009). Not a few cases of suicide can be traced to existential vacuum (Mascaro & Rosen, 2005). According to Corey (2009), because there is no preordained design for living, people are faced with the task of creating their own meaning. At times, people who feel trapped by the emptiness of life withdraw from the struggle of creating meaning and purpose (Keshen, 2006). According to Frankl (1997), there are three sources of meaning in life, namely, (1) by creating a work or doing a deed; (2) by experiencing something or encountering someone; and (3) by the attitude people take towards unavoidable suffering. Although the concentration of this study is on the second source of meaning in life – experiences with Saint John Paul II – the researcher did not eliminate the possibility that the participants might have found life’s meaning from other sources, particularly from the first and the third.

Going back to humanity’s quest for meaning in life, it appears that no answer or explanation could fill man’s bottomless pit of existential queries. The great question of “What is the meaning of life?” will continue to resound within the hollowed halls of human history. Meaning is not something that people can directly acquire or obtain. Paradoxically, the more rationally they seek it, the more likely they are to miss it (Corey, 2009). Frankl (1997) and Yalom (2008) are in basic agreement that, like pleasure, meaning must

be pursued obliquely. Finding meaning in life is a by-product of a transcendental engagement, which involves commitment to creating, loving, and working (Jacobsen, 2007; Znakov, 2009). The answer to this question will not be coming from books or experts for it lies within the person of the inquirer himself. It is not like a mathematical problem that has a formula which can be solved in one snap. It has to be experienced, it has to be felt, it has to be lived. Thus, it can be said that finding life's meaning is a subjective experience, which means that each person has his own understanding of purpose in life, a meaning unlike any other.

However, in today's modern world, man does not seem to pay attention to the reason of his existence anymore (Watson, 2006). Different distractions have kept him too busy. Life has become an ordinary routine, an endless repetition of daily tasks, which for him are all the same, yesterday, today, and tomorrow. The culture of convenience has intoxicated his way of thinking. The demands of daily living have taken too much from him. The noise from the hustling and bustling streets has made him deaf of his being's unheard cry for meaning. The competition and rivalry within the academe and the workplace have made him numb of his emptiness and meaninglessness. The dazzling lights of luxury and fame have blinded him from seeing his priceless possessions – his family, his friends, and his soul. But at the end of the day, when everyone and everything has turned silent, the unanswerable existential questions would begin to resound within his heart. This is the reason why some people hate silence. It is because this is the time when they would begin to introspect and see that they do not have the answers to the great questions of life, that they are empty, as if they do not exist. Know that the researcher is not condemning or rebuking people who are living in this state of meaninglessness. But these are the realities of life that man struggles to survive with, this is what is happening in today's era of modernity and secularism. This study aims to show the great importance of finding one's purpose in life and to rise from the state of meaninglessness, to grow, and to mature.

## **B. Saint John Paul II, a Source of Meaning in Life**

On April 27, 2014, Pope John Paul II, the 265th Successor of the Apostle Peter, together with Pope John XXIII, was canonized by Pope Francis at St. Peter's Square (Johnston, 2014). Just a month after his death (April 2, 2005), Camillo Cardinal Ruini, the Vicar General of the Diocese of Rome, headed the formal process of his beatification and canonization (Weeke, 2006). However, this is not the case for most of the candidates for sainthood. Usually, a five-year period of waiting after the person's death is observed before the formal process begins. The decision was announced on May 13, 2005, which happened to be the 24th anniversary of the 1981 assassination

attempt on the pope and the feast of Our Lady of Fatima, to whom the pontiff attributed his survival and recovery (Weigel, 2011). The decision of Pope Benedict XVI to beatify John Paul II might have been influenced by the acclaims of numerous clergy and laity during his funeral Mass, for the congregation was cheering "Santo Subito!", which is Italian for "Saint Immediately!" or "Saint Now!" (Cones, 2011).

But who is Pope John Paul II? Why is he a Saint? What is the meaning of his canonization for us? What does he have to do with finding meaning in life? Even before his canonization, Pope John Paul II has already been a Saint to many. Stanislaw Cardinal Dziwisz, the Archbishop of Kraków and the personal secretary of the late Holy Father, beautifully expressed his thoughts about the pontiff's canonization with these words, "He became a saint during his lifetime, not after his death. His canonization is just a confirmation of his holiness." (Keck, 2014). Even when he was still alive, John Paul II has already been an inspiration to countless people, people of different age groups, ethnicities, and beliefs. Immediately after his death, a lot of clergymen and lay people, especially Catholic authors (Trigilio, et al., 2006), have started calling him "John Paul the Great" (Novak, 2005; Weeke, 2006). In the history of the Roman Catholic Church, only three popes have been bestowed with this title (Saunders, 2005). Imagine, these three great popes were from the Middle Ages, then suddenly, someone from the twentieth century would join in their ranks. But Saint John Paul II is not just somebody. Considering that he was the leader of more than a billion Catholics around the globe, he is one of the most influential and inspirational figures in our times. He is considered "the Great" because he was able to transcend his greatness to others. His papal trips made him visible and accessible to the faithful. His pontificate is very close to the hearts of many (Novak, 2005).

This personal experience with Pope John Paul II is basically the focus of this study. In spite of his greatness as the Vicar of Christ, he went beyond the confines of the Vatican in order to reach out among nations, to touch lives, and to proclaim the Good News of Salvation to all men. Like the character of the father in the Parable of the Prodigal Son, the initiative to connect and to reach out began with him. Proofs of this are his apostolic trips. He made 143 pastoral visits in Italy, 104 international trips to 129 countries, and visited a total of 876 cities (Trigilio, et al., 2006). Saint John Paul II travelled more than any other pope and he consistently attracted huge crowds during his visits (Burrows, 2006). The Philippines was blessed to have been visited by His Holiness thrice: once as a cardinal – 1973; and twice as a pope – 1981 and 1995 (Weigel, 2001). His physical presence has given the faithful a tangible expression of God's love, a fatherly love. Indeed, Pope John Paul II pointed the way to a new civilization of love, real, serious, self-sacrificing, other-centered, unselfish love,

the kind that he showed until his final day (Novak, 2005).

“Be not afraid!” – These were John Paul II’s words during his inaugural Mass (Briel, 2010), and it certainly became the central theme of his entire pontificate. He was never afraid to fight for the Truth, to knockdown Europe’s Communism (Black, 2010; Weigel, 2001), to defend human life and dignity (Fielding, 2005), and to eliminate the immoralities brought by the culture of death (Macchia, 2005). It was because of his courage that he was able to survive the horrors of the Nazi occupation and the Second World War – September 1939 to January 1945 (Hanink, 2011; Weigel, 2001). It is worth mentioning that one of the central themes of Existential Psychology is courage. It takes courage to discover the true “ground of our being” and to use its power to transcend those aspects of nonbeing that would destroy us (Tillich, 1952). Courage entails the will to move forward in spite of anxiety-producing situations, such as facing our death (Medina, 2008). Indeed, John Paul II was a staunch defender of the Truth. “I am the Way, and the Truth, and the Life.” (John 14: 6) says the Lord. As the Vicar of Christ here on earth, his pastoral visits gave the faithful a personal encounter of the Truth, Jesus Christ himself. People of all ages were able to experience the Divine through his physical presence. Pope John Paul II has a charisma that draws believers and sceptics, young and old, rich and poor alike. He always has something for everyone – the feeling of being loved, as if you are the only person in front of him. There is a supernatural power that emanates from his being, from his life. Perhaps this is the reason why he was able to inspire a lot of people. Indeed, he lived an exemplary life – a life full of meaning, driven by a purpose.

### C. Religion and Spirituality in Existential Psychology

In the Philippines, almost all of its population affiliate themselves with a particular religious institution (99.92%) with 80.53% identifying themselves as Roman Catholics (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2016). Their spirituality is deeply rooted within their culture and heritage. Religious festivals and celebrations in honor of the Blessed Virgin Mary and Patron Saints can attest to this. It is said that spirituality is based on a biological predisposition that has been selected in the process of evolution because it has a survival value. It is a socio-culturally structured and determined attempt to cope with existential human situations (Hay & Socha, 2005). Spirituality is one of man’s strategies in dealing with the limitations of life, separation and loss, biological fragility, death, and nonexistence (Shaw, 2005). Furthermore, spirituality provides a means in addressing existential issues and a context in forming personal meaning (Shafranske, 2009). Religion as a source of meaning in life has been described as qualitatively unique in its ability to propose answers for life’s deepest questions (Silberman, 2005). One could not deny the fact that

religion and spirituality are important components of finding meaning in life. According to Emmons (2005), spiritual and religious goals, above all others, appear to provide people with significant meaning and purpose.

Several studies have been conducted regarding the role of spirituality and religion in Existential Psychology. It is said that happiness is one of the elements of a meaningful life (Peterson, et al., 2005). For Larrimore (2010), happiness could be religious too. Religious traditions offer visions and experiences of happiness. People often define themselves and their lives by what they are trying to do and by who they are trying to be (Emmons, 2005). Greater sanctification of strivings related to a greater sense of joy, meaning, and purpose in life (Mahoney, et al., 2005). Spirituality is about the process of meaning-making and valuing. It is about determining life’s true meanings and values (Helminiak, 2008). According to Shafranske (2009), religious narratives present schemas of relationships and models of experiences significant to mental health, such as hope. God images or other symbolic representations of the Divine have the power to evoke emotions, which can influence one’s motivation and behavior. The person of Pope John Paul II inspired and continues to inspire believers and nonbelievers alike. He has been a spiritual icon to many, a visible and tangible expression of God’s presence in the modern world. His recent canonization is an invitation to look at his life and imitate his virtues. This study suggests that encountering an inspirational figure, like Saint John Paul II, can be a great source of meaning and purpose in life.

## METHOD

### Participants:

The participants of this study included three Filipino Roman Catholics who were able to find meaning in life through the profound inspiration brought by Saint John Paul II, people who were deeply moved by him – his teachings, his presence, and his life. Though many Filipinos have seen Pope John Paul II during his visits in 1981 and 1995, only a few number of people can directly and undoubtedly attribute their meaning-making process to him. In order to get the general or central themes about Saint John Paul II and finding meaning in life, the researcher decided to look for three criteria/conditions in selecting the participants of this study. First, the participants should have been inspired by the late pontiff in finding meaning in life. The participants should have rediscovered life’s meaning, if not finding a new one. This inspiration may be accompanied by a change of heart, a conversion, or a spiritual rebirth. Second, the participants have experienced points of emptiness or meaninglessness before being enthused in finding meaning in life, moments that can be qualitatively described as “hanging on a cliff”, “being

lifeless”, “floating in an empty void”, and “feeling purposeless”. These “down” or “low” moments may take the form of spiritual dryness, suffering, or pain. This criterion will ascertain if they were really inspired by Saint John Paul II. The participants are expected to attribute their “healing”, either spiritual or emotional, to the late Holy Father. As for the last criterion, the participants’ “turning points” must come from their direct and/or indirect encounters and experiences with Pope John Paul II. Direct experiences include talking to the pope personally through a papal audience, receiving his apostolic blessing, attending a papal event, like the World Youth Day, or seeing him in his pope mobile. As one can see, these encounters involve the pope’s physical presence. On the other hand, indirect experiences include being inspired by his encyclicals, homilies, speeches, books, documentaries, or films about his life. The impact made by his recent beatification and/or canonization may also be considered. The participants should be able to articulate and describe these experiences with the researcher. In addition to that, they must possess a sufficient knowledge about the life and works of Pope John Paul II.

## PROCEDURE

The three participants of this existential-phenomenological study were gathered through purposive sampling, specifically critical case sampling, using the criteria/conditions mentioned above. Each participant was interviewed individually. The interview sessions lasted from one to two hours. With their written consent, their interview statements were recorded. Permission to use the gathered data in paper presentations and academic journal publications was also asked. The researcher employed six central questions (early recollections, direct experiences, indirect experiences, emptiness and meaninglessness, relationship with Pope John Paul II, and John Paul II himself) to determine the meaning in life that the participants have ascribed from their personal encounters with the pontiff. The interview questions were given to the participants ahead of time for them to reflect and ponder on their answers for deep questions require deep thoughts. They were asked to give the textual description of what was experienced and the structural description of how it was experienced. Furthermore, they described their lives before and after being inspired by Saint John Paul II. The preconditions of emptiness and meaninglessness determined the impact that he had on them. Follow-up questions were also given to probe and validate their answers. The interview session continued until data saturation was achieved. After transcribing, reading, rereading, and analyzing their interview protocols, the researcher extracted significant statements that directly pertain to the phenomenon being investigated. This is called horizontalization in phenomenology. At this point, each statement was given equal treatment.

These substantial statements were formulated into meanings. The meanings were then clustered into themes, which are the general or universal descriptions that typify and unite the participants’ experiences with Pope John Paul II as their source of meaning in life. The themes were referred back to the original transcriptions in order to validate them. Confirmation from the three participants was also sought regarding their agreement with the generated themes. This was done to see if there were any inconsistencies between the interview protocols and the cluster of themes. A final validation was obtained from two psychology practitioners. It was important for the researcher to set aside his preconceptions and biases regarding the topic in order to understand the phenomenon of Saint John Paul II and finding meaning in life in its purest form, that is, in the subjective reality of the participants. Their lived experiences with Pope John Paul II are the main foci of this existential-phenomenological study.



## FINDINGS

Table 1.1 Summary of the participants' encounters with Saint John Paul II		
	DIRECT EXPERIENCES	INDIRECT EXPERIENCES
DAVE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>1995 World Youth Day, Manila, Philippines</b></li> <li>• Praying at the tomb of Pope John Paul II, Rome, Italy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Book about Pope John Paul II</li> <li>• Receiving a letter from the Vatican</li> <li>• Death of Pope John Paul II</li> <li>• <b>Writings of Pope John Paul II</b></li> <li>• <b>A portrait of Pope John Paul II at Quiapo Church</b></li> <li>• Cause for Canonization of Saint John Paul II</li> <li>• "Miracles" attributed to Saint John Paul II</li> <li>• Seeing Pope John Paul II with people, especially with children</li> </ul>
ERIC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>January 14, 1995, World Youth Day Vigil, Manila, Philippines</b></li> <li>• 1997 World Youth Day, Paris, France</li> <li>• 1998, Declaration of St. Therese of the Child Jesus as Doctor of the Church, Rome, Italy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1981 Apostolic Visit, Manila, Philippines</li> <li>• Theology classes at the University of Santo Tomas</li> <li>• Studying a Master's Degree in Religious Education at Mother of Life Center</li> <li>• Preparing for the 1995 World Youth Day</li> <li>• Writings of Pope John Paul II</li> <li>• Polish brothers and sisters in Notre Dame de Vie Institute</li> <li>• Death of Pope John Paul II</li> <li>• Beatification and Canonization of John Paul II</li> <li>• Praying to Saint John Paul II</li> </ul>
VICKY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Easter 1980, St. Peter's Basilica, Rome, Italy</b></li> <li>• 1981 Apostolic Visit, Manila, Philippines</li> <li>• 2002, 10th Anniversary of the Catechism of the Catholic Church, Rome, Italy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Biography of Pope John Paul II</li> <li>• Writings of Pope John Paul II</li> <li>• Life and example of Pope John Paul II</li> <li>• <b>Sufferings of Pope John Paul II</b></li> <li>• Beatification of Pope John Paul II</li> <li>• Film about Pope John Paul II</li> </ul>
NOTE: <b>Bold</b> statements indicate the salient points that were instrumental in the participants' process of finding meaning in life.		

## Formulated Meanings of Significant Statements:

## Dave, the Prodigal Son

*"...While he was still a long way off, his father caught sight of him, and was filled with compassion. He ran to his son, embraced him and kissed him. ...because this son of mine was dead, and has come to life again; he was lost, and has been found."*

— Luke 15: 20, 24

Dave grew up in an environment where the presence of Catholicism was apparent, an environment that would foster and nurture the growth of his faith. At an early age, he showed a remarkable inclination to the truths of the Catholic faith, something uncommon to his age. He loves to read about the lives of spiritual heroes and heroines, popes, saints, and blessed. His parents supported him with this kind of liking. He studied in a Catholic school where he learned about Pope John Paul II. However, his knowledge of him was just trivial, like his original name, his homeland, and the like. He was 10 years old when World Youth Day was held in Manila, it was January of 1995. Little Dave was astounded by the preparations being made for the coming of the pope;

he could see that everyone was excited. His parents brought him to the Apostolic Nunciature in Taft Avenue, and for the first time, he saw Pope John Paul II, the man whom he only met through books, "I was really very happy!", "...so this was the Vicar of Christ that I have read...", "...I felt chills all over my body..." He was even surprised to hear the Holy Father speaking in Tagalog when he said "I love you all!", "Why does he know how to speak in Tagalog?!" The following day, John Paul II, riding in his pope mobile, passed in front of them, "...my dad carried me on his shoulders, then, I could see him very clearly..." He vividly recalled how Pope John Paul II looked and waved at him, "...his gaze and the way he waved, which may not be intended for me, but my belief, it was for me, he waved at me, he gazed at me..." That was the start of his personal relationship with Pope John Paul II, "...this man touched something in me, that I could not forget about him..."

At high school, he planned on entering the seminary. When asked why he would like to become a priest, he said, "I want to be like John Paul II." Upon the death of the pontiff, Dave started to get interested in the writings of Pope John Paul II, namely the "Theology of the Body" and *"Dives in Misericordia"*, an encyclical which tackles the mercy of God.

In 2009, his faith was challenged by unpleasant events, events that tested his fidelity to God and to the Church. He almost left the Catholic faith, *"It got lost, I really lost my faith..."* According to him, he was accused of dreadful things that he did not do by people working in and out of the Church. This endangered his reputation. The thought of becoming an anti-clerical even reached his mind. In fact, he was already planning how to take revenge against his transgressors, *"...I really wanted to take revenge..."*, *"I have already hired an assassin! Everything has already been planned..."* Dave lost his faith, forgiveness has no room for him during that time. *"...for half a year, I did not go to Mass, I did not go to confession..."*, *"...I did not have a God to believe in..."*, *"...I destroyed all of my holy images..."* Worst, he got angry at God and resorted to sinning, *"I was already taking drugs during that time, which is why I was very thin..."*, *"So it's all pleasure, drugs, girlfriends, etcetera..."*, *"If it was judgement day, fine! I will fight with God!"*, *"...that's how dreadful it was, that's how dreadful it was..."*

It was the anniversary of John Paul II's death. He was already declared "venerable" during that time. Dave went to Quiapo Church to confess since it was Lent. There, an old lady, probably suffering from a mental disorder, approached him and said things that he did not understand. He got impatient and decided to bid goodbye by embracing her. The old woman started crying and crying, he does not know why. Later on, he found himself crying too, *"...it's like, I was lacking from someone's touch...from touch therapy..."*, *"Of course I was already working during that time, and I was away from my family...it's like I was lacking there."* He saw a portrait of Pope John Paul II and remembered everything, how he gazed and waved at him in 1995. That was the beginning of his total conversion. *"I'm not only a human person that has a body, I also have a soul."* He recalled how John Paul II forgave Mehmet Ali Agca, his would-be assassin. *"Dives in Misericordia"* also played a key role in his change of heart, *"...no matter how sinful a person is...God can still forgive him..."* He was forgiven by God and he forgave his offenders. *"Maybe if that incident did not happen to me, I may not be as forgiving as I am right now to those who have damaged my reputation or hurt me..."* He also saw the necessity of suffering and experiencing adversities in life, *"...John Paul showed me that it's part of life, that I also have to experience suffering..."*, *"It is a way of self-sacrifice...self-oblation of oneself."* For Dave, these events happened because they have a reason, *"...it's like John Paul allowed me to experience these events for me to learn... and to share the things that I have learned with other people..."*

Dave did not pursue priesthood. Instead, he decided to take up a Master's Degree in Liturgical Studies. Months later, he was summoned to Rome to help in the canonization process of the late pontiff. During his stay there, everyday, Dave would visit John Paul II's tomb, at exactly 5:00 in the morning. He would often tell him, *"Did you know that we saw each other when I was a child, I was 10 years old back then, it was 1995 in Manila."* He was blessed to receive a blood relic, "ex sanguine", of Pope John Paul II which he allows the faithful to venerate.

He believes that the graces he received were due to the fact that John Paul II knows him personally, *"...we don't really know each other, we are not that even close..."*, *"Maybe he remembers me as the child whom he waved at."* Since then, each day has been an opportunity for him to make others happy, *"...everyday, I always see to it, that it is an opportunity to give that forgiveness, to give that love, and mercy of God."* He is currently teaching Religious Education at a certain Catholic school. He thinks that his mission is to spread the life of Saint John Paul II, especially to Filipinos. Dave has defined life as a happy life, a life full of meaning, because of God, because of others, because of John Paul II.

### **Eric, the Rich Young Man**

*"...Teacher, what good must I do to gain eternal life? ...Jesus said to him, if you wish to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."*

— Matthew 19: 16, 21

Eric learned about Pope John Paul II when he joined a quiz competition on Philippine history and culture, he was 11 years old. He knew that he existed; he knew that he was the pope during that time. However, for him, he was just the name being mentioned by the priest whenever he hears Mass. He has no idea what John Paul II looks like, *"...it was a vague memory of a man of greatness..."* It was his cousins who showed him a picture of the Holy Father, *"And when I first saw his picture, ah, I felt that there must be something great about this man."* Back in high school, Eric began questioning the Church. Although he goes to Mass every Sunday and Wednesday with his family, he was also attending the services of other denominations at the same time. Eric was searching for his religion; he wanted to discover his own religion. He took up Journalism at the University of Santo Tomas because he dreamed of becoming a lawyer like Ninoy Aquino and Miriam Defensor-Santiago. There, in his Moral Theology classes, he came across the writings and teachings of Pope John Paul II. He understood the pope's ideologies and principles but it was merely conceptual, it was superficial. As part of his quest of faith, Eric started joining religious organizations like the Knights of Columbus and the Legion of Mary. *"I wanted to have a stronger faith in the institutional Church, I used to regard as a mere edifice of my religion..."*

From the very beginning, Eric was aware that he was an intelligent student. He has always been an academic achiever. He knew his capabilities, his potentials, and his strengths. But he was also aware that he was very ambitious and full of self. *"I was first in my class, I'm first in the family, I'm always first...I have never been second."*, *"I'm very selfish...I'm used to being the center of attention..."* He would be very proud of his achievements, bragging his grades to his classmates. *"For me it was a high point to talk about my achievements..."* Although he joined Church organizations, in fact, he even became the president of their parish youth council due to his reputation as a diligent student, he was still aloof from his members, he was still distant from others. *"...I always wanted a different standard from others..."*, *"...it's like, if you were my girlfriend, you should know how to speak in English fluently..."* Eric experienced a lot of difficulty blending and relating with others. He sees himself as someone superior, better than other people, *"I am the protagonist of my own story..."*, *"...what I know is that I'm more intelligent than you."* He struggled in lowering down his ego and pride for the sake of others. Even though he has already a God, he has already a religion; his faith does not include relationships with others. *"I do things for myself, for my own gratification, glorification..."* Aside from that, he views the Church as something serious, something sober. He was stiff. For him, Church is Church, no more, no less, nothing else.

Before graduating, Eric realized that he wanted to become a teacher instead of being a lawyer. He taught at a certain parochial school that sent him to Mother of Life Center to finish a Master's Degree in Religious Education. *"...I studied there, of course I wanted to have a master's degree, that's part of the ambitious me but I also wanted to discern because I know that in Mother of Life we would pray..."* There, he discovered more about Pope John Paul II, primarily from his professors and the materials that they read in class discussions, *"...we were really bombarded with Pope John Paul II materials..."*, *"...my real interest in him as a person and as the pope began in 1994..."* It was August of that year, five months before World Youth Day, Eric and his classmates were assigned to facilitate catechesis around Metro Manila in preparation for the coming of the pope in January, *"...gradually, as World Youth Day comes close...it's like when you say 'For God so loved the world,' it's like he is really Christ, he is really the Vicar of Christ..."* Little by little, Eric could see that he was being transformed by what he was doing and the things he was learning, which were still theoretical for him. *"I was being edified, however, it was not that profound yet..."* Though it was not yet absolute, his conversion was beginning to blossom.

The 7th World Youth Day arrived, John Paul II passed in front of Eric twice, *"...I felt I was saved... something really happened to me, but, I could not explain..."*, *"I was really dazzled, I was really...in front of holiness, I was in awe, of this man..."* It was an extraordinary moment

which he could not put into words. The vigil of January 14, 1995 at the Luneta Grandstand was the real event for him. It was night-time, the ambiance was prayerful and joyful. Eric was listening to his walkman when the pope challenged the young people, *"A question therefore is directed to each one of you personally. Are you capable of giving yourself, your time, your energies, your talents, for the good of others? Are you capable of love? If you are, the Church and society can expect great things from each one of you."* Upon hearing the words of the Holy Father, Eric began to cry and he could not stop. He asked himself, *"Is he singling me out among the four to five million people at the Luneta Grandstand?"* He realized that this challenge was being given to him by the pope personally, *"...those words were really singled out for me. These words are for me..."* It was a personal experience of Christ for him, *"Who is this man? Why do I feel Christ's presence when I see him?"*, *"...he spoke to my soul, longing to give myself to the absolute, to the greatest of all loves..."*

That moment was the summit of everything for Eric, *"...for me it was a veritable turning point, I was questioned, I was stunned...my soul was stirred..."* He was transformed completely, life for him has never been the same again, *"...it's like it was the solution..."* From being self-centered and proud; God has become the center of his life. Humility and service have become his virtues. He also learned the value of being selfless, thinking of others before himself, *"...I realized that I'm not the only person in the world."* After that life-changing experience, Eric longed to give himself entirely to the Church, to serve others. *"I have to give myself to the Church..."*, *"...from then on, all my encounters with him, whether near or far, had a personal dimension..."* He saw the pope two more times, in Paris, France (1997) and in Rome, Italy (1998). Afterwards, he entered Notre Dame de Vie, a secular institute for laypersons, men and women, in response to the call of Pope John Paul II to live a life of consecration and service in the world. Eric defines life as gift and mystery, a gift freely given by God, filled with joyful, sorrowful, luminous, and glorious mysteries. He sees John Paul II as a father, a father who has given a spiritual rebirth to his soul.

### **Vicky, the Mother Teresa of Tondo**

*"Like Jesus we belong to the world living not for ourselves but for others. The joy of the Lord is our strength. We cannot do great things, only small things with great love."*

— Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta

Vicky has long been a catechist teaching in the poor areas of Tondo, Manila, way back since 1980s. She was appointed by the late Jaime Cardinal Sin to accompany two catechumens, Ruth Alonsagay and Lito Dullaga, to Rome to be baptized by Pope John Paul II during the Easter vigil of 1980. It was her first time to see the pope whose election as a pontiff was unexpected and surprising. The way John Paul II baptized the catechumens had the greatest impact on



her. *"...it was really different when he was baptizing, it had a strong impact on me..."* After the ceremony, they were led into a big hall to meet the pope personally. Vicky was very nervous during that time, she was trembling. And so, she told the Holy Father that she was a catechist teaching in the slums of Tondo, Manila. The pope responded, *"Ah, thank you very much for being a catechist. You're doing great work in the Church. Continue your work as catechist!"* It was an unforgettable experience for her, *"...it's just like meeting Christ...he's like Christ."*, *"Abhh, I could not ask for more, nothing else! This is it, I am really in front of Christ!"* Vicky recalled how John Paul II talked to her, *"What struck me most was, when talking to someone, it was as if you are the only person in the world, no one else..."* That indescribable encounter with Pope John Paul II left an indelible mark on her. *"After that encounter with him...I had the feeling of being lifted up by him. Do not worry, I am just here, with you."*, *"He was different, it was as if I was sealed/ marked by him..."* There, she resolved to continue being a catechist, with greater passion and conviction. *"...I have to be a catechist and I have to convince others to become a catechist."*

Upon returning home, Vicky was assigned by Jaime Cardinal Sin to prepare the people of Tondo for the Apostolic Visit of Pope John Paul II. Carrying a slide projector, together with other catechists, she went around the different parishes of Tondo, roaming the streets, introducing John Paul II, giving catechesis and seminars. She also prepared 50 children from poor families who would be receiving First Communion from the pope. She was also privileged to receive Communion from the Holy Father himself. For her, *"It was like the hand of Christ telling you, this is me whom I'm giving myself to you!"*, *"...he's like an Alter-Christ..."* For the longest time, Vicky has been a lay member of Notre Dame de Vie Institute. However, it was not always like that. Aside from the fact that it was against the will of her father, *"I also struggled before I responded 'yes' to God..."*, *"Because during that time...I was very gregarious, I want to be with people...I was always going out with friends..."* When she learned that she has a calling to the consecrated life, she got afraid and tried every way possible to run away from it. *"Me? Oh no! Ask anyone, except me..."* Vicky realized that she was not happy for she knew that something was lacking in her. After saying "yes" to God, *"...I had peace of mind..."* Since then, she has been very happy, grateful for the gift of her vocation.

But being a catechist has not always been easy. Vicky has encountered problems and difficulties throughout her vocation, *"...at times you feel so weak, and you don't have any strength anymore to give yourself..."*, *"...we were not spared from that..."* But she believes that it is Pope John Paul II that keeps her going, his writings, his teachings, his life, and her encounters with him. *"It's like he is encouraging you, go on, it's alright. Just go on, go on... Continue your walk."* Vicky was spending her "year of solitude" in France when she learned about the pope's beatification. She was brought to the hospital because

she could not walk. When she saw John Paul II on TV, she remembered Lito Dullaga, one of the catechumens who were baptized by the Holy Father in 1981. Lito was paralyzed after some years, but he accepted that suffering because he considers his Baptism from the pope as the greatest grace of his life. Vicky said, *"Ah, I can already accept this, this small trial of not being able to walk."*, *"Who am I to complain? I have already received so many graces. Why would I still complain?"* The courage and strength that John Paul II showed in his last years helped her accept and embrace life's challenges. *"I willingly accepted that trial, with no difficulty at all, I accepted everything after that..."*

Because of her encounters and experiences with Pope John Paul II, Vicky saw the value and importance of being a catechist in her life. *"I realized that I have received so many graces in life because of being a catechist..."* She recounted the common perception that people have about catechists, *"...before, people used to downgrade our role, 'You're just a catechist?'"* Through John Paul II, Vicky gained a greater sense of self-worth as a catechist, *"...it's like he affirmed it..."*, *"...he lifted it up, he elevated the image of a catechist..."* For her, being a catechist is a vocation, a calling, a gift. *"...his words always echo within me."*, *"You're needed by the Church. Continue the work you are doing."* Her vocation to serve was also strengthened and revitalized by Saint John Paul II. *"To serve the Church, to give myself, to God and to the Church..."*, *"...if I had love already for the poor before, the more when I encountered him..."*, *"...as long as you give yourself to others and you forget yourself, life would be more meaningful..."* She is currently teaching at Mother of Life Center, training and preparing catechists of the future. *"I find meaning in what I'm doing..."*, *"If you love God, you will do everything for him, there is meaning in everything that you do, and you are happy with what you're doing, because you are pleasing the one that you love..."*, *"It's only in God that we can find true meaning in life..."* Vicky is very happy with her life as a catechist. *"...I have nothing to ask more from God except gratitude, gratitude, gratitude..."*

## CLUSTER OF COMMON THEMES:

### Personal Connection – I am valued...

Pope John Paul II has a special way of communicating with people. *"What struck me most was, when talking to someone, it was as if you are the only person in the world, no one else..."* His presence creates a personal magnetism that attracts crowds of faithful to him, a presence that brings forth feelings of being blessed, being privileged, being valued, a greater sense of self-worth. *"Among all people John Paul, among all people, why did you still choose me?"*, *"Wow, could he be looking at me?"*, *"Could he be talking to me?"* He draws people as if he calls them by name, as if he knows them personally. There is always a sense of relatedness. *"Why does he know how to speak in Tagalog?!"*, *"I knew that he was addressing me in a personal way..."* In spite of being unsure, they personally believe that John Paul II was really looking at them. *"...his gaze and the way he waved, which may*

not be intended for me, but my belief, it was for me, he waved at me, he gazed at me...”, “...he talked to me, he asked me...” The same goes with his writings, they feel personally connected with him, “...he has a certain kind of openness...”, “I could empathize with him...”

### **Fatherly Relationship – I want to be like him...**

The person of Pope John Paul II expresses a paternal image, someone who knows what they need, someone who provides, someone who understands. “...even if you have not asked him yet, you know that he is attentive to your needs”, “...it's like, he is here beside me...” As a provider, John Paul II has answered most of their prayers, spiritually and materially speaking. “He knows what I need, even if I have not asked him yet, he knows it already...” They can see great similarities between John Paul II and their fathers, he resembles their fathers. “...I can see in John Paul the fatherly figure that is similar to my dad...”, “...ready to help, to do whatever he can, to his child...” As a father-figure, they see him as a role model because he has lived an exemplary life, worthy of emulation. Life has a sense of direction because they know that they have someone to imitate, someone to follow. “I wanted him to be the guide of my life...”, “I wanted to be like him...” But more than anything else, they see him as the father of their souls, a father who has given a spiritual rebirth to their souls.

### **Selflessness – I can give... I can forgive...**

For them, the life of Pope John Paul II is an example of selflessness. “...his life itself, all given to the Church, nothing for himself...”, “...he is someone who has lived his life to the full, until the last drop of his blood...” With this in mind and because of their encounters with him, they have learned to prioritize others before themselves, to forget themselves. “...it was as if, I was starting to think, I started thinking about others, not only about myself...” From being self-centred, they have learned to be selfless, “...to give everything out of love...”, “...to be able to find meaning, you have to give your all, to the full...” This, they saw in Saint John Paul II's life, “...because he has given his life to the fullest, he was able to find meaning...” The total giving of oneself yields meaning in life because they are aware that they are doing it for a greater cause, that it has a sense of purpose, that they are benefiting others, “...but if you give yourself completely, there is meaning...”, “...as long as you give yourself to others and you forget yourself, life is more meaningful...” Forgiveness is also selflessness because a person needs to lower down himself, his ego, his pride; he needs to set aside the pain in order to forgive. “I learned to forgive, even though I know that it was painful...”, “...because that is what John Paul did, forgive, forgive, no matter what happens, even if that person wants to kill you...”

### **Mission and Service – Here I am, Lord...**

Seeing John Paul II face to face gave birth to a strong desire to serve the Church, a longing to give themselves entirely to the people of God, their time, talent, and treasure. It was a pivotal moment for them, “This is it. You choose.” It was through their personal

experience of the Vicar of Christ that they received their mission. “...if it wasn't for him, I would not have probably found my vocation...”, “Probably I'm being called to serve the Church.”, “I have to do this now, while I'm young, while I'm still capable.” Following their vocation in life was a response to the challenge of John Paul II, “Are you capable of giving yourself, your time, your energies, your talents, for the good of others? Are you capable of love?” They have all responded “yes” to the invitation of the Holy Father to serve. Their decision to dedicate themselves to Christ and to the Church brought meaning to their lives. “To serve. To serve the Church, to give myself, to God and to the Church”, “...for me, this is already the meaningful life...” For them, it is love that gives meaning to everything that they do. “If you love what you are doing, you love that person, you will do anything because you love him...there is meaning in everything that you do, and you are happy with what you are doing, because you are pleasing the one that you love...”

### **Christ-like Image – I was saved...**

Pope John Paul II embodied the title, the Vicar of Christ, the representative of Christ here on earth. “He is not an ordinary person.”, “...he's the Vicar of Christ, he's Christ present among us...” He personified the image of the Good Shepherd, tending his flock, taking care of them, leading them. His divine presence emanates a strong sense of holiness that makes it a transforming and renewing experience. “I felt his powerful blessing...”, “...the whole sanctity, the air, the aura of sanctity was radiating in his own personality...”, “His glance, his movements were so penetrating that even the greatest sinners would kneel before his presence...” They have seen in John Paul II the person of Jesus Christ, a mediator, a redeemer, a sign of hope. “...it's just like meeting Christ...he's like Christ.”, “...he's like an Alter-Christ...”, “Abhh, I could not ask for more, nothing else! This is it, I am really in front of Christ!” His character speaks about the message that he brings, the Good News of Salvation. “...I felt I was saved... something really happened to me, but, I could not explain...” His life was also in conformity with that of Christ, preaching in every nation, suffering yet glorious.

### **Call to Holiness – I want to be a saint...**

The beatification and canonization of Pope John Paul II changed the way they viewed sanctity, becoming a saint. “...no doubt, he's really a model, that it is possible to become a saint...” To see someone who has lived in their lifetime being beatified, being canonized, made holiness achievable, possible, reachable. “...and I think it was wise...it's beautiful to beatify, canonize someone who has lived with you...”, “...all of us are called to become saints, and I think he paved the way for us...” The number of people that John Paul II canonized and beatified is also a proof that anyone can become a saint, no matter what, “...just to show us that holiness is possible regardless of your state in life...” In fact, they see sanctity as a calling, more so, as a responsibility. “...the very first thing that John Paul taught me is sainthood, the vocation to be a saint, to be holy...”, “...all of us, we have the duty to become

saints...”, “Because I think the world calls us to be great, but God calls us, wants us to be holy...” For them, heaven is their true home. “We come from God, we go back to God...” Becoming a saint is simple, “...saints are very ordinary...”, “...doing little things with extraordinary love, simple...”

### Suffering – I accept... I offer...

Through the life of Pope John Paul II, particularly the death of his loved ones, his sufferings in his homeland, his sickness, his death, they came to realize that suffering is an essential part of life. “...ab his trials, ah, there, I think he was strengthened more...”, “...he pursued his dreams...to the point of persecution...”, “...his failing health made him stronger I think, he never gave up...” John Paul II taught them how to accept, embrace, carry, and joyfully offer their lives’ crosses. “...if you will be persecuted, accept it, offer it to God...”, “It is a way of self-sacrifice...self-oblation of oneself.”, “Who am I to complain? I have already received so many graces. Why would I still complain?” Indeed, the way of the cross leads to the resurrection. It was their sufferings that gave meaning to their lives. Like gold in the furnace, suffering has a purpose. It refines and transforms their lives, making them into better and stronger individuals. “It’s not always easy but, it gives meaning, because if you only have joys, there is no meaning, it becomes flat, it becomes a perfect world, but it’s actually not perfect, because, there’s no such world...”

### Courage – I am not afraid...

“Be not afraid!”, these were the words of the Holy Father at the inauguration of his papacy. Courage certainly became the central theme of his entire pontificate, from beginning to end. “He’s not afraid, as he would always remind everyone, ‘Be not afraid!’ He’s not afraid, he’s not even afraid of death...” For them, it is John Paul II that keeps them firm and steadfast in their vocation of service. “It’s like he is encouraging you, go on, it’s alright. Just go on, go on...Continue your walk.” Acceptance entails courage. Through John Paul II, they learned to accept and embrace their sufferings and responsibilities in life, and this made them stronger, better individuals. “But if that incident did not happen to me, I may not be as courageous as I am right now...”, “...similar to a dog that becomes braver as it becomes more and more wounded...” To be courageous also means to be radical, to go against the lures and enticements of the world. “Fight for the truth, and not to be influenced by what society is offering us right now...because today’s world is presenting so many distractions to us, making them false gods, material things, power and all that...” But John Paul II taught them to be faithful to God, “...and if you have God with you, nothing will touch you, nothing will, you know, put you down, because you know, you are holding onto someone stronger...”

### Christian Joy – I am very happy...

Saint John Paul II was a joyful man of God. They see him as a happy person. “...people told in their stories that he is a very joyful person...”, “And John Paul has humor...”, “He is very, full of life, he is alive...” One of them recalled the youthfulness of the joyful pope, “But when I saw Pope John Paul II during the vigil dancing ‘Shine, Jesus, Shine’ with

his staff, I was impressed, I was saying, ‘How can I be sad? How can I not be joyful if the head of the Church could be joyful as such?’” The exuberance of this man inspired them to be joyful as well. He showed them that one can be holy and happy at the same time. “...he’s someone, I would like to be, I want to transmit the youthfulness of Christianity, I would like to transmit the joy of being a Christian...” Christians are entitled to be happy, and the joy of a true Christian persists and prevails in the midst of adversities and trials. “I think John Paul II can be a source of happiness despite the poverty of Filipinos...even in the midst of suffering...” It is their vocation of service that gives joy and meaning to their lives, “Then if you enjoy your work, then you, you’d be happy also...and you find meaning in your work.” For them, if they have not followed John Paul II or responded to his call, they would probably be unhappy. “...he has made me a happier person, alive...”, “I’m very happy...”

## DISCUSSION

### The Subjectivity of Existential Meaning

Considering the diversity and subjectivity of the participants’ experiences and encounters with Saint John Paul II, the researcher decided to present the data separately, that is, according to their own accounts. After reading, rereading, analyzing, and reflecting upon the interview transcripts of the three participants, it was ascertained that there is no specific or precise model that can explain their process of finding meaning in life. Indeed, existential meaning is complex, diverse, and unique (Adams, 2006; Längle, 2005). Although certain elements were found common among them, like the period of meaninglessness or emptiness, the motivation or will to search for meaning, and some direct and indirect experiences with Pope John Paul II, each participant has his or her own way of meaning making. For example, in the case of Dave and Eric (Refer to Table 1.1), the 1995 World Youth Day held in Manila had a significant impact on both of them. However, their perception and interpretation of the event were different. The way they accepted and internalized that moment were not the same. For Dave, the gaze and wave of John Paul II were the most significant. This, together with his knowledge of the pontiff’s life, helped him to forgive later in life. For Eric, it was the challenge of the pope to the young people that inspired him to serve the Church. One has to consider that they were also living in different circumstances during that time. Dave was 10 years old while Eric was 24. In short, they may have the same significant experience from the same man, Pope John Paul II, but the manner of meaning making is unique. There are important individual differences in the experience of meaning (Adler, 2005). None of the participants are alike or identical with each other.

Based on the results of this study, it can be said that the process of finding meaning in life is personal, private, and subjective. Several authors and researchers support this claim. It is said that existential meaning

depends on the person who is searching for it (Cornejo, 2008). Basic personality dispositions affect meaning and its correlates. It may emerge in healthy or unhealthy forms depending on the personality of the searcher (Steger, et al., 2008). According to Wood (2006), a subjective impact from a significant experience is essential in the meaning making process. Regardless of their sources and circumstances, existential meaning is personally constructed by individuals living their lives (Rys, 2009). Another indicator of the subjectivity of meaning is the sequence of events in the participants' accounts. For example, their points of meaninglessness happened either before or after they met Saint John Paul II. For Dave, it was after; for Eric, it was before; while for Vicky, it was before and after. The stories of the participants really show the complexity, diversity, and uniqueness of finding meaning in life. Eric beautifully captured this characteristic of existential meaning with these words, "I think finding meaning, finding happiness, finding one's vocation, it's a story of convergence, of meeting the right people, at the right moment, and giving the right answer."

### **The Role of Relatedness in the Meaning Making Process**

Although the process of meaning making is considered to be subjective, it does not mean that it is individualistic in nature. Yes, it is true that it happens internally, within the person of the searcher, but he has to acquire it externally, by relating and connecting with others. Why is that so? By nature, humans are social beings. It is said that a meaningful life is one of significance, relatedness, and fulfillment (Brady, 2010). One of the most famous expressions in the English language speaks about the vitality of human interdependence, "No man is an island." In one way or another, we need the help of other people to survive. In the Philippines, the hymn that is usually sung after every Mass expresses the importance of developing concern for others, "*Walang sinuman ang nabubuhay para sa sarili lamang. Walang sinuman and namamatay para sa sarili lamang.*" (*No one lives for himself alone. No one dies for himself alone.*) It reminds the faithful that anyone is everyone's responsibility. Indeed, we are our brothers' keepers. Existential meaning is personally constructed, but it is socioculturally situated (Bang, 2009). Filipinos, as well as other Asian nationals, are known for their collectivistic nature. They value their families, their cultural traditions, and their beliefs. One cannot separate meaning from the paradox of human existence, that the person is individual and social at the same time.

Among the nine themes that emerged in this study, four of them have something to do with relating or connecting with other people. The first two themes involve the participants' relational bond with Pope John Paul II, the personal connection that they felt when they saw him and the fatherly relationship that they have with him. According to Friedman (2008),

grounding his findings in the "I-and-Thou" theory of Martin Buber, it is possible to acquire healing through the physical presence of a significant person, which he termed "healing through meeting". This is basically what happened to the three participants, they were "healed" from their meaninglessness through their encounters with Saint John Paul II, "*...for me it was a veritable turning point, I was questioned, I was stunned, my soul was stirred...*"; "*...it's like it was the solution...*" Their personal connection with him as a father who has given a spiritual rebirth to their souls allowed them to gain meaning in life. The next two themes are the fruits of that meaning: selflessness, and mission and service. The participants discovered their mission and vocation after meeting the Holy Father. Being selfless and serving others involve human relationships and connections. Hughes (2006) claims that existential meaning motivates a person's involvement in activities that promote social integration and the quality of social relationships. As the individual gains more meaning in life, he or she becomes more involved in prosocial activities, like volunteerism (Sherman, 2011). Looking at this closely, one can see a continuous cycle between relatedness and meaning. Their fatherly relationship with Pope John Paul II gave meaning to their lives. In turn, that meaning led them to create more relationships by serving others. Dave is a teacher, Eric is a religious brother, and Vicky is a catechist. Their vocation of serving others continues to yield existential meaning, "*I find meaning in what I'm doing.*" It is a constant chain of establishing relationships and gaining meaning in life, a never-ending chain of giving and receiving.

### **Religion and Spirituality in Finding Meaning in Life**

Several authors, existential psychologists, and researchers have made a distinction between religion and spirituality (Day, 2010; Dierendonck, 2006; Emmons, 2005; Hay & Socha, 2005; Helminiak, 2008; Joseph, et al., 2006; Larrimore, 2010; Mahoney, et al., 2005; McFadden, 2008; Shaw, 2005; Sorajjakool, 2008), similarly, the author of this paper acknowledges that such exists between the two terms. Religion, being a set of beliefs, is associated with institutionalized traditions and practices. On the other hand, spirituality is related to the personal quest for meaning or the individual experience of the Divine. Applying the concepts of both terms in this study, religion has something to do with the doctrines, dogmas, and teachings of the Catholic Church, which involves the primacy of St. Peter and the infallibility of the pope in matters of faith and morals.

The participants acknowledge that Pope John Paul II is the Vicar of Christ and the 265th Successor of the Apostle Peter. It can be said that they are really familiar with the fundamentals of the faith. Spirituality, on the other hand, speaks about their personal relationship with God, their inner life, their souls. It has something to do with the impact that John Paul II made in their lives. Spirituality is broader



compared to religion. However, Dierendonck (2006) argues that the line separating religion from spirituality is still unclear, considering that both terms pertain to the sacred. Consequently, many people describe themselves as “equally religious and spiritual”, “more religious than spiritual”, “more spiritual than religious”, or “neither religious nor spiritual” (Day, 2010). People have various definitions and interpretations of being religious and being spiritual. In this study, the researcher did not highlight the difference between the two terms for a good reason; the spiritual life of the participants is intertwined, interwoven with their religious beliefs, it is deeply rooted in their creed. For Dave, Eric, and Vicky, it is the Sacraments, especially the Holy Eucharist, prayer, and the example of Saint John Paul II that strengthens and sustains them, allowing them to persevere in their spiritual life. *“I could see he was a very prayerful man...”, “...if in my entire day I was not able to pray, it is different, I feel different...”, “...but as soon as you put yourself under the light of God and you pray...when you receive the Sacraments, it’s there where you find strength...there is a direction...”*

Religion and spirituality have always been linked to finding meaning in life (Homan, 2010). Viktor Frankl (1975) himself regarded religion as the search for ultimate meaning. It offers an opportunity to feel a uniquely powerful emotional experience of closeness with the divine, and this can become a great source of significance in people’s lives. Religion that is centered on the sacred is one of the few types of meaning making systems that can meet the basic human need for self-transcendence (Silberman, 2005), the need to go beyond what the senses can reach. Shafranske (2009) proposes that God images or other symbolic representations of the Divine have the power to evoke strong emotions and motivations vital in the meaning making process. The Christ-like image that the participants saw in the person of the Holy Father aroused feelings of being redeemed, being saved, being lifted up, and being healed from their emptiness. The messianic figure of John Paul II gave them a sense of awe, wonder, and transcendence, all of which are salient in finding meaning in life (Adler, 2005; Day, 2010; Frankl, 1997). Know that the pope is not replacing Christ; rather, he is representing Christ, like an ambassador. The faith of the participants is still Christocentric. The holiness that John Paul II manifested in his life, as evidenced by his recent beatification and canonization, motivated the participants to aspire for sanctity as well. It is said that greater sanctification of goals (e.g., *“...all of us are called to become saints...”*) related to a greater sense of joy, meaning, and purpose in life, even if these strivings involve great sacrifices or efforts. It is also associated to better mental and physical health because these goals are more stable and more satisfying (Mahoney, et al., 2005). McGinley (2011) states that the meaning of life can be found in ordinary activities. The challenge is to rediscover truth and essence in

every repetition. For Dave, Eric, and Vicky, Pope John Paul II showed them how to become a saint, and that is by doing ordinary things with extraordinary love.

### **Logotherapeutic Explanation**

The account given by Viktor Frankl (1997) regarding the sources of meaning in life provides a comprehensive and concise explanation about the results of this study. According to him, there are three main sources of existential meaning, namely, (1) creative, when one accomplishes something through creative work; (2) experiential, when one derives beauty, love, and truth from something or someone; and (3) attitudinal, when one derives reflections from the negative aspects of life such as pain and suffering. After thoroughly analyzing the interview transcripts of the participants, it became apparent that they obtained meaning from the three sources proposed by Frankl. In the creative source, the work that they are currently doing gives meaning to their lives. Their vocation as a teacher, as a religious brother, and as a catechist gives purpose to their lives because they believe that they are doing the will of God, they are serving others, and they are following Saint John Paul II. They have decided to serve the Church as a response to the call of the Holy Father to offer themselves to Christ. Second, their personal encounters with the pontiff served as their experiential source. The person of Pope John Paul II, his life, his writings, his words, especially his physical presence have provided a strong sense of awe, wonder, and transcendence to the participants. They were struck by his sanctity. Again, these elements are vital in the meaning making process (Adler, 2005; Day, 2010; Frankl, 1997). Lastly, the points of emptiness and meaninglessness, the dark night of the soul that Dave, Eric, and Vicky went through have allowed them to experience a spiritual rebirth which they attribute to Saint John Paul II. The latter years of his life, his sickness, and his sufferings have encouraged them to face and overcome their trials and tribulations in life. Scheurich (2007) and Wortmann (2009) have highlighted the importance of experiencing suffering before achieving meaning. Emptiness propels the individual to go on a quest for self-understanding and purpose. Within the human person, there exists a deep yearning for meaning and a struggle to make sense out of suffering (Durà-Vila, 2009). Frankl (1997) referred to these as the will to meaning and the meaning of the unavoidable suffering, two of the three pillars of Logotherapy. The third being the freedom of the will, which means that a person is free to find meaning in life, but he is also free to remain in the state of meaninglessness (Pearce, 2011). The participants have chosen to find meaning in life, even in the midst of adversities. One thing that is common among Dave, Eric, and Vicky is their exuberance. Based on the observations of researcher during the interview sessions, one could say that they are very happy with their lives. Their character and personality exude a certain kind of joyfulness and peace



that suggest contentment and happiness, which is said to be a strong indicator of meaning in life (Jacobsen, 2007; Joseph, et al., 2006; Peterson, et al., 2005).

## CONCLUSION

Although majority of the participants' significant experiences were obtained indirectly (Refer to Table 1.1), the highlight or the summit of their encounters with Saint John Paul II are all found in their direct experiences with him. These salient points are considered by the participants as the most important among all their meetings with the Holy Father. Their transition from meaninglessness to finding meaning in life was because of those moments. The physical presence of Pope John Paul II allowed them to experience wonder, transcendence, and self-worth, all vital in finding existential meaning. However, it does not necessarily follow that their "change of heart" or "spiritual rebirth" happened instantaneously. Take for example the case of Dave, although his conversion took place after the death of John Paul II, his direct encounter with him during the 1995 World Youth Day became instrumental for him in finding meaning in life. From time to time he would relive how the pope gazed and waved at him. Several researches have proven the effectiveness of spiritual reminiscence in the meaning making process (Bohlmeijer, 2008; Bryant, 2005; MacKinlay, 2010).

The thematic analysis yielded nine themes common among the three participants, namely, personal connection, fatherly relationship, selflessness, mission and service, Christ-like image, call to holiness, suffering, courage, and Christian joy. These themes summarize the participants' direct and indirect experiences with John Paul II, specifically, the textual description of what was experienced and the structural description of how it was experienced. Based on the results of this study, one can sum up the phenomenon of finding meaning in life through Saint John Paul II into four statements, first, existential meaning is personal, private, and subjective, it is complex, diverse, and unique, each person has his or her own way of finding meaning; second, existential meaning can be achieved by establishing relationships and connections, with God and with others, this includes the participants' personal connection and fatherly relationship with John Paul II; third, religion and spirituality play an important role in experiencing transcendence which is vital in the meaning making process; lastly, the participants were able to obtain existential meaning from three different sources, (1) by living up their vocation of service; (2) by encountering the Holy Father face to face; and (3) by accepting trials and tribulations in life. Truly, an inspirational figure like Saint John Paul II can be a great source of meaning in life.

## Limitation

Considering that the results of this study were obtained from a small number of participants, the themes regarding finding meaning in life through Saint John Paul II are not generalizable to a large number of people. Some themes may be applicable or relevant to others, giving them an idea on how an inspirational figure can become a source of meaning in life. However, one has to keep in mind that existential meaning is personally constructed. The researcher cannot conclude that anyone who met Pope John Paul II found meaning. There is no specific or precise model that can explain the process of finding meaning in life because it is subjective. For those who would like to replicate this study in the future, it is recommended to include "ordinary" or "common" Filipinos, people who are not highly religious or affiliated in the Church, and yet, were able to find meaning in life through the inspiration brought by Saint John Paul II. Although the sampling process would be more challenging and laborious, the researcher believes that this will make the findings closer to the general public, especially those who are living in the secular world.

## References

- Adams, M. (2006). Towards An Existential Phenomenological Model Of Life Span Human Development. *Existential Analysis: Journal Of The Society For Existential Analysis*, 17(2), 261-280.
- Adler, M. (2005). Appreciation: Individual Differences In Finding Value And Meaning As A Unique Predictor of Subjective Well-Being. *Journal Of Personality*, 73(1), 79-114.
- Allen Jr., J. (2011). Blessed John Paul II Still Stirs Awe, Ambivalence. *National Catholic Reporter*, 47(15), 15.
- Bang, J. (2009). Nothingness And The Human Umwelt. *Integrative Psychological & Behavioral Science*, 43(4), 374-392.
- Black, C. (2010). For God And Man. *National Review*, 62(22), 52-54.
- Blumenthal, D. (2005). Now That John Paul II Is No Longer With Us. *Cross Currents*, 55(2), 234-240.
- Bohlmeijer, E. (2008). The Effects Of Integrative Reminiscence On Meaning In Life: Results Of A Quasi-experimental Study. *Aging & Mental Health*, 12(5), 639-646.
- Brady, L. (2010). Giving Back And Growing In Service: Investigating Spirituality, Religiosity, And Generativity In Young Adults. *Journal*

Of Adult Development, 17(3), 162-167.

Briel, D. (2010). A Pope For All Seasons. *First Things: A Monthly Journal Of Religion & Public Life*, (206), 65-67.

Bryant, F. (2005). Using The Past To Enhance The Present: Boosting Happiness Through Positive Reminiscence. *Journal Of Happiness Studies*, 6(3), 227-260.

Burrows, W. (2006). Mission And Missiology In The Pontificate Of John Paul II. *International Bulletin Of Missionary Research*, 30(1), 3-8.

Claessens, M. (2009). Mindfulness And Existential Therapy. *Existential Analysis: Journal Of The Society For Existential Analysis*, 20(1), 109-119.

Cones, B. (2011). Blessed Are You. *U.S. Catholic*, 76(5), 8.

Corey, G. (2009). *Counselling And Psychotherapy: Theory And Practice* (pp. 159 – 191). Philippines: MG Reprographics, Inc.

Cornejo, C. (2008). Intersubjectivity As Co-phenomenology: From The Holism Of Meaning To The Being-in-the-world-with-others. *Integrative Psychological & Behavioral Science*, 42(2), 171-178.

Day, J. (2010). Religion, Spirituality, And Positive Psychology In Adulthood: A Developmental View. *Journal Of Adult Development*, 17(4), 215-229.

Dierendonck, D. (2006). Some Thoughts On Spirituality And Eudaimonic Well-being. *Mental Health, Religion & Culture*, 9(3), 227-238.

Durà-Vila, G. (2009). The Dark Night Of The Soul: Spiritual Distress And Its Psychiatric Implications. *Mental Health, Religion & Culture*, 12(6), 543-559.

Emmons, R. (2005). Striving For The Sacred: Personal Goals, Life Meaning, And Religion. *Journal Of Social Issues*, 61(4), 731-745.

Fahlman, S., Mercer, K., Gaskovski, P., Eastwood, A., & Eastwood, J. (2009). Does A Lack Of Life Meaning Cause Boredom? Results From Psychometric, Longitudinal, And Experimental Analyses. *Journal Of Social & Clinical Psychology*, 28(3), 307-340.

Fielding, E. (2005). John Paul II And The Culture Of Life. *Human Life Review*, 31(2), 41-45.

Frankl, V. (1975). *The Unconscious God: Psychotherapy And Theology*. New York: Simon And Schuster.

Frankl, V. (1997). *Man's Search For Meaning – The 60th Anniversary Edition Of The Classic Bestseller*. New York: Pocket Books.

Friedman, M. (2008). Buber And Dialogical Therapy: Healing Through Meeting. *Humanistic Psychologist*, 36(3/4), 298-315.

Giorgi, A. (2010). Phenomenological Psychology: A Brief History And Its Challenges. *Journal Of Phenomenological Psychology*, 41(2), 145-179.

Hanink, E. (2011). The End And The Beginning: Pope John Paul II – The Victory Of Freedom, The Last Years, The Legacy. *New Oxford Review*, 78(5), 46-48.

Hay, D., & Socha, P. (2005). Spirituality As A Natural Phenomenon: Bringing Biological And Psychological Perspectives Together. *Zygon: Journal Of Religion & Science*, 40(3), 589-612.

Helminiak, D. (2008). Confounding The Divine And The Spiritual: Challenges To A Psychology Of Spirituality. *Pastoral Psychology*, 57(3/4), 161-182.

Homan, K. (2010). Religiosity, Sense Of Meaning, And Health Behavior In Older Adults. *International Journal For The Psychology Of Religion*, 20(3), 173-186.

Hughes, M. (2006). Affect, Meaning, And Quality Of Life. *Social Forces*, 85(2), 611-629.

Jacobsen, B. (2007). What Is Happiness? The Concept Of Happiness In Existential Psychology And Therapy. *Existential Analysis: Journal Of The Society For Existential Analysis*, 18(1), 39-50.

Johnston, A. (2014, April 27). Vatican Declares Pope John Paul II And John XXIII Saints. *BBC News Europe*. Retrieved from <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-27172118>

Joseph, S., Linley, P., & Maltby, J. (2006). Positive Psychology, Religion, And Spirituality. *Mental Health, Religion & Culture*, 9(3), 209-212.

Keck, D. (Executive Producer). (2014, April 27). In *The Footsteps of John Paul The Great* [Television Broadcast]. Hanceville, Alabama, USA: Eternal Word Television Network.

Keshen, A. (2006). A New Look At Existential Psychotherapy. *American Journal Of Psychotherapy*, 60(3), 285-298.

Längle, A. (2005). The Search For Meaning In Life And The Existential Fundamental Motivations. *Existential Analysis: Journal Of The Society For Existential Analysis*, 16(1), 2-14.

Larrimore, M. (2010). Religion And The Promise Of Happiness. *Social Research*, 77(2), 569-594.

- Lelen, J. (1997). *The Confessions Of Saint Augustine* (Book I: Chapter 1). New Jersey: Catholic Book Publishing Corp.
- Lucas, M. (2005). Existential Regret. *Existential Analysis: Journal Of The Society For Existential Analysis*, 16(2), 336-346.
- Macchia, F. (2005). John Paul II And The Culture Of Life. *PNEUMA: The Journal Of The Society For Pentecostal Studies*, 27(1), 1.
- MacKinlay, E. (2010). Living In Aged Care: Using Spiritual Reminiscence To Enhance Meaning In Life For Those With Dementia. *International Journal Of Mental Health Nursing*, 19(6), 394-401.
- Mahoney, A., Pargament, K., Cole, B., Jewell, T., Magyar, G., Tarakeshwar, N., Murray-Swank, N., & Phillips, R. (2005). A Higher Purpose: The Sanctification Of Strivings In A Community Sample. *International Journal For The Psychology Of Religion* 15(3), 239-262.
- Mascaro, N., & Rosen, D. (2005). Existential Meaning's Role In The Enhancement Of Hope And Prevention Of Depressive Symptoms. *Journal Of Personality*, 73(4), 985-1014.
- McFadden, S. (2008). Religious And Spiritual Supports For Late-Life Meaning. *Generations*, 32(2), 6-11.
- McGinley, P. (2011). The Question Of The Self In Existential Thought. *Existential Analysis: Journal Of The Society For Existential Analysis*, 22(1), 2-15.
- Medina, M. (2008). Everyday Courage. *Existential Analysis: Journal Of The Society For Existential Analysis*, 19(2), 280-298.
- Novak, M. (2005). Johannes Paulus Magnus. *American Spectator*. p. 4.
- Pearce, R. (2011). On Being A Person. Sartre's Contribution To Psychotherapy. *Existential Analysis: Journal Of The Society For Existential Analysis*, 22(1), 83-95.
- Peterson, C., Park, N., Seligman, M. (2005). Orientations To Happiness And Life Satisfaction: The Full Life Versus The Empty Life. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 6(1), 25-41.
- Philippine Statistics Authority (2016). Philippines in Figures. Retrieved from <https://psa.gov.ph/sites/default/files/PIF%202016.pdf>.
- Rys, E. (2009). The Sense Of Life As A Subjective Spiritual Human Experience. *Existential Analysis: Journal Of The Society For Existential Analysis*, 20(1), 50-68.
- Sadigh, M. (2010). The Foundation Of Existentialism In The Oldest Story Ever Told. *Existential Analysis: Journal Of The Society For Existential Analysis*, 21(1), 76-88.
- Saunders, W. (2005). Straight Answers: John Paul The Great. *Arlington Catholic Herald*.
- Scheurich, N. (2007). Suffering And Spirituality In The Poetry Of Emily Dickinson. *Pastoral Psychology*, 56(2), 189-197.
- Sebastian, A. (2010). Meaning Of Life And Death In The Poetry Of John Paul II. *Journal Of Alternative Perspectives In The Social Sciences*, 2(1), 227-249.
- Shafraanske, E. (2009). Spiritually Oriented Psychodynamic Psychotherapy. *Journal Of Clinical Psychology*, 65(2), 147-157.
- Shaw, J. (2005). A Pathway To Spirituality. *Psychiatry: Interpersonal & Biological Processes*, 68(4), 350-362.
- Sherman, N. (2011). Meaning In Life And Volunteerism In Older Adults. *Adultspan: Theory Research & Practice*, 10(2), 78-90.
- Silberman, I. (2005). Religion As A Meaning System: Implications For The New Millennium. *Journal Of Social Issues*, 61(4), 641-663.
- Sorajjakool, S. (2008). Disconnection, Depression, And Spirituality: A Study Of The Role Of Spirituality And Meaning In The Lives Of Individuals With Severe Depression. *Pastoral Psychology*, 56(5), 521-532.
- Steger, M., Kashdan, T., Sullivan, B., & Lorentz, D. (2008). Understanding The Search For Meaning In Life: Personality, Cognitive Style, And The Dynamic Between Seeking And Experiencing Meaning. *Journal Of Personality*, 76(2), 199-228.
- Tillich, P. (1952). *The Courage To Be*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Trigilio, J., Brighenti, K., & Toborowsky, J. (2006). *John Paul II For Dummies*. Hoboken, NY: Wiley Publishing, Inc.
- Von Eckartsberg, R. (2008). Dasein-Synthesis. *Humanistic Psychologist*, 36(1), 9-18.
- Watson, N. (2006). Martin Buber's I And Thou: Implications For Christian Psychotherapy. *Journal Of Psychology & Christianity*, 25(1), 34-43.
- Weeke, S. (2006). Perhaps "Saint John Paul The

Great?". 2006 – 2009 MSNBC World News.

Weigel, G. (2001). *Witness To Hope—The Biography Of Pope John Paul II*. New York: HarperCollinsPublishers.

Weigel, G. (2011). Blessed John Paul II And His Times. *First Things: A Monthly Journal Of Religion & Public Life*, (214), 27-31.

Willan, P. (2009). No More Shortcuts On Pope John Paul's Road To Sainthood. 2009 Newsquest (Sunday Herald) Limited.

Wood, W. (2006). Subjective Impact, Meaning Making, And Current And Recalled Emotions For Self-Defining Memories. *Journal Of Personality*, 74(3), 811-846.

Wortmann, J. (2009). Religion/Spirituality And Change In Meaning After Bereavement: Qualitative Evidence For The Meaning Making Model. *Journal Of Loss & Trauma*, 14(1), 17-34.

Wulfing, N. (2008). Anxiety In Existential Philosophy And The Question Of The Paradox. *Existential Analysis: Journal Of The Society For Existential Analysis*, 19(1), 73-80.

Yalom, I. (2008). The Ripple Effect. *Therapy Today*, 19(4), 6-11.

Znakov, V. (2009). The Psychology Of Human Existence And The Subject's Self Understanding. *Journal Of Russian & East European Psychology*, 47(5), 76-95.