

Article

Associations between Prayer and Mental Health among Christian Youth in the Philippines

Fides A. Del Castillo ^{1,2,*} , Clarence Darro B. Del Castillo ³  and Harold George Koenig ^{4,5,6} ¹ Department of Theology and Religious Education, De La Salle University, Manila 0922, Philippines² School of Innovation & Sustainability, De La Salle University, Binan 4024, Philippines³ Research Unit, Lumina Foundation for Integral Human Development, Calamba 4027, Philippines; cdbdelcastillo@gmail.com⁴ Centre for Spirituality, Theology and Health, Duke University, Durham, NC 27710, USA; harold.koenig@duke.edu⁵ Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences, Department of Medicine, Duke University Health Systems, Durham, NC 27710, USA⁶ Division of Psychiatry, Department of Medicine, King Abdulaziz University, Jeddah 21589, Saudi Arabia

* Correspondence: fides.delcastillo@dlsu.edu.ph

Abstract: Religion/Spirituality (R/S) has been associated with mental health. Although most Filipinos are Christian, little research has been done on how R/S affects their mental health. To address this research gap, an open-ended questionnaire was conducted on forty-three Filipino Christian youths regarding their thoughts, motives, and emotions about private prayer. Responses were coded and analyzed with the qualitative data analysis software NVivo. A traditional coding method was also employed to contextualize the data. Results show that most respondents define prayer as a way to communicate with God and personally encounter the transcendent. In general, prayer was used to express gratitude, request something, seek guidance, ask for forgiveness, or find psychological comfort. In most cases, participants prayed when they were feeling down or troubled. The majority prayed in silence and with their eyes closed. Most respondents felt calm and relaxed when praying. Many respondents also noted that their conversation with God provided comfort, reassurance, and relief. A theoretical model of causal pathways for the effects of prayer on mental health was used to examine how Filipino Christian youths' emotional health—a component of mental health—is affected by prayer. Research suggests that prayer guides many respondents in their decisions and life choices. Prayer also may evoke human virtues, such as gratitude, patience, and honesty. For many, prayer is critical to their cognitive appraisal of stressful events and serves as a coping resource. This study has important implications for R/S as a resource for mental well-being among youth in a country with limited mental health services.

Keywords: religion; spirituality; health; well-being; youth; invocation

Citation: Del Castillo, Fides A., Clarence Darro B. Del Castillo, and Harold George Koenig. 2023. Associations between Prayer and Mental Health among Christian Youth in the Philippines. *Religions* 14: 806. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14060806>

Academic Editor: Hans Zollner

Received: 29 May 2023

Revised: 13 June 2023

Accepted: 15 June 2023

Published: 19 June 2023



Copyright: © 2023 by the authors. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

1. Introduction

The World Health Organization (WHO 2022) defines mental health as “a state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, to realize their abilities, to learn well and work well, and to contribute to their communities” (p. 8). Globally, mental health conditions are highly prevalent. The WHO (2022) estimates that one in eight people live with a mental disorder, the most common of which are anxiety and depression. Also, the suicide rate among young people is alarmingly high (p. xv). Although the WHO (2022) has urged for a transformation in mental health (p. vii), the development of mental health services in most low- and middle-income countries (LMIC) has been slow (Rathod et al. 2017). Due to the inextricable link between mental health and poverty, countries that neglect mental health can trap people in a vicious cycle that prevents them from achieving a better life (Garman 2020).

In the Philippines, mental health issues pose a significant challenge (World Health Organization Regional Office for the Western Pacific—WHO-ROWP 2021). Anxiety and depression are the most common mental health issues among Filipinos (Tee et al. 2020; WHO-ROWP 2021). Also, suicide rates, particularly among the youth, are increasing (Lagman et al. 2021; WHO-ROWP 2021). According to the WHO-ROWP (2021), non-health sectors, such as education, employment, judiciary, housing, and social welfare, can contribute to mental health promotion, protection, and care (p. 30). In this paper, the researchers propose religion/spirituality (R/S) as a potential resource for mental health. Numerous qualitative studies have shown that R/S improves mental health and well-being. Also, many cross-sectional and longitudinal studies demonstrate that people who are more religious or spiritual have better mental health. Moreover, R/S interventions reduce psychological distress in randomized controlled trials (Koenig et al. 2021, p. 29).

The Christian doctrine was introduced to the Philippines in 1521 at the onset of the Spanish conquest, and was deeply embedded into Filipino culture (del Castillo 2015). Among Asian countries, the Philippines has the largest Christian population (Bautista 2014). Filipinos number around 109 million (Philippine Statistics Authority 2021), with almost 80 percent professing the Roman Catholic faith (Barry 2018; World Population Review 2020). The Philippines is the world's third-largest Catholic population (World Population Review 2020), and Christianity is flourishing in the country (del Castillo 2021). Consequently, Catholicism is integral to Filipino culture, society, and politics (Barry 2018). Catholic ideas and expressions influence Filipinos' sociocultural norms and their daily lives (Macaraan 2019). However, religion in the Philippines is not monolithic. Various religious beliefs exist in Filipino society, including, but not limited to, Christian denominations, Islam, Buddhism, and Sikhism. Some indigenous Filipinos have also appropriated and reimagined Christianity (del Castillo 2022). Interreligious dialogues grounded in the Filipino value of *pakikipagkapwa* (fellowship) contribute to community building and social cohesion, and they provide meaning to religious actors under challenging conditions (Canete and del Castillo 2022, p. 1).

Recent surveys show that most Filipinos consider religion essential in their lives (Patinio 2020; Tamir et al. 2020). Also, studies on the centrality of religiosity confirm that many Filipinos have a profound religious life (del Castillo et al. 2020, 2021a, 2021b). Some studies on R/S in the Filipino context point to the positive contributions of R/S to the mental health of Filipinos. Many Filipino youths report that R/S helps them to cope with life's challenges (del Castillo and Alino 2020). Moreover, spiritual Filipino youths manifest a grateful attitude, increasing their life satisfaction (Perez et al. 2021). Also, Filipino youth who have higher levels of R/S experience better relationships, academic success, and well-being (Baring et al. 2016). In addition, some Filipino women use spirituality to reinterpret adverse events, set meaningful goals, and make decisions (Mendez 2022). Also, some elderly Filipinos who live in institutional facilities run by religious orders are more spiritual and less anxious about death (Soriano et al. 2022).

Religion is a multidimensional construct (Huber and Huber 2012; Koenig 2018). Among Filipino youth, those whose faith plays an influential role in their lives demonstrate their religiosity primarily through ideology and private practice (del Castillo et al. 2020, 2021a, 2021b). This private practice of religion refers to personal prayers to God or the transcendent (Huber and Huber 2012). The studies mentioned earlier on R/S and mental health confirm that "the workings of the spirit are related to well-being" (Levin 2010).

Objectives of the Study

Currently, there is a plethora of empirical research on the effects of prayer on mental health (Elkonin et al. 2014; Jeppsen et al. 2022; Koenig et al. 2012; Moreira-Almeida et al. 2014; Roger and Hatala 2018; Cordero 2022). However, in the Philippines, limited studies examine the relationship between prayer and the mental health of Filipino youth. This paper addresses this lacuna by examining how private prayer affects youths' emotional health in a predominantly Christian lower-middle-income country. The authors hypothe-

size that prayer fosters positive emotions among select Filipino Christian youth, which can benefit their mental health.

Hence, this study aims to broaden the understanding of how R/S contributes to the mental health of Filipino Christian youth. In this paper, religion refers to “beliefs, practices, and rituals related to the transcendent. It is a multidimensional construct that includes beliefs, behaviors, rituals, and ceremonies that may be held or practiced in private or public settings but are in some way derived from established traditions that developed over time within a community [of believers]” (Koenig et al. 2012, p. 45). The definition of spirituality is “very similar to religion” (Koenig et al. 2012, p. 45). Spirituality traditionally refers to living a life dedicated to the divine (Contemplative Network 2016). However, in contemporary understanding, “spirituality is considered personal and something the individuals define for themselves. It is often free of rules, regulations, and responsibilities associated with religion” (McLean Hospital 2021).

Although religiosity has multiple dimensions (Huber and Huber 2012; Koenig et al. 2012) and mental health exists on a complex continuum (WHO 2022), this study examines only one dimension of religiosity and its effect on a component of mental health. This paper investigates select Filipino Christian youths’ notions, motives, and emotions regarding private prayer. It hopes to look at the healthy development of religiosity/ spirituality as a personal journey towards self-realization (Frankl 1962). More importantly, it aims to answer the question, “How does private prayer contribute to the mental health of select Filipino Christian youth?”.

2. Review of the Literature

2.1. Perspectives about Prayer

In recent years, prayer and its utilization have been the subject of controversy. A number of recent studies have explored the relationship between prayer and health (Carey et al. 2023). Several perspectives indicated that prayer is a personal communication between an individual and God (Spilka and Ladd 2013). It is a multidimensional phenomenon involving materialistic petition, rest, confession, intercession for others, and using rituals and traditions as guides (Ladd and Spilka 2002). Empirical studies show that prayer can foster mental health among Christians. Some Filipino American Catholics with mental health issues feel relief and support when they pray. Even before seeking professional assistance, they manage their mental health challenges through faith (Alviar and del Prado 2022). Among select Catholic students in Northern Ireland, prayer frequency was positively associated with psychological health. Additionally, higher levels of prayer were associated with lower psychoticism scores (Francis et al. 2008).

In the Roman Catholic tradition, prayer refers to raising one’s mind and heart to God, or asking for good things from Him (Catholic Church 1994, para. 2559). Through prayer, Christians deepen their union with the Trinitarian God (Catholic Church 1994, para. 2563–65). In prayer, Christians ask God for increased virtues, such as humility, mercy, patience, kindness, fortitude, or prudence (Neal 2019). In addition, prayer can ease anger, sustain love, multiply joy, and give Christians the strength to forgive (Francis 2021). The Catholic Church recognizes the benefits of communicating with God, especially for people overwhelmed with daily life. As Francis (2021) explains, “prayer, the words of Jesus, and psychological counseling can assist those who are weary and burdened and vulnerable to mental illness”.

Moreover, among select Roman Catholic congregants in Silicon Valley, centering prayer fostered a personal relationship with God, where rest and healing were found (Ferguson et al. 2010). In addition, many Catholic pastoral workers experience the transcendent through prayer. Their inner experience of the transcendent promotes their psychosomatic health and well-being (Büssing et al. 2016).

Studies also show that prayer helps individuals deal with negative emotions (Sharp 2010) and negative life experiences (Pargament et al. 1998). In Catholic primary schools in New South Wales, Australia, many students use prayer to diffuse and manage their

emotions, particularly anger, stress, and frustration (Graham and Truscott 2020). In Spain, some middle-aged Catholics report that their anxious and fatigued mood state has improved after reciting the Jesus Prayer (Rubinart et al. 2017). In Brazil, some Catholics utilize prayer as a coping strategy. By praying, they reduce anxiety and find meaning and purpose in their lives (Esperandio and Ladd 2013). Further, research on the reciprocal relationship between R/S and positive emotions (PEs) suggests that many people who pray feel gratitude and awe. An individual’s psychological well-being is enhanced by such PEs (Van Cappellen et al. 2021).

2.2. A Theoretical Model of the Causal Pathway of Prayer for Mental Health

Koenig (2012) offers a theoretical model of causal pathways for mental health (MH) based on Western monotheistic religions (hereafter referred to as the “R/S causal pathways for MH model”). Religious individuals believe in a transcendental force that cares for humans and responds to their needs. They also demonstrate their faith and commitment to the transcendent through organizational, non-organizational, and subjective or intrinsic religiosity (Koenig 2018, p. 14). Furthermore, religious adherents can be influenced by their religion’s rules and regulations (doctrines) when it comes to living their life and treating others in a social group. A religious person who follows such rules and regulations reduces the likelihood of stressful life events that reduce positive emotions and increase negative ones. It is also possible for religious individuals to be urged by their religion to practice human virtues, which can increase positive emotions and neutralize negative ones. Religious individuals, therefore, benefit from their powerful conceptualizations of transcendent and religious commitment, as they can make their adverse life events seem less distressing by influencing their cognitive appraisals (Koenig 2012, p. 7). Adapting Koenig’s (2012) “R/S causal pathways for MH model”, this paper proffers a causal pathway of private prayer for emotional health (see Figure 1).

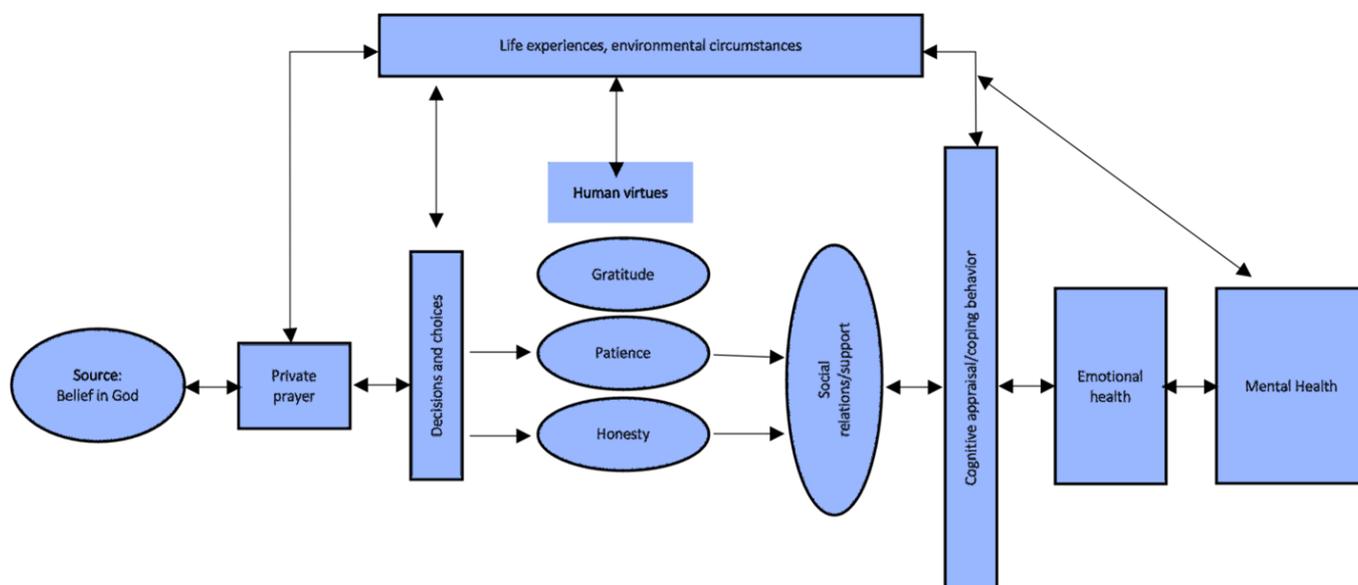


Figure 1. Causal pathway linking private prayer to emotional health. Adapted from Koenig et al. (2012) “Theoretical model of causal pathways for mental health (MH), based on Western monotheistic religions (Christianity, Judaism, and Islam)”.

2.3. Prayer Life Experiences of Filipino Christian Youth

In the Philippines, around 90% of Filipino Catholics affirm the importance of prayer (Tamir et al. 2020). Agoncillo (2015) found that many Filipino Catholic youths are devoted to daily prayer and meditation. However, only a few read the Bible, pray the Rosary, and visit the Blessed Sacrament (p. 131). del Castillo and Alino (2020) confirm Agoncillo’s

(2015) findings about the importance of private prayer among religiously involved youth. During significant life experiences that cause moral and physical suffering, many Filipino Catholic youths pray to God to forgive their sins and seek his help and care (del Castillo and Alino 2020, p. 10). Thus, private prayer for many Filipino Catholic youths is a way to communicate with God, and serves as a positive religious coping resource.

The select Filipino Christian youth demonstrate their belief in God through private prayer. In private prayer, they communicate their life experiences to the transcendent. Their conversation with God guides their decisions and choices in life. Prayer also evokes human virtues among religious youth, which, when applied to daily life, can improve their social relations or compel them to provide social support to others. Prayer elicits positive emotions, serving as a coping resource during difficult life circumstances. It is also essential to the cognitive appraisal of stressful events. Hence, prayer contributes to their positive emotional health, which is integral to their mental health.

3. Methodology

Demographics and Procedure

An open-ended questionnaire was conducted among a convenience sample of forty-three Filipino Christian college students at a Christian university in the Philippines. There were sixteen female and twenty-seven male participants, aged nineteen to twenty-two years old. Ninety percent of the respondents were Catholic, and the remaining were from other denominations (See Table 1).

Table 1. Participant Demographic Characteristics.

Variables	Total	
	n	%
Gender		
Male	27	62%
Female	16	38%
Total	43	100%
Religion		
Catholic	39	90%
Other Christian denominations	4	10%
Total	43	100%

The survey was conducted using online Google forms from September to October 2020. Participants were asked five open-ended questions about prayer: (1) What is prayer?; (2) Why do you pray?; (3) When do you pray?; (4) How do you pray?; and (5) What do you feel when you pray?. The respondents were informed that participating in the study was voluntary, confidential, and involved no risk or harm. In addition, other ethical considerations and information were provided. The participants knew they could withdraw at any time during the survey. Questionnaires were only given to participants who gave their informed consent. Participation was voluntary, and payment or extra credit was not used as an incentive. Participants completed the survey questionnaires individually.

The responses were coded and analyzed using the qualitative data analysis (QDA) software NVivo. In the data analysis, the data were categorized into nodes, or themes. Reading the text, highlighting key sections, and assigning sequential codes to these sections were all part of the process. The annotations in NVivo also captured analytical questions and reflections. A digital link was established between NVivo code memos and associated data. All codes developed were reviewed and grouped according to their similarity in concepts. The codes provided insight into the notions, motivations, and emotions of select Filipino Christian youth regarding prayer. Since the data generated by NVivo can be decontextualized and disembodied (James 2012), the researchers also analyzed the responses

of select Filipino Christian youth using traditional coding tools, such as colored pens, paper, and sticky notes, to contextualize the data. The multimodality forms of data interaction (i.e., data analysis using software and traditional methods and tools) maximized researcher data interaction and ensured the analysis process was rigorous and productive (Maher et al. 2018). The method also provided nuance and allowed the researchers to ground the potential causal pathway linking private prayer to mental health in empirical evidence.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Contextualized Data on Prayer

As a result of analyzing the data using NVivo, five themes emerged regarding the perspectives of Filipino Christian youth on prayer: (1) definition of prayer; (2) purpose of prayer; (3) circumstances or periods of prayer; (4) manner of prayer; and (5) prayer-related emotions (See Tables 2–6). Most respondents mentioned that their decisions and choices are guided by their conversations with God. Some of the responses were:

“I pray to him when I need his advice or guidance, especially when I am having trouble”. (Female 3: ORD)

“I also pray a lot when I have lots of problems to ask for guidance and strength to overcome my problems”. (Female 9: CATH)

“I would also pray whenever I feel lost and need guidance from the Lord”. (Male 18: CATH)

“I usually pray when I need guidance for a particular situation”. (Male 24: CATH)

Table 2. Definition of Prayer.

Inquiry	Content References	Frequency	Coverage
What is prayer?	Communicating with God	31	0.0418
	Personal or private encounter with God	5	0.0073
	A manifestation of faith and loyalty	5	0.0048
	Act of worship	4	0.0029
	Conversation	3	0.0036
	Spiritual	3	0.0025
	Two-way communication	3	0.0062
	A form of reflection	2	0.0034
	A group activity	2	0.0025
	A relationship	2	0.0028
	A meditation	1	0.0012
	A message	1	0.0012
	Storytelling	1	0.0015
	Subjective	1	0.0021
A sacred event	1	0.0019	

Note: The frequency refers to the number of times the respondents mentioned the content references. Each subject could mention several content references. The coverage percentage indicates how much of the source content is coded at this node.

Table 3. Purpose of Prayer.

Inquiry	Content References	Frequency	Coverage
Why do you pray?	Expression of gratitude	27	0.0394
	Request or favor	16	0.0243
	Seeking guidance	9	0.0145
	Asking forgiveness	8	0.0019
	Psychological comfort	8	0.0122
	As part of an everyday ritual	1	0.0007
	Communicating with deceased loved ones	1	0.0010
	Expressing concerns	1	0.0009

Table 4. Circumstances or Periods of Prayer.

Inquiry	Content References	Frequency	Coverage
When do you pray?	When feeling down or troubled	15	0.0195
	Evening	11	0.0134
	Meal	6	0.0059
	Mass	3	0.0035
	Morning	3	0.0022
	No specific time or place	3	0.0052
	Significant live events	3	0.0052
	Everyday	2	0.0041

Table 5. Manner of Praying.

Inquiry	Content References	Frequency	Coverage
How do you pray?	Silently	12	0.0176
	Spontaneously	9	0.0160
	Making the sign of the cross	6	0.0107
	Closing eyes as a symbol of God’s invisibility	5	0.0062
	With order of thanksgiving then request	4	0.0074
	ACTS method	3	0.0093
	Lying down	2	0.0020
	Short prayer	2	0.0019
	Kneeling	1	0.0018
	Reciting	1	0.0011

Table 6. Prayer-related Emotions.

Inquiry	Content References	Frequency	Coverage
What do you feel when you pray?	Light, calm, relaxed	13	0.0228
	Sense of security and reassurance	9	0.0146
	Sense of relief	7	0.0073
	Like talking to God	5	0.0075
	A source of happiness	4	0.0085
	Fulfillment	3	0.0021
	Varies, depending on the content of the prayer	3	0.0138
	Answered	1	0.0020
	Empowered	1	0.0021
	Loved	1	0.0007
	Not alone	1	0.0023

The respondents also report that prayer evokes various human virtues in them. They are grateful, patient, and honest when they pray. In addition, the respondents mentioned that prayer enables them to cope with stress and elicits positive emotions in them. Some of the responses were:

“After praying, I feel a bit of weight lifted off my shoulders”. (Female 13: CATH)

“Whenever I am praying, I feel empowered and am reminded that I am not alone whatever obstacle I encounter as I go along my path”. (Female 1: CATH)

“I feel a sense of protection and love whenever I start praying as I feel God’s presence”. (Male 9: CATH)

“After praying, sometimes I feel relieved, hopeful, at peace”. (Male 11: CATH)

“When I pray, I usually try to visualize myself in a sort of safe space just for God and me, which gives me this comfort I was talking about as well as happiness because of the opportunity I am given to talk to Him”. (Male 1: ORD)

For most respondents, prayer is a way to communicate with God. Some define prayer as an encounter with the transcendent on a personal level. A few confirm that praying

manifests faith, loyalty, and worship of God. Furthermore, prayer is a spiritual act (see Table 2). It is a two-way relationship between man and God, so praying involves talking and listening to God. Most of the respondents pray to express gratitude to God. Many pray to request help or a favor. Some engage in prayer to seek guidance, ask for forgiveness, and receive psychological comfort from God. Many select Filipino Christian youth pray when feeling down or troubled (see Table 3). They usually pray at the end of the day and before meals. A small number mentioned that they pray at Mass. A few respondents mentioned that prayer could be done anywhere and at any time. Some also report that they pray during significant life events. In general, the respondents pray in silence. Their prayers are spontaneous. Some make the sign of the cross before and after praying. They usually close their eyes and follow a particular order when they pray—thanksgiving first, then petition (see Table 4).

Furthermore, some respondents follow the ACTS (adoration, confession, thanksgiving, supplication) prayer method (see Table 5). In addition, many respondents report feeling light, calm, and relaxed when praying. Some respondents' conversation with God gives them a sense of security, reassurance, and relief. Also, a few individuals report feeling God's presence when they pray. Lastly, for some respondents, prayer is a source of happiness and fulfillment (see Table 6).

4.2. Potential Causal Pathway Linking Private Prayer to Mental Health among Select Filipino Christian Youth

In addition to exploring the notions, motivations, and emotions associated with prayer, this study sought to answer the question, "How does prayer contribute to the emotional health of Filipino Christian youth?". According to Koenig's (2012) "R/S causal pathways for MH model", there are three predominant mechanisms by which R/S can influence mental health. First, most religions have rules and regulations (doctrines) about living and treating others within a social group. Second, religion promotes virtues that help to maintain and enhance social relationships. Third, religion provides resources for coping with stress, which may increase the frequency of positive emotions (p. 7). Taking this into account, the researchers developed a preliminary model of private prayer's causal pathway for mental health. In the model, three predominant mechanisms of prayer's influence on emotional health were plotted (see Figure 2). The model shows that the select Filipino Christian youth talk and listen to God in times of distress. Through prayer, they seek guidance from the transcendent. Moreover, prayer cultivates virtues, such as patience and honesty, in them. Also, prayer induces positive emotions, such as calmness, relaxation, relief, and joy. In addition, their prayer alleviates the negative emotional consequences of stressful life circumstances, since they believe that God will help and protect them. The openness to transcendence allows the person to find meaning in life and understand the self (Frankl 1962). In turn, these mechanisms promote positive emotional health, which positively affects individuals' mental wellness.

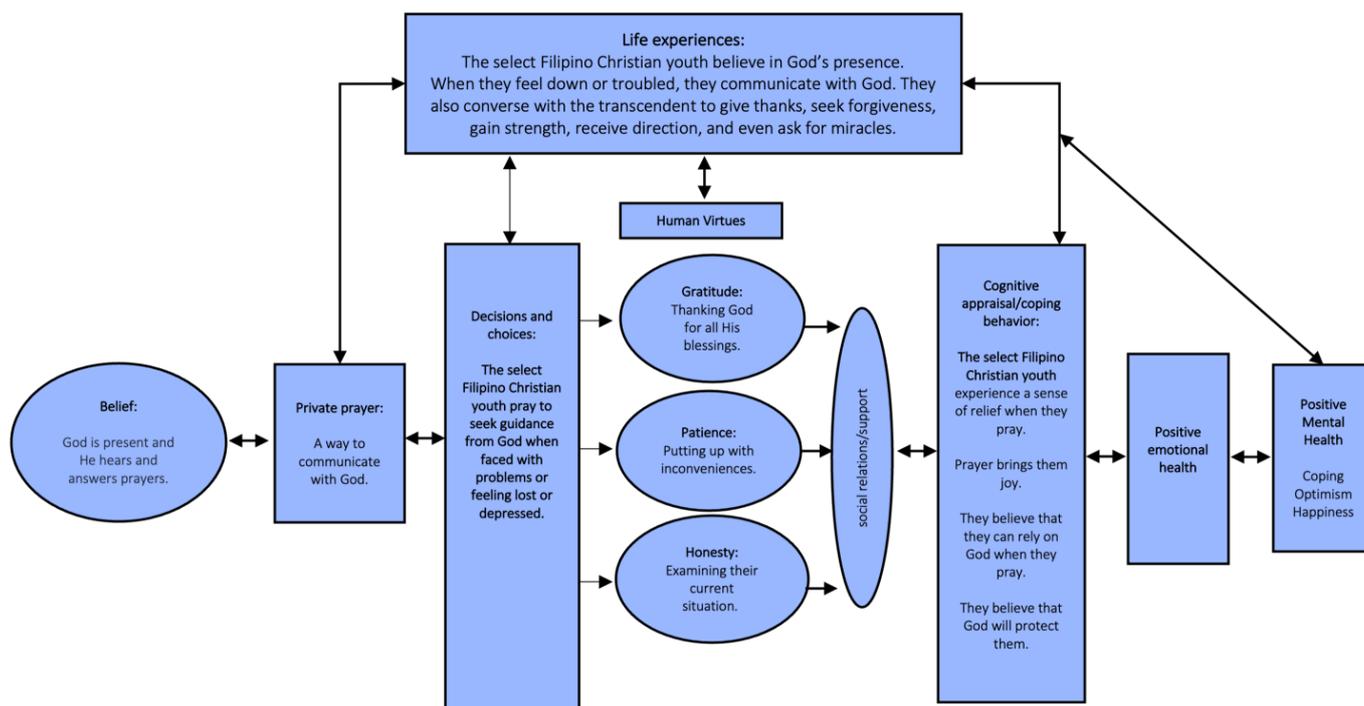


Figure 2. Causal pathway linking private prayer to mental health among select Filipino Christian youth.

4.3. Intimate Relationship between Prayer and Mental Health

Through contemporary culture, people develop practices and resources for everyday life in a given society (Baker 2015, p. 149). In the Philippines, the gospel took root in the people’s hearts and shaped an unmistakable Filipino and Christian identity (Paul 1981). There are several reasons why Christianity became embedded in Filipino culture and led to the widespread acceptance of this religion among native Filipinos, including the fundamental congruence between the autochthonous and Catholic religions (del Castillo 2015). In light of this study, the researchers argue that the flourishing of Christianity in contemporary Philippine society can also be attributed to the positive effects of the Christian faith on the mental health and well-being of many Filipinos.

This study reveals five important insights regarding the intimate relationship between prayer and mental health among select Filipino Christian youth. Firstly, prayer is a way to communicate directly with God during difficult times. According to Koenig (2012), prayers to God can change things. When people believe in and communicate with God, the individual feels a great sense of internal control of the external agents, especially in times of crisis. Communicating with God helps individuals overcome problems because they believe God is in control. Secondly, they pray before making important life decisions and choices. Cordero (2022) pointed out that young people seek the guidance of God through prayer, especially during uncertain times. Praying to God can give a subjective sense of control over events, and can positively influence the situation. Hence, prayer is important for individuals (Koenig 2012). Thirdly, prayer allows them to express gratitude to God, examine themselves (self-reflection), and persevere, despite their sufferings. Studies show gratitude confers positive benefits, including interpersonal, emotional, and physical flourishing (Emmons et al. 2003; Emmons and Kneazel 2005). Through prayer, the select Filipino youth feel grateful for the blessings they receive and experience positivity in life. Fourthly, prayer evokes positive emotions, such as relief and joy, in times of distress. It has been shown that the experience of prayer can help neutralize negative emotions and boost positive emotions. This can serve as a life-enhancing factor for the individual to cope with stressful situations (Koenig 2012). Lastly, prayer gives them a sense of security from God. In the study of Cordero (2022), the participants claim that they experience support and guidance through prayer. They believe that God is in control, and they are secure and

protected amidst uncertainties. [Kastanakis and Voyer \(2014\)](#) assert that “culture affects perception and cognition at both the social and individual levels” (p. 6). As such, the researchers argue that private prayer, an important marker of Christian identity, contributes positively to mental health among religiously involved Filipino Christian youth.

4.4. *The Source of Beliefs*

Many of the powerful cognitions of the select Filipino Christian youth on prayer are anchored in Christian scriptures, teachings, and tradition. Jesus communicated with God during his tribulations. He prayed, “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not as I will but what you will” ([New American Bible 2002](#), Matthew 26:39). When Jesus was at death’s door, he cried, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” ([New American Bible 2002](#), Matthew 27:46). Also, in seeking wisdom to make the right decisions, the Psalmist prays:

“Answer me quickly, O Lord; my spirit fails.

Do not hide your face from me, or I be like those who go down to the pit.

Let the morning bring me word of your unfailing love, for in you I put my trust.”

([New American Bible 2002](#), Ps 143:7–8)

Moreover, Paul teaches, “The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in situation, by prayer and petition with thanksgiving, present your requests to God” ([New American Bible 2002](#), Phil 4:5–6). In addition, human emotions during prayers are also highlighted in Christian scriptures. The Psalmist implores God:

“Turn to me and be gracious, for I am lonely and afflicted.

Relieve the troubles of my heart, and bring me out of my distress.

Consider my affliction and my trouble, and forgive all my sins”. ([New American Bible 2002](#), Ps 25:16–18)

God also promises his people protection. In the Second Book of Samuel, God is described as:

“my rock in whom I take refuge, my shield and the horn of my salvation,

my stronghold and my refuge [. . .]”. ([New American Bible 2002](#), 2 Samuel 22:3)

4.5. *The Value of Prayer*

The Catholic Church teaches the immense value of prayer. According to [Francis \(2013\)](#), “Life is filled with difficulties and trials. Christians, however, should not give up since they possess the power of the Holy Spirit to overcome such challenges. The peace from encountering Jesus daily in prayer lasts even during trials and sufferings” (para. 2). Also, prayer is essential to discernment, and should be considered in making significant life decisions ([Francis 2019](#)). Moreover, praying for forgiveness leads to conversion, and closes the gap between humans, their neighbors, and God.

According to Christian teachings, sin is a failure in genuine love for God and neighbors, caused by a perverse attachment to certain goods ([Catholic Church 1994](#), para. 1849). As Christians acknowledge their sins, they strive towards interior repentance, which involves conversion to God and turning away from evil ([Catholic Church 1994](#), para. 1431). The decision to show genuine love to one’s neighbors (i.e., other people) is central to cultivating harmonious social relationships. Further, prayer strengthens the spirit of many people struggling with life’s challenges. [Francis \(2021\)](#) says, “God strengthens us through prayer, so problems do not steal our joy. Our daily prayers can make us more courageous, freer, and even happier” (para. 4).

4.6. *The Experience of Prayer Leading to Positive Emotional Health*

This study shows that select Filipino Christian youths pray when they feel down or troubled. Through prayer, their decisions and choices are guided by their communication with God. They seek God’s guidance in navigating life’s often turbulent waters. As

praying about a problem frees up cognitive resources that would otherwise be consumed by worrying and ruminating (Adams et al. 2017, p. 1), the researchers speculate that the informants can come up with better options and make better decisions when they pray. Furthermore, prayer allows them to reinterpret their cognitions, which is essential because, as Sharp (2010) puts it, “individuals’ interactions with God through prayer help make situations less threatening” (p. 417). The respondents also mentioned that prayer evokes human virtues in them. They show gratitude to God for the blessings they receive every day. Prayer also cultivates their patience and honesty. For many respondents, prayer is critical to their cognitive appraisal of stressful events, and serves as a coping resource. To maintain mental peace and tranquility, they speak with God privately. The protection and availability of God help Filipino Christian youth cope effectively with stressors. As a result, events are no longer perceived as uncontrollable or only controllable by others, but rather as something able to be overcome by divine intervention (Newton and McIntosh 2010).

5. Limitations and Strengths

In this empirical study, we examined what constitutes prayer from the perspective of Filipino Christian youth, and examined how prayer facilitates their emotional and mental health. It is, however, difficult to generalize the findings to Filipino youth as a whole because of the small number of respondents and the qualitative nature of the study. Using a larger sample of participants, other researchers can study how prayer supports the mental and physical health of people dealing with significant life stressors.

It is also pertinent to note that the research focused only on one dimension of religiosity and its impact on one mental health component among youth. In the Filipino context, current research shows that many Filipino Christian youths also demonstrate religious commitment through ideology (del Castillo et al. 2021b). Researchers may examine how Filipino Christian youths’ strong belief in transcendent reality and private prayer influences their decision-making, health behaviors, and health maintenance.

This paper also explored a potential causal pathway connecting prayer to mental health among Filipino youth. While the model attempts to explain the link between prayer and mental health, further research is needed to validate it. The researchers hope that other scholars will investigate further the nexus between R/S, mental health, and physical health among youth.

6. Conclusions

As a result of our study of the notions, motivations, and emotions of select Filipino Christian youth regarding prayer, we can conclude that prayer is crucial to contemporary, religiously involved youth. Their communication with God is a resource for religious coping. When they feel down or troubled, their firm belief in God’s help and protection brings calm, relief, and joy, which helps improve their emotional well-being. In addition, their practice of spontaneous talking and listening to God in silence, especially during distress, facilitates a positive appraisal of a negative situation.

A person’s emotional health is an integral part of their mental health. In light of this, this study argues that the private prayers of select Filipino Christian youth are vital to their mental health. The paper also suggests that countries struggling to provide comprehensive mental health services for their people consider R/S as a means to promote, protect, and care for mental well-being.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, F.A.D.C. and C.D.B.D.C.; methodology, F.A.D.C., software, F.A.D.C.; validation, F.A.D.C., C.D.B.D.C. and H.G.K.; formal analysis, F.A.D.C.; investigation, F.A.D.C., C.D.B.D.C. and H.G.K.; resources, F.A.D.C., C.D.B.D.C. and H.G.K.; data curation, F.A.D.C.; writing—original draft preparation, F.A.D.C. and C.D.B.D.C.; writing—review and editing, F.A.D.C., C.D.B.D.C. and H.G.K.; visualization, F.A.D.C., C.D.B.D.C. and H.G.K.; supervision, F.A.D.C. and H.G.K.; project administration, F.A.D.C. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted per the guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki. Data were collected within an accepted educational setting. More importantly, the information obtained is encoded in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects cannot readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: Data for the current study is available upon written request to the corresponding author.

Acknowledgments: Thank you to the Center for Spirituality, Theology and Health of Duke University, NC, USA, John Templeton Foundation, De La Salle University and MDPI Religions.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

References

- Adams, Holly, Heather M. Kleider-Offutt, David Bell, and David A. Washburn. 2017. The effects of prayer on attention resource availability and attention bias. *Religion, Brain & Behavior* 7: 117–33. [CrossRef]
- Agoncillo, Roland. 2015. *Understanding Catholic Youth Religiosity in a Developing Country*. Available online: <https://icsai.org/procarch/1iclehi/1iclehi-47.pdf> (accessed on 13 October 2022).
- Alviar, Sthefany, and Alicia del Prado. 2022. “You should pray about it”: Exploring mental health and help-seeking in Filipino American Catholics. *Asian American Journal of Psychology* 13: 97–111. [CrossRef]
- Baker, Jonny. 2015. Culture: Mission and Culture in Prophetic Dialogue. In *Mission on the Road to Emmaus: Constants, Context, and Prophetic Dialogue*. Edited by Cathy Ross and Stephen B. Bevans. New York: ORBIS, pp. 147–57.
- Baring, Rito V., Romeo Lee, Madelene Sta Maria, and Yan Liu. 2016. Configurations of student Spirituality/Religiosity: Evidence from a Philippine university. *International Journal of Children's Spirituality* 21: 163–76. [CrossRef]
- Barry, Coeli. 2018. Gender, Nation, and Filipino Catholicism Past and Present. In *Routledge Handbook of the Contemporary Philippines*. Edited by Eric Vincent C. Batalla and Mark R. Thompson. Abingdon: Taylor and Francis, pp. 330–40. [CrossRef]
- Bautista, Julius. 2014. Christianity in Southeast Asia: Colonialism, Nationalism and the Caveats to Conversion. In *The Oxford Handbook of Christianity in Asia*. Edited by Felix Wilfred. New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 215–30.
- Büssing, Arndt, Eckhard Frick, Christoph Jacobs, and Klaus Baumann. 2016. Health and Life Satisfaction of Roman Catholic Pastoral Workers: Private Prayer has a Greater Impact than Public Prayer. *Pastoral Psychology* 65: 89–102. [CrossRef]
- Canete, Jonathan James, and Fides del Castillo. 2022. Pakikipagkapwa (Fellowship): Towards an Interfaith Dialogue with the Religious Others. *Religions* 13: 459. [CrossRef]
- Carey, Lindsay B., David Drummond, Harold G. Koenig, Terrence Hill, Jeffrey Cohen, Carl Aiken, Ezra Gabbay, and Jacinda R. Carey. 2023. Chaplaincy, Clergy, Prayer, Cancer and Measuring Religion and Health. *Journal of Religion and Health* 62: 1467–72. [CrossRef] [PubMed]
- Catholic Church. 1994. *Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC). Part Four: Christian Prayer Section One Prayer in the Christian Life*. Available online: https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/___P8Z.HTM (accessed on 14 October 2022).
- Contemplative Network. 2016. *Dr. Harold Koenig—Spirituality & Health*. [Video]. YouTube. Available online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zedkOrKZDfw> (accessed on 14 October 2022).
- Cordero, Dalmacito A., Jr. 2022. *Down but Never Out! Narratives on Mental Health Challenges of Selected College Students During the COVID-19 Pandemic in the Philippines: God, Self, Anxiety, and Depression*. *Journal of Religion and Health* 61: 618–43. [CrossRef]
- del Castillo, Fides. 2015. Christianization of the Philippines. *Mission Studies* 32: 47–65. [CrossRef]
- del Castillo, Fides. 2021. *A Flourishing Faith: Celebrating 500 Years of Christianity in the Philippines*. Manila: Don Bosco School of Theology.
- del Castillo, Fides. 2022. Re-Imagining the Religious Beliefs and Cultural Practices of Indigenous Christian Youth. *Religions* 13: 539. [CrossRef]
- del Castillo, Fides, and Maire Antoniette Alino. 2020. Religious coping of selected Filipino Catholic youth. *Religions* 11: 462. [CrossRef]
- del Castillo, Fides, Clarence Darro del Castillo, Gregory Ching, and Michael S. Campos. 2021a. Centrality of Religiosity among Select LGBTQs in the Philippines. *Religions* 12: 83. [CrossRef]
- del Castillo, Fides, Clarence Darro del Castillo, Marie Antoniette Aliño, Rene Nob, Michael Ackert, and Gregory Ching. 2020. Validation of the Interreligious Forms of the Centrality of Religiosity Scale (CRSi-7, CRSi-14, and CRSi-20): Saliency of Religion among Selected Youth in the Philippines. *Religions* 11: 641. [CrossRef]
- del Castillo, Fides, Clarence Darro del Castillo, Marie Antoniette Aliño, Rene Nob, Michael Ackert, and Gregory Ching. 2021b. Validation of the Abrahamic Forms of the Centrality of Religiosity Scale (CRS-5, CRS-10, and CRS-15): Evidence from Selected University Students in the Philippines. *Religions* 12: 84. [CrossRef]
- Elkonin, Diane, Otilia Brown, and Samantha Naicker. 2014. Religion, Spirituality, and Therapy: Implications for Training. *Journal of Religion & Health* 53: 119–34. [CrossRef]

- Emmons, Robbert A., and Teresa T. Kneezel. 2005. Giving thanks: Spiritual and religious correlates of gratitude. *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* 24: 140–48. Available online: <https://emmons.faculty.ucdavis.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/90/2015/08/2005-emmonskneezel.pdf> (accessed on 20 December 2022).
- Emmons, Robbert A., Michael E. McCullough, and Jo-Ann Tsang. 2003. The measurement of gratitude. In *Handbook of Positive Psychology Assessment*. Edited by Shane Lopez and Charles Richard Snyder. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, pp. 327–41.
- Esperandio, Mary Rute G., and Kevin Lee Ladd. 2013. Oração e Saúde: Questões para a Teologia e para a Psicologia da Religião (Prayer and Health: Issues for theology and psychology of religion). *Horizonte (Belo Horizonte, Brazil)* 11: 627–56. [CrossRef]
- Ferguson, Jane K., Eleanor W. Willemssen, and MayLynn V. Castañeto. 2010. Centering Prayer as a Healing Response to Everyday Stress: A Psychological and Spiritual Process. *Pastoral Psychology* 59: 305–29. [CrossRef]
- Francis. 2013. *Holy Mass and Conferral of the Sacrament of Confirmation*. Available online: <https://www.popefrancishomilies.com/trials-of-life> (accessed on 24 October 2022).
- Francis. 2019. *Prayer, Dialogue, Enthusiasm Are Key to Making Good Choices, Pope Says*. Available online: <https://catholicnews.com/prayer-dialogue-enthusiasm-are-key-to-making-good-choices-pope-says/> (accessed on 24 October 2022).
- Francis. 2021. *Catechesis on Prayer—24. Prayer in Daily Life*. Available online: https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2021/documents/papa-francesco_20210210_udienza-generale.html (accessed on 24 October 2022).
- Francis, Leslie, Mandy Robbins, Christopher Alan Lewis, and Philip Barnes. 2008. Prayer and psychological health: A study among sixth-form pupils attending Catholic and Protestant schools in Northern Ireland. *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* 11: 85–92. [CrossRef]
- Frankl, Viktor E. 1962. *Man's Search for Meaning: An Introduction to Logotherapy*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Garman, Emily. 2020. *The Vicious Cycle*. Available online: <https://www.acu.ac.uk/the-acu-review/the-vicious-cycle/> (accessed on 10 October 2022).
- Graham, Anne, and Julia Truscott. 2020. Meditation in the classroom: Supporting both student and teacher well-being? *Education* 3–13 48: 807–19. [CrossRef]
- Huber, Stefan, and Odilo Huber. 2012. The centrality of religiosity scale (C.R.S.). *Religions* 3: 710–24. [CrossRef]
- James, Allison. 2012. Seeking the analytic imagination: Reflections on the process of interpreting qualitative data. *Qualitative Research* 13: 562–77. [CrossRef]
- Jeppsen, Benjamin, Stephanie Winkeljohn Black, Patrick Pössel, and David H. Rosmarin. 2022. Does closeness to God mediate the relationship between prayer and mental health in Christian, Jewish, and Muslim samples? *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* 25: 99–112.
- Kastanakis, Minas, and Benjamin G. Voyer. 2014. The effect of culture on perception and cognition: A conceptual framework. *Journal of Business Research* 67: 425–33. [CrossRef]
- Koenig, Harold G. 2012. Religion, Spirituality, and Health: The Research and Clinical Implications. *ISRN Psychiatry* 2012: 1–33. [CrossRef]
- Koenig, Harold G. 2018. *Religion and Mental Health: Research and Clinical Applications*. Edited by Harold G. Koenig. Cambridge: Academic Press.
- Koenig, Harold G., Dana E. King, and Verna B. Carson, eds. 2012. *Handbook of Religion and Health*, 2nd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Koenig, Harold G., Terrence D. Hill, Steven Pirutinsky, and David H. Rosmarin. 2021. Commentary on “Does Spirituality or Religion Positively Affect Mental Health?”. *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 31: 27–44. [CrossRef]
- Ladd, Kevin L., and Bernard Spilka. 2002. Inward, Outward, and Upward: Cognitive Aspects of Prayer. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 41: 475–84. [CrossRef]
- Lagman, Jasmin G., Michael Gara, Raman Baweja, and Wun Jung Kim. 2021. Correlates of Suicide Attempts in Filipino Youths: An Analysis Based on the 2015 Global School-Based Student Health Survey. *Cureus* 13: e18100. [CrossRef]
- Levin, Jeff. 2010. Religion and mental health: Theory and research. *International Journal of Applied Psychoanalytic Studies* 7: 102–15. [CrossRef]
- Macaraan, Willard. 2019. A kapwa-infused paradigm in teaching Catholic theology/catechesis in a multireligious classroom in the Philippines. *Teaching Theology and Religion* 22: 102–13. [CrossRef]
- Maher, Carmel, Mark Hadfield, Maggie Hutchings, and Adam de Eyto. 2018. Ensuring Rigor in Qualitative Data Analysis: A Design Research Approach to Coding Combining NVivo with Traditional Material Methods. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 17: 1609406918786362. [CrossRef]
- McLean Hospital. 2021. *Religion, Spirituality, and Mental Health: Research and Clinical Applications*. [Video]. YouTube. Available online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rhJDle4jAsM> (accessed on 14 October 2022).
- Mendez, Samantha Erika. 2022. Sense-Making and Spirituality: Single Filipinas' Lived Experiences of Meaning in Life. *Psychological Studies* 67: 340–51. [CrossRef]
- Moreira-Almeida, Alexander, Harold G. Koenig, and Giancarlo Lucchetti. 2014. Clinical implications of spirituality to mental health: Review of evidence and practical guidelines. *Revista Brasileira de Psiquiatria* 36: 176–82. [CrossRef]
- Neal, Tom. 2019. *Praying for Virtue*. Available online: <https://www.wordonfire.org/articles/praying-for-virtue/> (accessed on 23 October 2022).

- New American Bible. 2002. *Holy Bible*. Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.
- Newton, Taylor, and Daniel McIntosh. 2010. Specific Religious Beliefs in a Cognitive Appraisal Model of Stress and Coping. *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 20: 39–58. [CrossRef]
- Pargament, Kenneth I., Bruce W. Smith, Harold G. Koenig, and Lisa Perez. 1998. Patterns of positive and negative religious coping with major life stressors. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 37: 710–24. [CrossRef]
- Patinio, Ferdinand. 2020. *More Pinoys Believe Faith 'Very Important' in Fighting COVID-19*. Available online: <https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1108913> (accessed on 9 October 2022).
- Paul, John, II. 1981. Message of His Holiness John Paul II to the President and to the People of the Philippines. Available online: https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/1981/february/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19810217_manila-presidente.html (accessed on 1 November 2022).
- Perez, Jeannie A., Consuelo O. Peralta, and Federico B. Besa. 2021. Gratitude and life satisfaction: The mediating role of spirituality among Filipinos. *Journal of Beliefs & Values* 42: 511–22. [CrossRef]
- Philippine Statistics Authority. 2021. *Highlights of the Philippine Population 2020 Census of Population and Housing*. Available online: <https://psa.gov.ph/population-and-housing/node/164811> (accessed on 9 October 2022).
- Rathod, Shanaya, Narsimha Pinninti, Muhammed Irfan, Paul Gorczynski, Pranay Rathod, Lina Gega, and Farooq Naeem. 2017. Mental Health Service Provision in Low- and Middle-Income Countries. *Health Services Insights* 10: 1178632917694350. [CrossRef]
- Roger, Kerstin S., and Andrew Hatala. 2018. Religion, spirituality & chronic illness: A scoping review and implications for health care practitioners. *Journal of Religion & Spirituality in Social Work* 37: 24–44. [CrossRef]
- Rubinart, Marta, Albert Fornieles, and Juan Deus. 2017. The Psychological Impact of the Jesus Prayer among Non-Conventional Catholics. *Pastoral Psychology* 66: 487–504. [CrossRef]
- Sharp, Shane. 2010. How Does Prayer Help Manage Emotions? *Social Psychology Quarterly* 73: 417–37. Available online: <https://www-proquest-com.dlsu.idm.oclc.org/scholarly-journals/how-does-prayer-help-manage-emotions/docview/907550500/se-2> (accessed on 1 November 2022).
- Soriano, Gil P., Kathyrine A. Calong Calong, Rudolf Cymorr Kirby P. Martinez, and Rozzano C. Locsin. 2022. Religiosity, spirituality and death anxiety among older adults living at home and in institutional facilities: A comparative study. *Journal of Religion, Spirituality & Aging* 34: 284–96. [CrossRef]
- Spilka, Bernard, and Kevin L. Ladd. 2013. *The Psychology of Prayer: A Scientific Approach*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Tamir, Christine, Aidan Connaughton, and Ariana M. Salazar. 2020. *The Global God Divide*. Available online: <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2020/07/20/the-global-god-divide/> (accessed on 9 October 2022).
- Tee, Michael, Cherica A. Tee, Joseph P. Anlacan, Katrina Joy G. Aligam, Patrick Wincy C. Reyes, Vipat Kuruchittham, and Roger C. Ho. 2020. Psychological impact of COVID-19 pandemic in the Philippines. *Journal of Affective Disorders* 277: 379–91. [CrossRef]
- Van Cappellen, Patty V., Megan Edwards, and Barbara L. Fredrickson. 2021. Upward spirals of positive emotions and religious behaviors. *Current Opinion in Psychology* 40: 92–98. [CrossRef] [PubMed]
- WHO-ROWP (World Health Organization Regional Office for the Western Pacific). 2021. *Prevention and Management of Mental Health Conditions in the Philippines. The Case for Investment*. Available online: https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/wpro/-/-documents/countries/philippines/reports/investment-case-report-mental-health-philippines-2021.pdf?sfvrsn=d0f436e7_9 (accessed on 9 October 2022).
- WHO (World Health Organization). 2022. *World Mental Health Report: Transforming Mental Health for All*. Available online: <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240049338> (accessed on 10 October 2022).
- World Population Review. 2020. *Highest Catholic Population 2020*. Available online: <https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/highest-catholic-population> (accessed on 18 October 2022).

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.