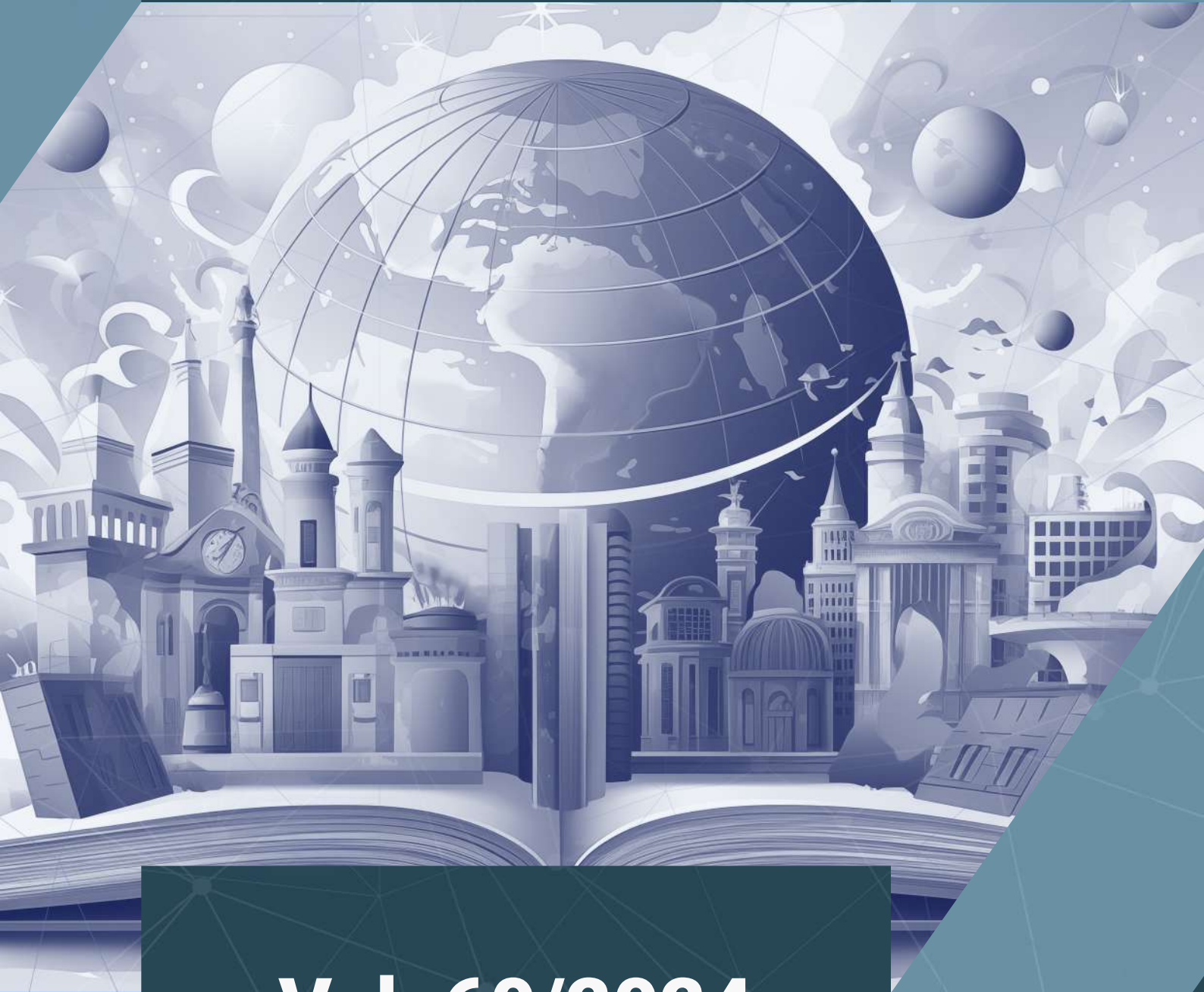




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# Fostering Faith and Flourishing: A Phenomenological Inquiry into the Lived Experiences of Non-Catholic Graduating Students in a Catholic University

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**Abstract.** This phenomenological study explores the lived experiences of non-Catholic graduating students at a Catholic university in Bacolod City, Philippines. The research aimed to understand their insights and perspectives on studying within a Catholic institution. The study involved in-depth interviews with eight participants from diverse religious backgrounds. The findings revealed four key themes: spiritual growth, community and inclusivity, personal growth and resilience, and academic excellence and holistic development. The study highlights the positive impact of the university's inclusive environment, fostering spiritual growth through interfaith dialogue and religious education. The emphasis on community and shared values creates a sense of belonging and acceptance for non-Catholic students. The university's rigorous academic programs and supportive community contribute to personal growth, resilience, and academic excellence. The study concludes that the integration of non-Catholic students into Catholic universities fosters inclusivity, personal growth, and academic success, providing valuable insights for enhancing educational practices and promoting interfaith understanding.

**Keywords.** Spiritual growth, inclusivity, non-Catholic students, Phenomenology, Catholic university, Philippines

## 1.0 Introduction

Catholic universities, as influential social institutions, play a crucial role in fostering inclusivity within academic environments [1]. In pluralistic settings, inclusivity is essential to create adaptable spaces that cater to diverse learners [2]. This aligns with Pope Paul VI's [3] vision of Catholic universities serving all individuals, including non-Catholics, with special affection (Sec. 7, *Gravissimum Educationis*). St. John Paul II's [4] apostolic constitution, "*Ex Corde Ecclesiae*" (From the Heart of the Church), further encourages openness to students of all faiths, recognizing the significance of interfaith dialogue and inclusivity. As a community of learners, the Catholic university provides a social space where individuals can express and experience their faith in diverse ways [5].

In Southeast Asia, the distinct religious and cultural landscape presents unique challenges and opportunities for Catholic education [6]. Research reveals significant differences in how non-Catholic students in the region perceive religion, particularly regarding spirituality

and religiosity [7], often shaped by the complex challenges and engagements inherent in Catholic religious programs [6]. This can lead to identity crises among non-Catholic students in Catholic universities, potentially impacting their interactions with Catholic peers [8]. Therefore, fostering interfaith coexistence and understanding is crucial. While a study by Soabil [9] found that non-Catholic students may experience distress due to limited knowledge of Catholic religious practices, opportunities exist to enhance interfaith dialogue and bridge this gap [10,11,12].

The institutionalization of non-Catholic students' presence in Philippine Catholic universities is evident in CHED Memorandum Order (CMO) No. 9 section 30, which mandates the creation of environments respectful of diverse religious orientations [13]. While some research suggests potential struggles for non-Catholic students in maintaining spiritual well-being within these institutions [14], other studies offer a more positive perspective. Lucas [7] found that the mission of Catholic universities can foster a sense of purpose and enrich faith for all students, while Estrellas [13] highlights how the inclusion of non-Catholics exemplifies personal autonomy and respect for diversity. These findings collectively indicate that non-Catholic individuals in Philippine Catholic universities can derive meaning, purpose, and a sense of social responsibility from their experiences [15].

In alignment with the Catholic Educational Association of the Philippines' (CEAP) Transformative Education (TE) framework, Catholic higher education institutions are called to support the spiritual growth of all community members, including non-Catholics [16]. Catholic universities in Negros, adhering to CEAP and Vatican II mandates, foster values of openness, love, and friendship within their diverse communities [17]. Notably, one university, through its Recoletos education, emphasizes an educational apostolate integrating charisms to be practiced by all, including non-Catholics [18]. However, challenges arise in ensuring non-Catholics fully adapt to and embrace this educational approach. To explore this situation and amplify the voices of non-Catholic students, this research seeks to uncover the lived experiences of non-Catholic graduating students within a Catholic university setting.

While global studies have highlighted the challenges faced by non-Christian and non-Catholic students in feeling a sense of belonging and inclusion in academic environments [19,20] research in the Philippines has primarily focused on the experiences of Catholic students in Catholic universities [21,22,23,24]. Although Del Rosario [25] emphasizes the need for holistic formation to achieve inclusivity for students of all beliefs in these institutions, there remains a significant gap in understanding the lived experiences of non-Catholic graduating students, especially in the Asian and Philippine contexts. This research seeks to address this gap by exploring the unique perspectives and experiences of this underrepresented group within Catholic universities.

Thus, this phenomenological study aimed to explore the lived experiences of non-Catholic graduating students at a Catholic university in Bacolod City. Specifically, it sought to understand their insights and perspectives on studying within a Catholic institution.

## **2.0 Literature Review**

*Non-Catholic students' experiences in Catholic schools.* Catholic schools have a long tradition of catering to Catholic students. However, these institutions increasingly accommodate students from diverse religious backgrounds [7]. This diversity can create challenges for non-Catholic students, particularly regarding religious education and practices. In the Philippines, studies have explored the experiences of non-Catholic students in Catholic schools. Soabil [9] found that these students might feel distress due to unfamiliarity with

Catholic traditions and mandatory participation in religious activities. However, they also acknowledged the positive aspects, such as the schools' discipline and supportive relationships among the community members.

Global studies by LaBelle and Kendall [20] and Ahmadi et al. [19] reveal similar challenges for religious minority students, including feelings of exclusion and a lack of belonging. Despite these challenges, research suggests that non-Catholic students can develop positive perceptions of religion and spirituality within Catholic schools. Thunstrom and Noy [26] discovered that prayer is valued by both Catholic and non-Catholic students for its emotional comfort. Lucas [7] found similarities in how Catholic and non-Catholic students perceive religion, particularly regarding spirituality.

*Spiritual growth and development of non-Catholic students.* Spiritual development in Catholic schools involves nurturing students' inner life, beliefs, and values [27]. Non-Catholic students can engage with the spiritually enriching environment and benefit from the values of respect, tolerance, and moral development promoted by Catholic schools [28]. Exposure to Catholic rituals and teachings can help these students reflect on their beliefs and grow personally and spiritually. Furthermore, the sense of community in Catholic schools fosters personal and spiritual development by providing supportive frameworks and counseling [29].

*Spiritual growth through interfaith dialogue and shared experiences.* Spirituality is a dynamic and intrinsic aspect of humanity, involving the search for ultimate meaning and purpose [30,31]. In the context of Catholic schools, interfaith dialogue plays a crucial role in spiritual growth [32]. Religious diversity within the school community provides opportunities for students to engage in meaningful conversations about different faiths, fostering understanding and respect [33,34,35]. Catholic religious educators acknowledge the reality of religious plurality and view it as a chance to promote inclusivity through dialogue [36].

*Gaining a deeper understanding of faith and spirituality through religious education.* Religious education in Catholic schools aims to deepen students' understanding of faith and spirituality, regardless of their religious backgrounds [35]. Prayer is a significant aspect of spiritual development, offering emotional comfort and connection with the divine [37]. College students' spiritual quests and life experiences often intertwine with their faith journeys [38]. The connection between faith and spirituality provides a sense of inner peace and enables students to reflect on their values and life experiences [39].

*Community and inclusivity.* Community and inclusivity are vital components of Catholic education [40,41]. Building a welcoming and inclusive community enhances student engagement and satisfaction [42]. Effective strategies include collaborative learning, diverse curriculum content, and safe spaces for dialogue. Inclusivity contributes to social cohesion by bringing together individuals from diverse backgrounds and fostering trust and collaboration [43]. However, achieving inclusivity can be challenging due to systemic biases and lack of awareness [44]. Catholic schools play a crucial role in addressing these challenges and promoting inclusivity among students [5].

*Fostering an inclusive community that values respect and understanding for diverse backgrounds.* Inclusivity is crucial in educational settings, ensuring all students feel valued and supported regardless of their background [45]. Fostering an inclusive environment involves creating a culture of respect, empathy, and responsibility. Diversity-sensitive practices are essential, considering the diverse perspectives of students, teachers, and parents [46]. School leaders play a crucial role in promoting inclusivity by implementing transparent practices that empower diverse voices [47].

### **3.0 Philosophical Assumptions**

Creswell and Poth [48] outline four philosophical assumptions that guide qualitative research: ontological, epistemological, axiological, and methodological. In this study, the ontological assumption acknowledges the diverse realities of non-Catholic students in a Catholic university setting. The researcher, as a social science and religion teacher, values cultural and religious diversity and aims to understand the unique experiences of these students to promote inclusivity. The epistemological assumption emphasizes the importance of getting close to the participants and understanding their perspectives. This was achieved through close observation, building rapport, and focusing on the participants' significant statements and descriptions. The axiological assumption acknowledges the researcher's values and biases, particularly their appreciation for diversity and inclusivity in education. The methodological assumption follows an inductive approach, using Lichtman's data analysis model to gain a deeper understanding of the non-Catholic students' experiences in a Catholic university.

### **4.0 Methods**

This study used a descriptive phenomenological research design to explore the experiences of non-Catholic graduating students in a Catholic university [48]. Eight participants were selected using purposive and snowball sampling, ensuring a diverse range of non-Catholic denominations for rich data collection [49]. The study participants were eight non-Catholic graduating students from a Catholic university in Bacolod City. They represented diverse religious backgrounds, including Baptist, Aglipayan, Islam, Born Again Christian, Seventh-day Adventist, Iglesia Ni Cristo, Latter-day Saint, and Pentecostal. They were selected based on their non-Catholic affiliation since birth, enrollment status as graduating students, and ability to articulate their experiences. This diverse group provided valuable insights into the experiences of non-Catholic students within a Catholic educational institution.

Data collection involved unstructured, in-depth individual interviews, allowing participants to share their experiences in their own words [48,49]. Ethical considerations were prioritized, with informed consent obtained, and rapport established before interviews. Mind bracketing was employed to maintain objectivity, and debriefing sessions were provided to ensure participant well-being. Data analysis followed Lichtman's 3Cs model [49], involving coding, categorizing, and conceptualizing. This inductive approach allowed themes to emerge from the data, providing a comprehensive understanding of the lived experiences of non-Catholic graduating students in a Catholic university.

In qualitative research, trustworthiness ensures that the data is credible, transferable, dependable, and confirmable [50]. In this study, credibility was established through member checking, where participants verified the accuracy of their transcribed interviews. Transferability was enhanced through thick descriptions and probing techniques, allowing for the application of findings to other contexts. Dependability was achieved through detailed field notes and adherence to Lichtman's methodology, ensuring consistency and traceability of data. Finally, confirmability was established through an external audit, verifying the alignment between the thematic presentation of data and participants' descriptions of their experiences.

To ensure ethical soundness, the researcher addressed the general principles of respect, justice, and beneficence in line with PHREB guidelines. The study holds social value by contributing to the limited research on the experiences of non-Catholic students in Catholic universities, aiming to promote inclusivity and inform relevant programs (PHREB). Informed consent was secured, and vulnerability was mitigated by ensuring voluntary participation and maintaining confidentiality. Potential risks, such as emotional exhaustion, were addressed with

breaks and emotional support, while benefits included increased awareness and representation for non-Catholic students. Privacy was upheld through anonymization and data protection measures, and transparency ensured through online publication and disclosure of any conflicts of interest. Justice was maintained by providing compensation and avoiding discrimination. The researcher's qualifications in social science and education, as well as adequate resources, ensured the study's rigor. Community involvement was fostered through presentations and dissemination of findings to relevant stakeholders.

### **5.0 Results**

The study participants comprised eight non-Catholic graduating students from a Catholic university in Bacolod City, Philippines. These students, each with a unique background and story, represented a diverse range of religious affiliations.

Vela, a resilient Civil Engineering student and Baptist, shared her experiences navigating academic challenges while maintaining her faith. Lyra, an eloquent Aglipayan Medical Technology student, offered an optimistic perspective on her educational journey. Orion, an accomplished Muslim leader in the College of Criminology, provided insights into his experiences balancing academic excellence and his cultural heritage. Virgo, an assertive Psychology student raised in a Born Again Christian family, emphasized the importance of inclusivity and fairness.

Aries, a resilient Seventh-day Adventist Medical Technology student, highlighted the role of faith and perseverance in overcoming academic obstacles. Pollux, a basketball enthusiast and Iglesia Ni Cristo member from the College of Criminology, shared his experiences within the university community. Hydra, a Latter-day Saint Psychology student and church leader, showcased her dedication to mentorship and community engagement. Draco, a humble Pentecostal student from a business-oriented family, expressed gratitude for the university's opportunities for service.

### **6.0 Thematic Insights**

To ensure objectivity, the researcher employed phenomenological bracketing and limited personal interaction with the participants. This approach allowed for an open and unbiased understanding of the lived experiences of non-Catholic graduating students in a Catholic university. Following in-depth interviews and transcriptions, the researcher utilized a rigorous data analysis model to identify key insights and develop comprehensive descriptions of the participants' experiences. The analysis focused on both the content and the nature of their experiences, revealing four overarching themes and fourteen sub-themes that collectively illuminated the multifaceted nature of being a non-Catholic student within a Catholic educational institution.

*Spiritual growth* is fostered through interfaith dialogue, religious education, and embracing humility. *Community and inclusivity* are cultivated through shared commitment to love and learning, fostering respect for diversity, finding unity amidst diversity, and experiencing a supportive learning environment. *Personal growth and resilience* are developed through experiencing personal growth and joy, persevering through challenges, and balancing personal beliefs while participating in required religious activities. *Academic excellence and holistic development* are achieved through receiving high-quality education, navigating academic pressures, finding relaxation through school activities, and embracing community engagement. These diverse experiences collectively contribute to the non-Catholic students' overall growth and development within the Catholic university setting.

### **Theme 1: Spiritual Growth and Development**

The university facilitates spiritual growth through diverse activities like ARSE retreats, religious services, and classroom discussions, emphasizing St. Augustine's teachings on humility and faith. This multifaceted approach encourages students to reflect on their beliefs, learn about different faiths, and deepen their understanding of spirituality.

***Spiritual growth through interfaith dialogue and shared experiences.*** The university fosters spiritual growth through interfaith dialogue and shared experiences, creating a space for diverse individuals to learn from each other and deepen their understanding of spirituality through activities like ARSE retreats and daily prayers.

It has helped me know myself. It has also given me spiritual growth because our last retreat in Don Bosco was facilitated by the Campus Ministry. I was able to realize who I really am. The retreat helped a lot (*Lyra, Personal Communication, February 23, 2024*).

This is for spirituality, sir, so I will be given more strength to overcome the challenges, especially since I am in a field that saves lives (*Lyra, Personal Communication, February 23, 2024*).

We had our ARSE last week. It was a confession, sir, of the Catholics. So, they were in church. It was so quiet. It did not seem to be a purely Catholic exercise. It was more on personal reflection, whatever your faith is. They did not strictly impose (*Aries, Personal Communication, March 4, 2024*).

In our Religion subject, we just join masses held because our department is sometimes the sponsor. It is nice because we also give offerings during the mass (*Lyra, Personal Communication, February 23, 2024*).

The university taught me how to be firm in my faith. Even if they teach Catholicism, you will be inspired because of how intensely they always show their faith in religious practices and mass. However, on my part, I also want to be firm with my faith (*Vela, Personal Communication, April 19, 2024*).

***Gaining a deeper understanding of faith and spirituality through religious education.*** Religious education at the university, particularly through ReEd classes, fosters a deeper understanding of faith and spirituality by exposing students to diverse religious perspectives, including Catholicism, and encouraging reflection on their own beliefs.

Another one, sir, I remember with our ReEd... it was an assignment from our teacher that every Sunday... we had to list the message religious learnings given by our pastors every Sunday... we should provide pictures and lessons learned... for five Sundays, this helped improve my ideas about my faith, this is the only thing that helped me improve (*Vela, Personal Communication, February 22, 2024*).

I learned a lot of things that were not taught to Born Again Christians. However, I have learned a lot, and I guess the knowledge really helped me integrate into my physical, mental, and emotional life at university, and there is nothing I learned that makes me uncomfortable. It was fun discussing and reading about Christianity through the eyes of the Catholics (*Virgo, Personal Communication, March 1, 2024*).

*Gin dibdib ko gid toh sir actually ang sa ReEd nga task, ang Sunday reflection, I take my REED tasks seriously, sir. The Sunday reflection helps a lot in my knowledge and faith* (*Orion, Personal Communication, April 18, 2024*).

***Embracing humility as a transformative force.*** The university's emphasis on St. Augustine's teachings, particularly on humility and the integration of faith and knowledge

(Caritas et Scientia), serves as a guiding principle for students' personal and spiritual development.

St. Augustine taught us the value of humility (*Lyra, Personal Communication, February 23, 2024*).

I will never forget that St. Augustine was a sinner who changed and became the greatest saint. I learned from him the value of humility, sir. I know I have not practiced this often, but what I learned from REED impacted my life. It is nice to learn everything about St. Augustine, like his teaching, his values, something like those, sir (*Aries, Personal Communication, March 4, 2024*).

Regular prayer, the need to always pray, and the teachings of St. Augustine on humility and caritas et scientia (*Hydra, Personal Communication, April 20, 2024*).

The university taught me to be humble and to stay grounded. I thank the people close to me, like my friends and classmates, for they helped me process my emotions (*Virgo, Personal Communication, March 1, 2024*).

### **Theme 2: Community and Inclusivity**

The university prioritizes community and inclusivity, evident in its diverse student body and commitment to fostering respect and understanding. United by a shared passion for learning and the values of Caritas et Scientia (Love and Knowledge), students develop meaningful connections and a sense of belonging through inclusive practices and celebrations of different religions.

***Finding inspiration and community in a shared commitment to love and learning.*** The university fosters a community where love and learning intersect, inspiring students and nurturing lasting connections through shared values and the pursuit of knowledge.

I was touched by learning about the lives of saints whose lives are so inspiring based on what I have learned from the university on Caritas et Scientia (*Hydra, Personal Communication, April 20, 2024*).

University aligns with my belief... to do good and to love the least. That is why I am really okay (*Pollux, Personal Communication, March 12, 2024*).

Overall, my best experience was when I met people that I could consider life-long friends, as well as I met professors who gave me knowledge on how to become a pillar of society (*Virgo, Personal Communication, March 1, 2024*).

The biggest cycle of wisdom. People. The university has a bunch of kindred people, especially the students (*Draco, Personal Communication, March 14, 2024*).

***Fostering an inclusive community that values respect and understanding for diverse backgrounds.*** The university fosters an inclusive community that values respect and understanding for diverse backgrounds, particularly religious beliefs, as demonstrated by non-Catholic students' active participation in Catholic practices and the university's recognition of other religious traditions.

The only thing I can do is to respect, sir, because I am in a Catholic school, and that is what we are, non-Catholics. For example, during prayers, we bow as a sign of respect when they make the sign of the cross (*Vela, Personal Communication, February 22, 2024*).

Then, during prayers, lunchtime, or morning, I join. I stand and show respect. I do not walk, although I see others walking (*Vela, Personal Communication, April 19, 2024*).

As a form of respect. Yes. This is to honor the beliefs of others. The university also adheres to respect for other religions, such as Muslim and Chinese, since the university also celebrates Chinese New Year and Ramadan (*Virgo, Personal Communication, March 1, 2024*).

I am very respectful of the values and practices of the university. For example, I also comply with attendance at masses (*Hydra, Personal Communication, March 6, 2024*).

***Finding unity amidst diversity within the school community.*** The university fosters unity within its diverse community by embracing and celebrating differences in socioeconomic backgrounds, faiths, and cultures, promoting empathy and understanding among students.

The diversity of people at the university. To me, there are different kinds of people in college; there are poor and rich as well – those who study here come from different parts of the world, and they have different backgrounds, but when we are at the university, we are like equals (*Vela, Personal Communication, February 22, 2024*).

People pray differently. People do things differently there, and then they pray for the saints, other than we do. So, yes, even though I am a non-Catholic, I still understand the way it is (*Draco, Personal Communication, March 14, 2024*).

With the exposure I have at the university, I can personally deal with diverse people because I know they have different experiences in life, and we have to deal with them. And this is what I am today; I can easily adjust (*Orion, Personal Communication, February 27, 2024*).

We are really taught to respect. There is diversity when it comes to religion. That is what I always remember, sir. I always observe empathy and compassion towards others because both the school and my religion as LDS taught me about these (*Hydra, Personal Communication, March 6, 2024*).

There is no discrimination when it comes to religion. Any person, no matter the belief, is welcome at the university as long as you practice the moral values that you show in school (*Lyra, Personal Communication, April 26, 2024*).

***Experiencing a supportive and inclusive learning environment.*** The university fosters a supportive and inclusive learning environment that values diversity and promotes collaboration among students, faculty, and staff, creating a sense of belonging for all.

One thing I am thankful to the university community... admin, teachers, and staff is their great support when it comes to the education of the students, especially since we are in the medical technology program. They give us enough time for our studies and excellent training (*Lyra, Personal Communication, February 23, 2024*).

Because of my friends, sir, since they are there, and the teachers or the professors, my friends, and the administration, they include me or make me feel I belong in everything we have in school (*Virgo, Personal Communication, March 1, 2024*).

What I like most, sir, with MedTech is that our professors and mentors, especially the CI (Clinical Instructors), are now very approachable and willing to teach us. You will really know that they deliver high quality. They are intelligent; there are always answers to our questions. Most of them are products of the university MedTech and are achievers. The program is good, and the people who handle us are also good, as well as the staff and our head (*Aries, Personal Communication, March 4, 2024*).

My most meaningful experience, sir... I got to know the people, sir. This is what I appreciate. When I was in high school, people were conscious of their status. At UNO-R – I was truly amazed with the students (*Vela, Personal Communication, February 22, 2024*).

### **Theme 3: Personal Growth and Resilience**

The university's environment fosters personal growth and resilience in students, encouraging them to embrace diverse perspectives, overcome challenges, and balance personal beliefs with institutional values.

***Experiencing personal growth and joy within a welcoming and enriching environment.*** The university's welcoming and enriching environment fosters personal growth and joy in students through diverse experiences, shared values, and religious education programs like ARSE.

It was great and fun until I reached college, sir. I have built lots of memories here at the university, as well as my escapades with my group. Many happy events happened at the university, sir (*Pollux, Personal Communication, March 12, 2024*).

That is why I am grateful to the university, sir, because it widened my horizon. I became open to other ideas, I became open-minded, and I am happy (*Pollux, Personal Communication, March 12, 2024*).

Exciting and thriving Institution. Because I am just a curious person, and at some point, there are things that you could learn from, something you could remember a good thing (*Draco, Personal Communication, March 14, 2024*).

I am very happy to have received the opportunity to study in a Catholic university because I have learned a lot of things. In our community, a Muslim community, people are rude. Here people are good-natured. They are very caring (*Orion, Personal Communication, February 27, 2024*).

***Developing resilience and perseverance in the face of challenges.*** The university fosters resilience and perseverance in students by presenting diverse challenges, encouraging them to overcome obstacles and adapt to new situations, ultimately preparing them for the real world.

The university did not stop. So, students did not surrender. This kind of push made me realize that despite the struggles and awkwardness in life, we have to move forward. The university taught me to be resilient and thrive (*Draco, Personal Communication, March 14, 2024*).

The tasks in ReEd were difficult to me, but I did not mind them. I just continued. This is part of my being in a Catholic school. I accepted everything (*Orion, Personal Communication, February 27, 2024*).

The resilience and survival of the engineering students are great. I had to struggle and became resilient because the course I chose was difficult (*Vela, Personal Communication, February 22, 2024*).

In the ARSE, sir, the challenging part is the prayers and leading in the prayers. I believe that prayers should not be memorized, but this is what happens during the rosary. Even though it is difficult, I attend and participate, but the feeling is different since it is given that I am a non-Catholic (*Hydra, Personal Communication, March 6, 2024*).

***Balancing personal faith with academic demands in a Catholic institution.*** While required religious activities like attending Mass are part of the university experience, students navigate the balance between personal beliefs and participation, with some expressing a lack of personal connection or spiritual growth.

In terms of worship, at ARSE, my presence was there, but I felt I did not contribute anything. For example, in the masses, in the confessions, it is like that; it feels like I have not done anything. It seems I just reflected on myself personally but not religiously (*Orion, Personal Communication, February 27, 2024*).

I also remember one biggest challenge... I remember one non-Catholic telling me that during prayers, just follow because it will not affect me anyhow, but I refused because it is different for me (*Vela, Personal Communication, February 22, 2024*).

The Mass is not that effective because it is being required, sir. It is not good to attend mass only because you are required to attend. However, we have to attend because there is an attendance (*Hydra, Personal Communication, March 6, 2024*).

Most especially the mandatory masses, sir, like when there is sponsorship, I attend because I respect your religion (*Pollux, Personal Communication, March 12, 2024*).

#### **Theme 4: Academic Excellence and Holistic Development**

The university is recognized for providing high-quality education and rigorous training, preparing students for their chosen fields while fostering personal growth and community engagement.

***Receiving a high-quality education and rigorous training.*** The university is consistently praised for providing high-quality education and rigorous training that prepares students for successful careers.

This is precisely my training ground – the school, the training ground to serve my fellowmen. There are many good things to experience at university. All those I have experienced created an impression on myself and my being, and I will bring them when I leave the university in the coming months (*Orion, Personal Communication, February 27, 2024*).

The University is a Cradle of excellence – quality education. This is what I have learned because of the rigid training in engineering that the university gives (*Vela, Personal Communication, April 19, 2024*).

This University provides quality education. Although it is not perfect, I am very satisfied with my academic journey (*Hydra, Personal Communication, April 20, 2024*).

I like that there is academic excellence, sir, and our mentors and professors train us. This is the feeling I got from the university, excellence in education and skills in the workplace (*Aries, Personal Communication, March 4, 2024*).

I am here because of the quality of education, sir. Also, some of my friends from and are with the University, sir. It is the quality of education and my group of friends (*Pollux, Personal Communication, March 12, 2024*).

***Navigating the challenges and pressures of academic rigor.*** The academic rigor at the university, particularly in the MedTech program, is undeniably challenging. However, students find ways to cope and persevere, viewing the challenges as opportunities for growth and drawing inspiration from their peers' successes.

The academics, sir, are very, very difficult. There is no joke that they are difficult, but you can survive. You should survive, taking myself as an example, I failed three times (*Vela, Personal Communication, February 22, 2024*).

It is hard coupled with pressure at the same time. But this is manageable. It is just hard to keep up sometimes because they are strict, especially in the REED class (*Vela, Personal Communication, April 19, 2024*).

Medtech is difficult because the university medtech is known to be an achiever and number one in Negros. The teachers exerted all the pressure to maintain a 100% passing percentage on the board. So, all pressures and expectations have been thrown at us, sir, because the university MedTech has a great reputation (*Lyra, Personal Communication, February 23, 2024*).

I remembered one challenge in my REED subject in my second year. We were required to make an output after going to church. We were to make a synopsis, reflection, or conclusion about the homily. There were times I was not able to submit an output because I was not able to attend even the Muslim worship (*Orion, Personal Communication, February 27, 2024*).

***Finding relaxation and camaraderie through school activities and events.*** School activities and events like U-Week, Sportsfest, and Psychology Night provide students with opportunities to relax, connect with peers, and foster a sense of community.

Aside from religious activities, activities like the U-WEEK help me get acquainted with other students in other departments and be together with them (*Vela, Personal Communication, February 22, 2024*).

Excited but also exhausted because of the work, especially activities; for example, we work hard for the sports fest so that everyone may enjoy the activity and get self-fulfillment and joy (*Virgo, Personal Communication, April 18, 2024*).

During U-week, we can relax from academics. We were tasked with MedTech activities and were in 3rd year. So, we should be there every day because MedTech manages a booth. When it is sportsfest, we need the power of the department. So, my friends joined. I helped in the committee on sports to help my department (*Aries, Personal Communication, March 4, 2024*).

Psychology night. I enjoyed it a lot because I consider myself an introvert, but then I saw myself enjoying it a lot (*Hydra, Personal Communication, March 6, 2024*).

***Embracing a life of service and community engagement.*** The university's emphasis on service, rooted in the teachings of St. Augustine, manifests in students actively participating in outreach programs and alumni pursuing service-oriented careers.

It is like when you devote yourself to one thing, like the values of a student, because they teach us how to live these values – these are taught to us by our teachers and others in the community (*Lyra, Personal Communication, February 23, 2024*).

The attitude acquired from the university is their simplicity and integrity. They are also more engaged in community service because of the university and our brotherhood, which is registered at the university. Community service has helped a lot (*Pollux, Personal Communication, April 19, 2024*).

Service is my motivation; this is why I took up criminology. For me, helping is a joy. It is nice that the university provides the venue to serve and help. I was able to conquer my doubts about my capabilities (*Orian, Personal Communication, February 27, 2024*).

What feels so good at a university other than its size is the opportunity to help others. We have community outreach. Well, most of the time we would go to the outreach at Handumanan. It is an amazing place (*Draco, Personal Communication, March 14, 2024*).

Overall, the university provides a holistic educational experience that fosters spiritual growth, personal development, and community engagement within a diverse and supportive environment. Students from various backgrounds thrive academically and personally, guided by the university's emphasis on love, service, and humility. While facing academic challenges, students develop resilience and perseverance, emerging as well-rounded individuals ready to make a positive impact. The university's commitment to interfaith dialogue allows students to deepen their faith while respecting others, fostering an inclusive and supportive community. This holistic approach equips students with not only knowledge and skills but also nurtures their spiritual, emotional, and social well-being, preparing them for fulfilling lives of service and leadership.

## **7.0 Discussion**

### ***Spiritual Growth and Development***

In Catholic universities, non-Catholic students experience spiritual growth through diverse religious practices, interfaith dialogue, and inclusive religious education, fostering a deeper understanding of their own faith and others [28,9]. The emphasis on humility in Catholic tradition encourages self-reflection and personal transformation, leading to meaningful connections with others [51]. The university's inclusive approach and exposure to diverse perspectives also contribute to spiritual development, allowing students to appreciate the richness of human spirituality and find common ground despite differences [7,32]. Religious education in Catholic universities plays a crucial role in deepening students' understanding of faith and spirituality, regardless of their religious background [35]. The curriculum encompasses not only Catholic teachings but also the study of other religions and cultural influences on spirituality [34]. Through exposure to diverse perspectives and the promotion of open dialogue, students are encouraged to reflect on their own beliefs and develop a more profound understanding of faith. This inclusive approach to religious education nurtures spiritual life and promotes tolerance and interreligious understanding among students [52].

### ***Community and Inclusivity***

Building community and fostering inclusivity in a school setting creates a welcoming and harmonious environment where all students feel valued and respected, enriching their educational experience and equipping them with essential life skills [42,43]. The university fosters a community where love and learning intersect, inspiring students and nurturing lasting connections through shared values and the pursuit of knowledge [53]. Fostering an inclusive community that values respect and understanding for diverse backgrounds enhances the sense of belonging and emotional well-being among all students [54,55]. The university fosters a sense of unity amidst diversity by embracing and celebrating differences, encouraging open dialogue, and promoting empathy, leading to a truly inclusive community [56]. Experiencing a supportive and inclusive learning environment is crucial for non-Catholic students as it fosters a sense of acceptance and belonging [45,57].

### ***Personal Growth and Resilience***

In an inclusive school environment, non-Catholic students experience significant personal growth and develop resilience by engaging with diverse beliefs and traditions [58,59]. This holistic development equips them with the confidence and perseverance to navigate future challenges [60,61,62]. Moreover, the welcoming atmosphere fosters personal growth and joy, allowing students to broaden their perspectives and form meaningful relationships [63,64,65]. Additionally, non-Catholic students learn to balance their personal beliefs with participation in required religious activities, fostering understanding and respect for different practices [66,67,68]. They develop resilience and perseverance by facing challenges, adapting to new situations, and embracing different perspectives, which prepares them for future obstacles [69,70,9]. Overall, the inclusive environment fosters personal growth, resilience, and joy, equipping students with essential skills for navigating life's complexities.

### ***Academic Excellence and Holistic Development***

Non-Catholic students pursuing academic excellence in a Catholic school environment gain valuable insights as they navigate a curriculum that integrates rigorous academics with moral and ethical education [3,9]. This holistic approach fosters their personal growth and

equips them with a well-rounded education that extends beyond the classroom [71]. Through structured learning and disciplined study, they gain valuable insights into academic excellence and personal growth, recognizing the importance of intellectual and character development. This comprehensive approach prepares them to excel academically and equips them with essential skills and resilience, setting them on a path toward future success [72,73,17,74,75]. Navigating academic rigor in a Catholic school setting equips non-Catholic students with crucial life skills beyond the classroom. They develop resilience and adaptability by learning to prioritize tasks effectively, manage stress, and persevere [76,77,78,79,80]. Extracurricular activities offer relaxation and camaraderie, promoting social bonding and personal rejuvenation [81,82,83,84,85,86]. Non-Catholic students also embrace a life of service and community engagement, finding fulfillment in giving back and developing compassion and empathy [87,88,89,90,91,92]. This holistic approach to education nurtures their spiritual, emotional, and social well-being, preparing them for fulfilling lives of service and leadership.

### **8.0. Conclusion**

The integration of non-Catholic students into Catholic school environments fosters inclusivity, personal growth, and academic excellence. Through exposure to diverse perspectives and a supportive community, these students embark on transformative journeys, deepening their understanding of faith and developing resilience, open-mindedness, and essential life skills. The emphasis on moral education and community engagement further shapes them into empathetic and responsible leaders, highlighting the power of education to transcend religious boundaries and create a thriving environment for all.

### **9.0. Limitations of the Findings**

Given the study's limited scope and the small sample size, which included only eight non-Catholic emerging adults, one of whom was non-Christian, the findings are not generalizable. They cannot fully capture the diverse experiences of this population within the broader context of their lives.

### **10.0. Practical Value of the Paper**

This study offers valuable insights into the experiences of non-Catholic students in a Catholic university, providing a foundation for enhancing inclusivity across various departments. By incorporating recommendations like interfaith dialogue, specialized counseling, and inclusive activities, the university can foster a more welcoming environment that enriches the educational experience for all students.

### **11.0. Directions for Future Research**

Building upon these findings, future research could explore the lived experiences of Catholic students in non-Catholic or non-sectarian schools, offering a comparative perspective. Researchers could also delve deeper into the individual narratives of non-Catholic students through narrative inquiry, focusing on their spiritual journeys, identity formation, and sense of belonging. Additionally, detailed case studies could offer rich, contextualized insights into the unique experiences and coping strategies of these students. Quantitative surveys could measure various dimensions of student development, including spiritual growth, academic achievement, and well-being. Longitudinal studies could provide a comprehensive view of the long-term impact of these experiences. Furthermore, including perspectives from extended families, professionals, and the larger community could offer a broader understanding of the issue.

## 12.0. Declaration of Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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