

The Meaning of Life of Nuns Who Serve Lepers at Bunda Pembantu Abadi Hospital

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Abstract. This research aims to discover how meaningful the lives of nuns serving lepers at the Bunda Pembantu Abadi Naob Hospital, East Noemuti District, Timor Tengah Regency are. This study used five subjects with the criteria of nuns serving lepers. This research uses descriptive qualitative methods, with two data collection methods: observation and interviews. The data was obtained and analysed using thematic analysis techniques and produced three main themes, namely, 1) self-view, 2) service dynamics, and 3) challenges and solutions. The choice to become a nun with the task of serving lepers is a form of responsibility to God, oneself and others. Choosing to become a nun leads participants to discover their self-concept and self-esteem through serving vulnerable people, namely lepers. In service, participants encounter challenges, but participants are also able to find solutions to each challenge, namely spiritual activities and an attitude of self-acceptance.

Keywords: *meaning of life, nuns, lepers*

Abstrak. Penelitian ini bertujuan mengetahui bagaimana kebermaknaan hidup biarawati yang melayani orang kusta di Rumah Sakit Bunda Pembantu Abadi Naob Kecamatan Noemuti Timur, Kabupaten Timor Tengah Utara. Penelitian ini menggunakan 5 subjek dengan kriteria biarawati yang melayani orang kusta. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode kualitatif deskriptif, dengan dua metode pengumpulan data yakni observasi dan wawancara. Data-data yang sudah didapatkan dianalisis menggunakan teknik analisis tematik dan menghasilkan tiga tema utama yakni, 1) pandangan diri 2) dinamika pelayanan 3) tantangan dan solusi. Pilihan hidup menjadi biarawati dengan tugas pelayanan kepada orang kusta adalah sebuah bentuk tanggungjawab baik kepada Tuhan, diri sendiri dan sesama. Pilihan hidup menjadi biarawati menghantar partisipan menemukan konsep diri dan harga diri lewat pelayanan kepada kaum rentan yakni penderita kusta. Dalam pelayanan partisipan menemukan tantangan, namun partisipan juga mampu menemukan solusi dari setiap tantangan yakni aktifitas rohani serta sikap penerimaan diri.

Keywords: *Kebermaknaan hidup, biarawati, orang kusta*

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Introduction

A nun is a woman who chooses a religious life, voluntarily leaving worldly life and focusing herself and her life on religious life (Aleksander in Hagang, 2015). The choice of life as a nun with vows or vows made leads nuns to the consequences of having to live a life with limited freedom, not having much free time, having a scheduled daily routine that must be carried out, not being married, living simply, and being bound by Church regulations. (Hagang, 2015).

A nun in the Catholic Church is explicitly called to dedicate herself to God to participate in God's work of salvation. One of the roles is to dedicate oneself to work by providing services in the community. According to Renita (in Pujiyono et al., 2016), work viewed from a spiritual or religious perspective is an effort to regulate the world in accordance with God's will. Work is a life commitment that must be accountable to God (Kitab Hukum Kanonik, 2016).

Manis (2017) discusses the meaning of the mission of learning for nuns, a process encountered and faced daily with all difficulties and challenges. This makes nuns interpret studying earnestly and diligently, cultivating themselves, increasing their knowledge and finding the right way to escape difficulties. Nuns are increasingly aware of the requirements that need to be met in accordance with government regulations and the congregation's needs. Research by Sari & Setyawan (2017) on the experience of being a Catholic nun found that being a nun in totality with service and self-devotion was a free and conscious choice, so the subjects already understood the consequences and risks of this religious life. One of the consequences is living a lifetime of singleness or celibacy. For nuns in spiritual life, apart from praying to build a relationship with God, the subjects felt the importance

of personal reflection related to prayer and daily activities. One of the challenging duties of service for nuns is service to lepers.

The service duties of nuns for lepers can be seen in the PRR (Putri Renyah Rosari) congregation, which carries out service duties for lepers at St. Mary's Hospital, Bunda Pembantu Abadi, Naob. In providing services, nuns often experience challenges such as conflicts between fellow nuns living in a community with various age backgrounds. Apart from that, health challenges are also something that nuns should pay attention to because one way of transmitting leprosy is through direct contact. Even though there are many challenges, this process can help nuns find the meaning of their lives. Apart from that, information on the meaning of life can provide an overview for nuns who will carry out service tasks for lepers.

According to the World Health Organization (2023), leprosy is a chronic infectious disease caused by *Mycobacterium leprae*. This disease mainly affects the skin, peripheral nerves, upper respiratory tract mucosa and eyes. Leprosy also attacks various body parts, including the nerves and skin (Minister of Health of the Republic of Indonesia, 2019). To achieve leprosy elimination at the provincial level in 2019 and the district/city level in 2024, the government has established several strategies, one of which is as stated in Article 3b, namely strengthening the participation of the community and community organisations. The parties responsible for this program are the central and regional governments, society in particular, and the Catholic Church. The Catholic Church, through the duties and roles of nuns, carries out its function of caring for lepers, one of which is at the Hospital of Bunda Pembantu Abadi, Naob, Timor Tengah Utara, East Nusa Tenggara. This service task gives nuns their own meaning, which becomes their way of interpreting their lives.

Method

This research uses qualitative methods, with observation and interview data collection techniques. The research was conducted at St. Leprosy Hospital. Maria

Maid Abadi Naob Village, Naob East Noemuti District, North Central Timor, East Nusa Tenggara (NTT), in March-May 2023. Participants were determined using a purposive sampling technique, including being a nun on a ministry mission at Lepers and willing to become participants. After the data was obtained, the data was analysed using thematic analysis techniques to obtain themes of the meaning of life.

Result

Theme 1. View of Self

Views on religious life and service to lepers

The view of religious life and the task of serving lepers is interpreted as a form of obedience to vows or promises that have been made, as well as surrendering oneself to God and the congregation, which is realised in the form of committed service. Some participants even described this with various attributes that became their identity, such as the clothes they wore as nuns, verses in the Holy Bible and Catholic figures.

"I am obedient to the vows I have made, namely the vow of obedience, so whatever service assignments my superiors give must be obeyed. That is also a form of surrender through my obedience to service duties, which can be symbolised by the nurse's clothes that I am wearing" (Participant Em)

"We PRR have three vows of poverty, obedience and purity. We say these vows at the altar which strengthen me to persist with my choice as a nun..." (Participant Ar)

".... Living with lepers is something I am very grateful for, like Veronika who washed Jesus' face. A small work but of enormous value " (Participant Ver).

Theme 2. Dynamics of Service Tasks

Service Motivation

The identified service motivation is inner motivation, which also arises due to the influence of the surrounding environment, especially the service area, which participants call faith.

" Serving lepers is a legacy from the bishop, so the bishop wants us to continue the legacy, and we increasingly experience the presence of Christ through serving lepers...." (Partisipan Ur).

Negative Emotions

In service tasks, participants feel negative emotions, namely unpleasant feelings.

".....sometimes I am less enthusiastic because the wound smells so bad...."
(participant Ver)

"When I was in high school in Lembata, there were a lot of leprosy sufferers, which made me afraid, and because leprosy is one of them which is contagious, as an ordinary human being, at any time I am afraid of being infected" (participant Mar)

Commitment

The commitment that they continue to maintain cannot be separated from the learning they gain while providing service and bringing about change in the participants.

"During my time with them, I learned to be persistent and patient and accept myself in any condition" (participant Ur).

Theme 3. Challenges and Solutions

Challenges of religious life

"When facing challenges, the most important thing is to surrender to God through prayer and reflection so that we can know each other's mistakes and forgive each other" (participant Ver).

Challenges in Serving Leprosy Sufferers

Almost all participants expressed that, when dealing with leprosy sufferers, they felt afraid of being infected. Learn to adapt to Dawan culture and language, and learn to be patient with the behaviour of leprosy sufferers.

"I have a little difficulty communicating with lepers because I can not speak Dawan" (participant Ur)

"In living with leprosy sufferers, I, as an ordinary human being, am also afraid of being infected. There are situations where I am disgusted, especially if the wound smells" (participant Ver)

"..empathy is one way I overcome feelings of disgust and fear. Putting myself like them helps me get rid of those feelings of fear" (participant Ar)

Discussion

Based on the results of the analysis, it was found that there were three main themes, namely Self View, Service Dynamics, and Challenges and Solutions. Self-view is an understanding of religious life with every service task carried out thoughtfully and without coercion. This is done as a complete surrender to God and others, especially lepers. Participants view that becoming a nun is a life choice that must be accepted and carried out without coercion from other people, taking vows or promises in every service. Complete surrender to God by accepting the consequences of service to God and others through sacrifice. Sacrifice in energy, time, feelings and all of life is a form of obedience. For participants, serving lepers is the same as serving Christ, caring, helping and serving with full responsibility and compassion.

Frankl (2019) argued that freedom of will constitutes a crucial dimension of life's meaningfulness. This includes the freedom to shape one's existence, particularly in choosing a religious vocation, which embodies a fundamental freedom intrinsic to life. Apart from that, the choice to become a nun for lepers is a form of freedom of will because serving lepers is the participant's choice without any coercion from other people, even though the participant already knows the consequences and ups and downs of the service process. Participants believe that serving leprosy sufferers is a form of responsibility. As described by Frankl (2019), the freedom of will is responsible free will. Freedom to make responsible choices is realised in every service. Responsibility is physical, spiritual, and psychological responsibility through spiritual activities. The choice of life as a nun is a big responsibility for the participants because apart from serving leprosy sufferers,

there are responsibilities regarding commitment as a nun. Taking full responsibility for the consequences of religious life, such as being away from family, not marrying, being required to live, and not being free to enjoy worldly things.

Participants view religious life as a form of obedience to their vows. Free will, namely making life choices, can lead participants to find their identity as nuns, with the attributes they wear, one of which is a nun's clothes. Self-identity can help participants find their self-concept. Self-concept is an individual's evaluation of oneself, assessment or interpretation of oneself by the individual concerned. Self-concept is formed due to interactions with the people around them. What other individuals perceive about themselves cannot be separated from the structure, role and social status that an individual holds (Papalia, Olds, and Feldman, 2010).

Leprosy is an infectious disease. Society's stigma about leprosy sufferers results in different treatments towards leprosy sufferers. Sufferers are often ostracised, but participants choose to live and serve leprosy sufferers even though they are seen as vulnerable in society. Coppersmith (in Roso, Dekas & Wrzesniewski, 2010) explains that one of the formations of self-esteem is success and success in completing large tasks. In contrast to this research, participants found their self-worth through serving vulnerable groups, namely leprosy sufferers. Participants had high life satisfaction when serving leprosy sufferers. The life satisfaction felt by participants was able to lead them to find the meaning of life. The vows that participants pronounce and live by become guidelines in carrying out their duties of service to leprosy sufferers as a form of surrender to God. This is in line with research by Sari and Setyawan (2017), which revealed that becoming a nun is a calling and freedom to choose with full awareness so that you are ready to accept the consequences and risks of religious life.

This research also describes vows/promises that have meaning for the participants. The vow of poverty is related to humility, compassion, concern, ability and sincerity in facing challenges. The vow of obedience relates to accepting and carrying out ministry duties responsibly obeying the congregation's rules. The vow

of chastity relating to sexuality shows that nuns do not commit themselves to living a life of love that is only given to certain people, for example, husband and wife, but rather love that is open to everyone, especially lepers. The values that are lived through vows align with one of the sources of meaning in life, namely, the values of appreciation. In this case, participants appreciate the values of caring, love, and compassion, which makes them experience a meaningful life through services based on these values (Bastaman, 2007).

In carrying out their lives as nuns with the task of serving lepers sufferers, they must have motivation as strength. This study found that participants were motivated to find the meaning of life through serving people with leprosy. This motivation makes participants aware of responsibility, compassion and the value of caring faith as strength in every service. This is slightly different from research by Hagang (2015), which revealed that there is meaning in life that is obtained after becoming a nun, namely the value of creativity in the form of serving happily, accepting God's will sincerely, and feeling able to love everyone; feeling more calm and appreciative through prayer, and this value is what ultimately strengthens the subject to be able to survive as a nun.

In serving lepers, there is learning, namely the value of simplicity, patience and perseverance. This learning can make participants aware of continuing to be patient with life's challenges, be more diligent in service, and live. This learning can strengthen commitment to the task of serving leprosy sufferers. Giacalone and Jurkiewicz (in Beribe, 2021) explain that a transcendent experience is a spiritual experience that makes individuals feel change through serving lepers. Individuals can feel strength through spiritual activities with God through spiritual activities, namely prayer, as well as recollection and reflection. Through this, participants can gain meaning and purpose in their lives. The participants described this experience through the positive emotions they felt, namely, feelings of joy and gratitude for being able to serve leprosy sufferers.

There are two services, namely curative and rehabilitation. The form of service provided by participants is curative service, which helps leprosy sufferers reduce pain and also attempts to cure the disease so that sufferers can get better. The curative services participants provide include cleaning, grooming, bathing and therapy for the healing process. Rehabilitative services, namely health service activities, return former sufferers to society so they can function again as members of society. The services provided include training in sewing, weaving and farming. One aspect of Frankl's (2019) meaningful life is the desire for a meaningful life, which is the desire for every individual to become a valuable and helpful person for themselves, others and society. Carrying out the duties of curative and rehabilitation services, namely caring for, helping and encouraging leprosy sufferers to return to independence, is the participant's way of making sense of life. In carrying out their service duties, nuns find ways to interpret each process as a form of finding the meaning of life. This aligns with Frankl's (2019) concept of life's meaningfulness, emphasising personal interpretation rather than external determinants in searching for and discovering life's meaning. In the process of providing services to leprosy sufferers, participants receive feedback. The leper sufferer stated that being served by the participants was a gift. Leprosy sufferers felt a feeling of gratitude because the participants served with sincerity, so leprosy sufferers felt accepted like their own family. Feedback from leprosy sufferers provides satisfaction and motivates participants to continue empathising and improving service quality. The meaning of life can be found in every process that the individual wants to achieve and fulfil. Finding the meaning of life is also related to self-concept, so these two things cannot be given by other people but are sought and found by the individual.

In this research, participants were also faced with challenges, namely, conflicts of misunderstanding with fellow nuns due to cultural differences and challenges of obedience in an increasingly advanced world. This is supported by research conducted by Beribe (2021), which revealed that nuns experience the challenges of

religious life, namely the lack of support from community friends and disputes with fellow nuns due to many differences. Apart from that, the participants also faced challenges when dealing with leprosy sufferers due to their cultural background, so they had to try harder to adapt to the local culture. Participants also felt negative emotions when carrying out service tasks for leprosy sufferers, namely, anger, sadness, fear, and lack of enthusiasm when carrying out service tasks. Even though there are challenges, participants find ways and solutions to survive the challenges they experience.

According to Lazarus and Folkman (in Purnama, 2017), coping is seen as a factor determining humans' ability to adjust to stressful situations (stressful life events). The coping method that participants often engage in is spiritual activities such as prayer, recollection, and reflection. Spiritual activities can help participants adjust to life's stressful situations as nuns with the task of serving lepers. This aligns with research by Beribe (2021), which revealed that nuns always pray and reflect when faced with challenges. Apart from that, participants have another way to face challenges, namely an attitude of self-acceptance with every situation they experience. Self-acceptance is a positive view of oneself, recognising and accepting different aspects. A good attitude of self-acceptance can encourage participants to find the purpose and meaning of their lives, namely serving leprosy sufferers.

Conclusion

Nuns find the meaning of their lives by serving lepers, namely through self-view, the view of religious life with the task of serving lepers and the lessons learned while serving lepers. The dynamics of service tasks, namely the motivation for serving lepers as a form of surrender to God, are also positive and negative emotions experienced when providing service to lepers. The challenges faced by nuns in the service process are the challenges of religious life, the challenges of serving lepers, and the solutions to each existing challenge.

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