



Original Article

Understanding Human Suffering among Black Nazarene Devotees: A Qualitative Study through the Lens of Edward Schillebeeckx

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Abstract

This study analyzes how devotees of the Black Nazarene perceive human suffering using Edward Schillebeeckx's theology of the method of correlation. The approach of Schillebeeckx has two aspects, namely, negative dialectics and positive sphere of meaning. Through these two moments, the study identifies similarities and differences in the devotees' perception of human suffering. This study employs qualitative research, particularly content analysis. Furthermore, purposive sampling serves as a tool for conducting in-depth interviews with selected devotees, taking into account the duration of their devotion, to gather data. This aims to explore the perception of devotees regarding how they understand and make sense of suffering in the context of faith in God. The results show that devotees perceive suffering as a means of taking part in God's kingdom. Their awareness of other people's suffering, their belief that suffering is a common human experience, and the association of their own suffering with Jesus the Black Nazarene – all of these demonstrate their involvement in the devotion. Devotees find spiritual consolation. This understanding emphasizes the spiritual resilience of the devotees, portraying suffering not simply as an experience but, as Schillebeeckx believes, as a way toward greater spiritual development and a positive moment. It enables individuals to relate their suffering to a broader, divine purpose, developing empathetic and nurturing faith within the community.

Keywords: Black Nazarene Devotion; Human Suffering; Negative Contrast of Experience; Positive Moment

Suggested citation:

Toledo, J.P. (2025). Understanding Human Suffering among Black Nazarene Devotees: A Qualitative Study through the Lens of Edward Schillebeeckx. *Hitik: International Journal of Catechists and Religious Educators*, 2(2), 90-107. <https://doi.org/10.63130/hijcre.v2i2.100>

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Introduction

The devotion to the Black Nazarene holds profound significance in the Filipino Catholic community. In January 2024, over 6.5 million devotees attended, transforming Manila's streets into a massive gathering (Parungao et al. 2024). The *Traslacion*, or the Feast of Nuestro Padre Jesus Nazareno, commemorates the transfer of the life-sized statue from Intramuros to its present shrine, Quiapo Church, every 9th of January. This image is a concrete symbol for devotees, especially the poor, offering a relatable image of struggle and hope. In other words, the image of the Black Nazarene symbolizes that he is one with the suffering of the million devotees across the country. The image reminds the devotees of Christ carrying his own cross (cf. John 19:17); this also emphasizes the close connection between his suffering and the human experience of difficulties and resilience (Tallara, 2022).

The annual procession is a spiritual pilgrimage where devotees draw the carriage bearing the image of the Black Nazarene as an act of penance and deep devotion. With this ritual, millions of stories of struggles and healings motivate the people to participate in the *Traslacion*. This image symbolizes a glimpse of hope amidst struggles. Further, answered prayers strengthen devotees' connection to their faith in Jesus. The faith embodies a dynamic manifestation of Christianity, providing a foundation of deep, genuine Christian faith (Manzano, 2022). Manzano believes that this devotion-drawn faith relies on God's salvific promises, ensuring resilience and spiritual growth in times of suffering and even persecution. The foundation of true Christian faith is the centrality upon which devotees build their relationship with the suffering Jesus in the Black Nazarene, anchored in the truth of Christ and His teachings. The devotion symbolizes a deeper truth about human existence: suffering, which can transform into collective resilience when perceived through the lens of faith.

To understand the context of suffering from the devotees to the Black Nazarene, the paper will answer the following questions:

1. How do devotees perceive human suffering?
2. How does the negative contrast of experiences relate to their perception of suffering?
3. How do their perceptions align with Schillebeeckx's ideas on suffering as a means of participating in God's reign?

Framework

The paper employed Edward Schillebeeckx's theology of suffering, particularly the method of correlation (Schillebeeckx, 1974), namely negative dialectic and positive sphere of meaning, as its primary theoretical framework.

The study preferred to utilize Schillebeeckx's method of correlation in the context of human suffering, as it was designed to provide a meaningful and dynamic relationship between two distinct, yet mutually informative, realities: the Christian tradition and human suffering. The method was driven by the negative contrast experience. It began with the negative dialectic, where the focus was not on answers from human perspectives, as they were not representative of humankind as a whole (Schillebeeckx, 1974), but rather on the experience of suffering, which posed a threat to the *humanum*. Then the positive sphere of meaning came from the experience of the meaninglessness (Schillebeeckx, 1974) of one's life; then, the universal pre-understanding of the *humanum* gave rise to the implicit potential and eventual redemption of humanity, providing a perspective in which a feeling of fullness, salvation, and serenity overcame the pointlessness of suffering. It then brought this

question into correlation with the positive sphere of meaning (the promise of God's Kingdom/salvation) found in the Christian tradition.

This framework offered the dynamic structure for interpreting how the devotees' experience of suffering was transformed from meaninglessness into a profound expression of faith and hope within the Filipino cultural and religious context. Schillebeeckx's theological framework set the study to provide insight into the relationship between religious interpretation of human suffering across time and personal devotion.

That is why Schillebeeckx (1994) debunked the notion of a divine mystery that could not be mediated by human experience, arguing that experiences were never isolated acts (such as purely psychological or religious ones). This theological framework enabled the study to contextualize and interpret the devotees' experiences, with a specific focus on the close relationship between individual spirituality and religious interpretations of suffering, as well as how these perceptions evolved over time and with personal devotion.

Methodology

The paper employed qualitative research, specifically phenomenological research, as it described the meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences with a concept or phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). Through a phenomenological design, the paper explored the lived experiences of devotees, particularly their devotion to the suffering Jesus Christ. Further, it analyzed the phenomenon of human suffering based on their personal experiences and obtained a thorough understanding of how they perceived and understood suffering through their faith.

The primary rationale for employing this methodology was its ability to explore the perceptions of human suffering grounded in the devotees' own stories. This allowed the study to gain insights into how personal devotion formed the meaning of suffering within a religious framework over time. By focusing on lived experiences, the research directly aligned with Schillebeeckx's view that human experiences were central to mediating divine mystery.

In addition, this paper utilized some AI assistance, such as Google Gemini and QuillBot, to generate themes and ensure proper grammar.

Significance of the Study

The main significance of the study was to reveal the concrete relationship between human suffering and faith, particularly how Black Nazarene devotees perceived suffering as a participatory way into God's kingdom. This transformed personal and communal suffering into sources of spiritual meaning, resilience, and compassion for others.

Further, by employing qualitative methods such as in-depth interviews, the research gathered the lived experiences of devotees and how suffering was personally and theologically understood within the Filipino Catholic devotional context. Lastly, the research encouraged a broader audience, including non-Catholics, to examine suffering through a hopeful and redemptive lens, highlighting the opportunity for spiritual growth and empathy while being mindful of the risks of romanticizing or trivializing the harsh realities of suffering.

Population and Respondents

This study focused on adult Black Nazarene devotees who actively engaged in religious activities, including the *Traslacion*, the first Friday devotion, and other associated events. Five respondents, each reflecting varying durations of dedication

(2 participants for 1–5 years, 2 participants for 6–10 years, and 1 participant for 11+ years), were chosen by purposive sampling to offer a range of insightful perspectives. Only adult devotees with at least one year of active devotion were included, while those under 18 or not actively practicing were excluded. Since the research study employs a qualitative approach, it involves a range of 5-25 participants (Creswell, 2007).

Interview Questions for Black Nazarene Devotees

1. *Ano ang pagtingin mo sa pagdurusa? (What is your perspective on suffering?)*
2. *Sa palagay mo, nakapagpabago ba ang iyong debosyon sa iyong pananaw tungkol sa pagdurusa? Paki-paliwanag. (Do you think that your devotion has influenced your perspective on suffering? Please explain.)*
3. *Sa palagay mo, ang karanasan sa pagdurusa ay isang uri ng pakikiisa sa Kaharian ng Diyos? Bakit? (Do you think the experience of suffering is a form of unity with the Kingdom of God? Why?)*

Data Collection

Data was gathered through in-depth, semi-structured interviews that explored respondents' perceptions of human suffering, how their devotion influenced these beliefs, and their theological understanding of suffering's relationship to God's kingdom. To protect privacy and promote sincerity in discussing individual experiences and opinions, respondents' identities were strictly secured.

Ethical Considerations

In conducting this study on the perspectives of Black Nazarene devotees regarding human suffering, the researcher upholds the highest ethical standards to ensure the safety, dignity, and rights of all participants. Ethical considerations form an essential foundation of this research, guiding every stage of data collection, handling, and analysis. As the study involves personal experiences, spiritual reflections, and potentially sensitive narratives, it is crucial that participants are fully informed about their role and protected throughout the process.

To guarantee transparency and respect for the respondents' autonomy, a clear explanation of their rights, the purpose of the study, and the measures taken to maintain confidentiality was provided prior to their participation. The statement below was read and presented to all respondents to secure informed consent and ethical clearance.

Informed Consent/Invitation for Devotees

Maraming salamat sa iyong pagsasaalang-alang sa paglahok sa pag-aaral na ito tungkol sa pananaw sa pagdurusa ng tao ng mga deboto ng Itim na Nazareno. Ang iyong paglahok ay nangangailangan ng isang malalimang panayam kung saan maaari mong ibahagi ang iyong mga personal na karanasan at paniniwala. Mangyaring tiyakin na mananatiling ganap na anonymous ang iyong pagkakakilanlan. Tanging ang mananaliksik lamang ang magkakaroon ng pahintulot na malaman ang mga personal na detalye. Ito ay ligtas na itatago at gagamitin lamang para sa mga pang-akademikong layunin. Mayroon kang ganap na karapatan na umatras mula sa panayam o pag-aaral anumang oras nang walang anumang kaparusan, at maaari kang pumili na hindi sagutin ang anumang tanong na hindi mo nais sagutin. Lubos naming pinahahalagahan ang

iyong malayang paglahok, at ang iyong tapat na mga sagot ay magbibigay ng mahalagang pananaw habang tinitiyak ang iyong privacy at kalayaan.

(Thank you very much for considering your participation in this study regarding the perspective on human suffering held by the devotees of the Black Nazarene. Your cooperation requires an in-depth interview where you can share your personal experiences and beliefs. Please be assured that your personal identity (name, age, home address, and other personal details) will remain completely anonymous. Only the researcher will have authorization to know your personal details, and they will be disposed of three years after the study. This information will be safely stored and used only for academic purposes. You have the full right to withdraw from the interview or the study at any time without any penalty, and you may choose to skip any question you prefer not to answer. We highly value your voluntary participation, and your honest answers will provide valuable insights while ensuring your privacy and freedom.)

The respondents read the statement above for the purpose of obtaining ethical clearance.

Findings

Initial Findings

The responses provided by Black Nazarene devotees who have been active for various years reflect how their religious experiences have changed their perception of suffering. Three respondents, who have been devotees for less than five years, view suffering as a normal and inevitable part of life. Suffering can also be experienced through our surroundings, such as friends, family, etc. However, when suffering is always anchored in the Black Nazarene, it can be a meaningful suffering. With this perspective on suffering, devotees inspire others to view suffering as a path to holiness. This early-stage devotee emphasizes the consoling quality of relating to Christ's suffering. This leads to spiritual consolation.

Table 1. Summary of the Interview and Common Themes

	Question no. 1	Question no. 2	Question no. 3
Respondent 1 (1-5 years)	<p><i>Ang pagdurusa ay isang karanasan ng bawat tao at ito ay hindi matatakasan mabuti man o masamang tao</i></p> <p>(Suffering is a universal human experience, and it is inescapable, whether a person is good or bad.)</p>	<p><i>Nung ako ay sumama sa Traslacion at first Friday mass mas naliwanagan ako na mismong si Jesus ay nagdurusay rin pala nung siya ay pinako sa krus pero dinala nya yun ng may pagsunod sa Diyos. Dito nakita ko na ang pagdurusay ay may kaakibat na ginhawa dahil sasamahan ka ni Hesus."</i></p> <p>(When I joined the Traslacion</p>	<p><i>Depende kung ang pagdurusay ko ay iniaalay ko sa Diyos at sinasamahan ko ng pananampalataya.</i></p> <p>(It depends on whether I offer my suffering to God and accompany it with faith.)</p>

		(procession) and the first Friday Mass, it enlightened me that Jesus himself too suffered when he was nailed to the cross, but he carried it out with obedience to God. Here, I saw that suffering is accompanied by comfort because Jesus will be with you.)	
Respondent 1 (1–5 years)	<p><i>Nuong una ay takot ako sa problema dahil hindi ko alam ang gagawin at kung ang magiging desisyon ko ba ay at tama, ngunit nung nag simula akong maging deboto ng poong itim na Nazareno ay lumakas ang loob kong harapang ito.</i></p> <p>(At first, I was afraid of suffering because I didn't know what to do or if my decision would be aligned. But when I started becoming a devotee of the Black Nazarene, my courage to face them grew stronger.)</p>	<p><i>Malaki ang naitulong sa'kin ng pagdedebosyon sa Nazareno dahil mas tumibay ako at nakikita kong sa Hesus mismo ay sinasamahan ko sa paghihirap dahil kada punta ko sa Quiapo at nakikita ko ang kanyang imahe ay nararamdamang kong kasama ko sya.</i></p> <p>(My devotion to the Black Nazarene has helped me a lot because I became stronger, and I feel that I am with Jesus Himself in my suffering, because every time I go to Quiapo and see His image, I feel that He is with me.)</p>	<p><i>Hindi ko man lubos na nauunawaa ang ibig sabihin ng kaharian ng Diyos, ngunit alam kong ang pagdurusa ko ay daan patungo sa kabutihan at kaligtasan. Sa pagdedebosyon ko ay nagiging inspirasyong din ako sa iba dahil marami akong nahihikayat na mga kaibigan.</i></p> <p>(I may not fully understand what the Kingdom of God means, but I know that my suffering is a path toward goodness and salvation. Through my devotion, I also become an inspiration to others because I encourage many of my friends [to join].)</p>
Respondent 3 (1–5 years)	<p><i>Sa totoo lang sanay na ko sa paghihirap dahil lagi ko naman nararanasan yan sa trabaho, pamilya kapag minsan hindi nagkakaintindihan o sa mga kaibigan, kaya hindi na bago sa'kin yung paghihirap o pagdurusan</i></p>	<p><i>Malaki ang nabago sa pagtingin ko sa paghihirap, nung nagging deboto ako ng itim na Nazareno ay mas lumawak ang pagtingin ko dito, dati sanay na ako sa paghihirap, ngayon mas nagging positibo</i></p>	<p><i>Ang kaharian ang Diyos ay ang kaligtasan dulot ni Hesus, kaya naniniwala akong kapag nakikiisa ako sa frist Friday lalo na sa Traslacion, naniniwala akong nagiging</i></p>

(To be honest, I'm already used to suffering because I always experience it at work, with family when we sometimes don't understand each other, or with friends, so suffering or problems are not new to me.)

ang pagtingin ko dito dahil naniniwala akong may Hesus Nazareno na gumagabay sa'kin. Bukod dun, nakakakrining din ako ng ibang deboto na nagpapatunay na lahat nang pagdurusan nila ay napagtugumpayan dahil kay Hesus Nazareno.

(There was a big shift in my perspective on suffering. When I became a devotee of the Black Nazarene, my perspective on it widened. I used to be just accustomed to hardship; now, my view on it is more positive because I believe that Jesus of Nazareth is guiding me. Besides that, I also hear from other devotees who testify that they overcame all their suffering because of Jesus of Nazareth.)

instrumento ako sa ng kaligtasan hindi lang sa sarili ko pati na rin sa ibang tao. Kaya kahit tatlong taon palang ako sa pagdedebosyon ay ipagpapatuloy ko ito dahil ito ang pamamaraan ko para magpasalamat sa Diyos at maging instrument ni Hesus sa ibang taong nahirapan sa buhay.

(The Kingdom of God is the salvation brought by Jesus, so I believe that when I unite in the First Friday [Mass], especially in the *Traslacion* (procession), I believe I become an instrument of salvation not just for myself but also for other people. That's why even though I have only been devoted for three years, I will continue this because it is my way of thanking God and being an instrument of Jesus for other people who are suffering in life.)

Respondent 4
(6–10 years)

Ang pagdurusay ay Isang bagay na dumating sa Buhay ng Isang tao kung saan ito ay dahilan sa kapabayaan din nito kung kaya't nahahantong sya sa sitwasyong ito

(Suffering is something that comes into a person's life, and it is also due to their own negligence (or carelessness), which leads them to that situation.)

Opo! malaking tulong Ang debosyon lalo't nasa panahon ng pagdurusay dahil nakakatulong ito na harapin ang suliranin sa buhay na may lakas na pananampalataya sa Diyos na tanging makapagbibigay ng pag asa"

(Yes! Devotion is a

Opo! Kung haharapin ng buong puso ang pagdurusay na may kalakip na pananampatalaya ito ang magiging paraan upang mapabilang sa Kaharian Ng Diyos.

(Yes! If one faces suffering wholeheartedly with accompanying faith,

			great help, especially in times of suffering, because it helps one face life's problems with strong faith in God, who is the only one who can provide hope.)	this will be the way to belong to the Kingdom of God.)
Respondent 5 (11+ years)	<p><i>Sa pagdurusa ko, nakakagaan ng loob, na nakikibahagi pala ako sa mga sakit at dusang dinaranas ni Jesus.</i></p> <p>(In my suffering, it is consoling to know that I am sharing in the suffering and struggles experienced by Jesus.)</p>	<p><i>Nagbabago, sa pagpanaw ng dalawang anak ko nun COVID 19, ang naging consolation ko ay manuod ng misa sa Quiapo sa cellphone ko.</i></p> <p>(It has changed. After the passing of my two children during COVID-19, my consolation became watching the Mass from Quiapo on my cell phone.)</p>	<p><i>Naniniwala ako sapagkat kung mapagtatagumpaya n ko ang mga pagdurusa dto sa lupa, mararanasan ko na ang kaligayahan sa kaharian ng Diyos.</i></p> <p>(I believe that if I can overcome the sufferings here on earth, I will experience happiness in the Kingdom of God.)</p>	

Though Respondent 3 perceives suffering as a personal accountability, the respondent still recognizes the importance of devotion as a source of strength during difficult times. This mid-stage devotee highlights participation in God's kingdom by fully embracing suffering with faith. For the respondent, there is a shift in perspective where religion not only provides comfort but also transforms suffering into a means of salvation.

With more than 11 years of devotion, respondent 5 shows an integration of suffering, faith, and personal loss, perceiving it as a part of Christ's suffering and the journey to God's kingdom. The story of this third respondent shows how sustained devotion can help people better understand suffering as a common experience with Jesus and a source of consolation during difficult times. This implies that the duration of devotion is a crucial consideration for a deeper connection between suffering and faith. This also emphasizes that devotion not only changes perceptions of suffering but also cultivates a sense of communal and spiritual connectedness. Moreover, their growth in faith aligns with Edward Schillebeeckx (1994), who suggests that suffering led to their metanoia, a change in their actions, mindset, and identity as devotees.

The following are the common themes found in the respondents' perceptions of human suffering:

1. Universality of Suffering: Respondents acknowledge that everyone will face suffering, regardless of their ethical principles, societal status, and religion. This theme highlights the universal suffering that all human beings experience.
2. Influence of Devotion: The respondents claim that their devotion to the Black Nazarene significantly influences their positive perspective on

suffering. It often provides consolation and fortitude in the face of difficulties, indicating the transformational potential of devotion.

3. Ritual Participation: Attending First Friday Mass, *Traslacion*, and other churches' participation related to the devotion are examples of rituals that can be used to have a new perspective on suffering. Respondents can give new meaning to their suffering by drawing a connection between their faith and Jesus' own suffering, as reflected in the devotion.
4. Spiritual Participation: According to the respondents, enduring hardship in faith may lead to a deeper sense of belonging to God's kingdom. They believe that struggle can be transformed into an avenue for heavenly connection and that suffering can be a method of achieving spiritual fulfillment.
5. Redemptive Perspective: There is a belief that obtaining genuine happiness in the hereafter can result from enduring suffering on earth. This redemptive perspective aligns with broader Christian theological concepts regarding the relationship between spiritual growth and suffering.
6. Communal and Spiritual Connection: Devotees develop a sense of community through shared suffering and devotion. Their shared faith is strengthened, and their spiritual journeys grow deeper as they endure pain together.

In the Philippine context, devotions, culture, and the human experience are deeply intertwined with the sociocultural foundation of suffering. Therefore, suffering is an inevitable part of life that transcends individual differences. Devotion to the Black Nazarene significantly offers a consoling interpretation of suffering and the transformative power of faith. Devotees find new meaning in their suffering by relating their own struggles to Jesus' suffering through participation in Black Nazarene devotional rituals. This spiritual involvement helps devotees to perceive struggles as a way to belong to God's kingdom. The redemptive perspective is consistent with broader Christian theology, acknowledging that genuine happiness with Christ is achieved after enduring earthly suffering. Communitarily, these themes demonstrate that suffering in the Philippines is not just a personal encounter but also a culturally and spiritually structured event that unites communities and strengthens faith-based resilience.

Furthermore, the resilience of Black Nazarene devotees is deeply rooted in their faith, which transforms suffering from a cause of hopelessness into an avenue for spiritual development and consolation. By connecting their own struggles with Jesus' suffering, they find strength and purpose through devotion and traditions like the First Friday Mass and *Traslacion*, which promote a sense of divine relationship and shared suffering.

In *Catechism for Filipino Catholics*, no. 51 (hereafter cited as CFC), Filipinos are resilient because they yearn for order (kaayusan) amidst chaos. This resilient spirit is further nurtured by the belief that enduring earthly suffering with faith leads to belonging in God's kingdom. This resilience is strengthened by the fellowship of devotees who share in suffering and encourage one another, strengthening both their individual and collective journeys of faith. Resiliency arises as a transformational spiritual practice that strengthens, consoles, and relates Christians in the face of difficulty. As CFC no. 2035 mentioned, "final destiny" is already an active and present reality. Perceiving human suffering as a way of uniting with Jesus' suffering is a way of being with Christ in His second coming. This interpretation connects current

suffering with eventual spiritual fulfillment by highlighting the promise of resurrection and eternal life.

Discussion

Schillebeeckx's Theology of Suffering

Schillebeeckx perceives suffering as a formative and harsh reality that needs theological reflection. The experience of human suffering presents an ongoing challenge to believers who seek to sustain their relationship with God in the face of the tragedies of human history (Ryan, 2024). Therefore, suffering is not merely a secondary concern, but an essential locus where the Christian message becomes intelligible amid the various faces of suffering (Schillebeeckx, 1994). The latter encourages Christians to admit limitations as part of human existence and demands an answer that transcends a mere surface-level solution. However, every answer from different sources resulted in a plurality of positive views, which cannot serve as the basis for a universal claim about the Christian answer (Schillebeeckx, 1974). As a result, the diversity of positive viewpoints cannot be the foundation for a universal Christian assertion, because these fragmented responses, which stem from a variety of human experiences, lack the singular focus and common denominator required to represent the comprehensive, unifying message of Christianity for all humanity.

Schillebeeckx's Theology of Suffering offers a transformative understanding of human suffering. His approach explores the relationship between the harsh reality of suffering and the hope rooted in the Christian faith, offering a sobering yet hopeful framework that resists simplistic explanations of evil and pain in the world.

The theological framework of the method of correlation in Edward Schillebeeckx arises from his theological exploration, particularly in examining the problem, rather than relying on a formula or theory, as theologian John Galvin would mention. That is why Schillebeeckx views suffering as the primary problem and then sees the method of correlation as the steps. Schillebeeckx also develops largely in response to observing the profound injustices and hardships present in the world, which led him to realize that such experiences of suffering must be acknowledged and interpreted within a theological context. He then suggests that negative contrast experiences, situations marked by injustice, oppression, or suffering, do not merely provoke despair but can also inspire a profound sense of protest and the impulse for transformative action. According to Schillebeeckx (1994), the crux of "negative dialectics" lay in the intersection between evil and suffering, as well as critical resistance against anything and everything that threatened the humanum (1994). Schillebeeckx's negative dialectics are thus connected to the survival and future of vulnerable humanity and creation, as they serve as a convincing explanation of a basic human experience. Therefore, part of human existence is suffering. These reflections underscore the conviction that through these experiences, individuals are innately driven to strive for a different reality that aligns more closely with their understanding of a just and flourishing humanity. Consequently, Schillebeeckx integrates these insights into a broader discourse about the spirituality of suffering and the potential for active engagement with these negative realities, framing them as foundational to a faith that seeks to respond positively amidst suffering. To make it clearer, there are two ways in which Schillebeeckx applies the method of correlation in relation to human suffering.

Firstly, the negative moment (negative dialectics), comprising experiences of limitation, suffering, and meaninglessness (Rego, 2006). This means that the negative moment in existential thought comprises experiences characterized by human limitation, suffering, and a pervasive sense of meaninglessness. This first

concept highlights the human condition, where individuals often confront difficulties, leading to feelings of despair and helplessness, especially if not addressed properly. Although suffering may result from a natural disaster, international violence, political injustice, or subtle personal oppression (McManus, 1999). This acknowledges the concept of suffering as part of human existence. Such experiences can arise from various situations, including the bereavement of loved ones, societal pressure, or existential crises that challenge one's worldview. It may be coming from other people or even from the personal consequences of one's actions. Nevertheless, there is also too much unnecessary and inhuman suffering (Rego, 2006). Suffering is part of human existence. Schillebeeckx's understanding of negative dialectics begins with outrage at excessive human suffering and is followed by protest and, eventually, praxis aimed at alleviating and ending the suffering (Moseley, 2014). Within this context, suffering is a fundamental aspect of one's existence. Recognizing these negative moments can serve as a catalyst for personal and communal growth, encouraging individuals to redefine their mission.

Nevertheless, Schillebeeckx emphasizes that these emotional responses are essential for recognizing the dignity of those who suffer and for invoking a collective call to action against oppression. Rego describes this as a contrasting experience of positivity. This is an opportunity to witness another situation that calls for action.

Secondly, a positive sphere of meaning, which comprises experiences of goodness, beauty, and meaning (Rego, 2006). Schillebeeckx (1972) believes that divine salvation can be achieved through individual faith and the addressing of suffering, such as injustice and a lack of freedom. This perspective sees the fight against dehumanization and the denial of freedom as a divine act of salvation.

Schillebeeckx offers a religious perspective on suffering that can be both constructive and meaningful. Negative experiences of contrast are also productive (Rego, 2006). This holds that suffering can be transformed and used to enrich a person in a meaningful way.

Christian claims to salvation are also interrelated to the method of correlation; this facilitates the proclamation of the Christian message (Rego, 2006). This acknowledges the need for divine intervention, which serves as a basis for proclaiming the Christian message of hope and redemption in the midst of suffering. Negative experiences of contrast, such as outrage at excessive human suffering, underscore that there are still limitations in human effort to achieve salvation. As the Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 581 (hereafter cited as CCC) states, the virtue of the saving work of Christ is accomplished once and for all. The Paschal mystery of Christ's cross and resurrection stands at the center of the good news that the apostles and the Church following them are to proclaim to the world. God's saving plan was accomplished "once and for all" by the redemptive death of his Son, Jesus Christ (CCC 571). Thus, by Jesus' sacrifice on the cross, it becomes the head of redeemed humankind (Schillebeeckx, 1963). It is emphasized that salvation is not attainable through any human actions alone; rather, it is a gift from God, as articulated in the doctrines of the Church, that through the Paschal Mystery, people are being saved once and for all. Such experiences deepen the understanding of the transformative nature of salvation through Christ, highlighting His sacrifice as the ultimate response to humanity's suffering. The virtue of the saving work of Christ is accomplished once and for all (CCC no. 1128). Therefore, amidst the reality of suffering and injustices, the Christian message proclaims that true hope and redemption lie in the Paschal Mystery of Jesus. With this, it offers a glimpse of hope for salvation to those who endure suffering in the name of Jesus. As devotees confront life's challenges, they can draw comfort from the assurance that Christ's paschal mystery has addressed the issue of sin and its

consequences, allowing them to forgive themselves and others. This act of divine grace transforms human suffering into a testimony of resilience and hope, emphasizing that despite the trials they may face, they are not alone; Jesus' enduring presence offers strength and a pathway to healing and restoration. Consequently, the message of salvation through Christ becomes a profound source of encouragement that instills hope amidst personal and collective suffering, affirming the belief that through Him, a new life is possible. Despite being burdened by the cross, gasping, and having his shoulders down (Catholic News Agency, 2024), the image of the Black Nazarene shows Christ standing up after the fall. This image of Christ symbolizes His unwavering strength and determination to persevere despite immense suffering. The very act of standing up after falling symbolizes the willpower to continue and conquer obstacles, even in Jesus' darkest hours. This might be the observation of devotees that consider their own hardships with a renewed feeling of hope and faith. Thus, the Black Nazarene suggests that hope may blossom even in the most difficult situations by serving as a source of encouragement for people confronting their own afflictions, as well as a reminder of Christ's suffering. This might possibly explain why the Black Nazarene is one of the most venerated religious icons in the Philippines. It is well known that Filipinos are resilient, as evidenced by the image of Jesus in the Black Nazarene.

The Christological aspect is when Jesus Christ fulfills His redemptive mission as the suffering servant (CCC no. 440), profoundly illustrating the relationship between divine purpose and human suffering. The cross of Jesus signifies the ultimate response to the problem of human suffering, as He willingly took upon Himself the sins and sorrows of humanity, thus bearing the iniquities of many. His suffering was not merely a tragic event but rather the fulfillment of messianic prophecies that reveal God's redemptive plan, emphasizing that through pain and humiliation, God's glory can be manifested. In addition, the Catechism of the Catholic Church states that all that Jesus did, said, and suffered had as its aim restoring fallen humanity to its original vocation (CCC no. 518). Further, Schillebeeckx (1963) states that Christ clearly gave His death the significance of a sacrifice of Himself to God for all. The Catechism of the Catholic Church and Schillebeeckx convey the importance of the suffering servant, emphasizing that His life and sacrifices were geared toward the salvation of all humankind. This idea resonates concretely with the devotion to the Black Nazarene, where devotees see Jesus as expressing deep human suffering and pain, reflective of their own struggles in life. Just as Christ's suffering was purposeful and transformative, allowing for reconciliation with God, the faithful relate their own difficulties to His passion, enabling them to embrace their suffering as a means to spiritual renewal and a deeper connection with God.

In other words, this paradigm shift shows that suffering can lead to healing and salvation, as exemplified in Isaiah's prophecies, where the suffering servant brings justice, salvation, and blessing to all nations. Consequently, Jesus' experience of suffering redefines our understanding of suffering, emphasizing that it can be a means of restoration and hope for humanity within the divine narrative of redemption. Edward Schillebeeckx (1963) perceives suffering that includes thoughts of transformation and purification. It also includes experiences of goodness, beauty, and significance. He states that, as seen by Jesus' crucifixion, suffering can result in significant spiritual and existential transformations. "My Father, Your will be carried out if it is impossible for me to finish this cup without sipping from it!" according to Matthew 26:42. Even Jesus exemplifies a transformational act of love by freely accepting His agony on the cross, emphasizing the full power of selfless love. Jesus' unconditional love for the people is symbolized by his obedience to trials—even to the

point of agony. Jesus' suffering in the image of the Black Nazarene and His identification with humanity causes a transformation that goes beyond empathy and offers a new perspective on how suffering is experienced by people. "There is also self-sacrificial suffering for a worthy cause. Fidelity to any worthwhile commitment must include the willingness to suffer for it. Suffering, then, can be quite a meaningful experience (Robin, 2008). It can lead to a closer relationship with God and spiritual growth.

Furthermore, communion with Christ is central to Schillebeck's theology of suffering. Human encounter, however, calls for mutual availability (Schillebeeckx, 1963). This shared experience requires active participation rather than a passive one in the story of salvation. Schillebeeckx primarily focused on the concept that Jesus fully entered humanity as the Son of God and was entirely human (Schillebeeckx, 1963). Jesus experienced every trial that comes with being a human, revealing His profound humanity. For those who are suffering, Jesus's incarnation provides inspiration and consolation.

According to Schillebeeckx, the eschatological hope that suffering brings draws a Christian hope of an eschatological glory in the future. This hope is not denied, as it acknowledges that ultimate and definitive salvation is from God, i.e., the eschatological element. This salvation is mediated in the world by human beings attending to negative experiences of contrast (Rego, 2006). This believes that the eschatological community must be rooted in their personal relationship with Jesus (Schillebeeckx, 1968). This is a concrete expression of how devotees relate their suffering to their devotion. The eschatological hope concept posits that although final and ultimate salvation comes from God, people actively participate in its reality in the world as a response to adverse experiences, such as injustice and suffering. By actively alleviating others' suffering, people can mediate God's grace by acting on their moral duties to turn empathy into action.

Schillebeeckx highlights the ecclesial dimension of devotion by exemplifying solidarity with those who suffer, as it is the body of Christ. The Church encompasses all who are afflicted with human suffering with love (*Lumen Gentium*, no. 8, hereinafter cited as LG). The ecclesial dimension entails a positive action for people who suffer. *Lumen Gentium* emphasizes the importance of the Church encouraging people in their endeavors, illustrating the teachings of Christ, who identified with human suffering. Jesus is sensitive to the needs and sufferings of every human being (Second Plenary Council of the Philippines no. 38, hereafter cited as PCP II). Even the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines has the same sentiment. The devotion to the Black Nazarene reflects Jesus' compassion for human suffering, as followers perceive Him in solidarity with the poor and afflicted, embodying their sufferings and aspirations for restoration. The faithful, who see their devotion as an opportunity to encounter and experience Christ's compassion in their everyday lives, are deeply bonded by this relationship and grow to value one another highly. In 1 Corinthians 12:12-26, the apostle Paul emphasizes the value of every individual member and the unity and diversity found within the Christian community by using the metaphor of the body. Suffering in relation to the Kingdom of God: "What is decisive [for Christians] is the praxis of the kingdom of God in solidarity with all men and women and, moreover, precisely in that and because of it, in a partisan choice for the poor and oppressed, against the oppression of powerful people and structures that grind down men and women" (Bergin, 2010). Bergin emphasizes that what matters to Christians is not merely holding theoretical beliefs but actively participating in the actualization of God's kingdom in action. This means being committed to standing in solidarity with everyone, regardless of social, economic, or cultural differences. To

highlight the importance of practicing one's religion and adhering to Jesus' teachings of loving and helping others, the concept of "praxis" is employed. This emphasizes the importance of taking a firm stand for justice, standing up to oppressive systems that are supported by powerful individuals and institutions, and making a tangible and deliberate decision on behalf of the underprivileged and oppressed.

Christian life in the world, being concerned with the world and practicing human solidarity, must therefore be for the Christian worship of God, glorifying God's name (Schillebeeckx, 1972). Furthermore, the devotion to the Black Nazarene illustrates how Christian life is deeply concerned with the world and the practice of human solidarity, as devotees engage in worship that not only glorifies God but also reflects their lived realities. Many Filipino devotees, particularly those from marginalized backgrounds, connect their suffering and hopes to the suffering of Christ depicted in the image of the Black Nazarene. In their fervent devotion, *Traslacion*, First Friday devotion, and other practices reveal a communal spirit where individuals support one another, sharing in prayer and hope for healing and miracles. This becomes an outward expression of their faith, showing that their worship is not isolated but rather permeates every aspect of their lives, creating a sense of community among those who pray for help from God and offer assistance when enduring suffering. Their worship becomes a powerful expression of faith that praises God and addresses the universal human experience of sorrow and hope, a testament to this devotion. Therefore, devotion to the Black Nazarene symbolizes the Church's image as a beacon of solidarity, where devotees, united in their struggles and prayers, collectively honor God while fostering a compassionate community that addresses shared human suffering and aspires to hope.

Edward Schillebeeckx's theology of suffering and the Devotees' Perception towards Human Suffering

Edward Schillebeeckx provides a fundamental framework for understanding how human suffering can be both a negative and a positive moment for social change and spiritual development.

According to McManus (1999), Schillebeeckx believes that there is creative and transforming knowledge that comes only from suffering. Using Edward's words, it is a critical and productive epistemic power.

That is why there is a demand to see suffering as an inspiration for active resistance and praxis aimed at easing suffering and promoting justice. According to Schillebeeckx, by engaging with suffering in this way, Christians strengthen their bonds with the poor, imitating Christ's role as the suffering servant and pursuing a faith that aims to change the world in line with God's goal for his kingdom.

To see the relationship between the respondents' viewpoints and Edward Schillebeeckx's theology, it is examined and summarized below:

Commonalities

Universality of Suffering

Schillebeeckx's Perspective: The notion that suffering is a universal experience is consistent with Schillebeeckx's contention that acknowledging another person's suffering extends an invitation to human empathy and connection. Both perceptions highlight how suffering is a common experience.

Devotees' View: The recognition that suffering affects everyone. This also reflects a collective experience that develops compassion and solidarity among devotees.

Influence of Devotion

Schillebeeckx's Perspective: He believes that faith can transform the experience of suffering, leading individuals to find deeper meaning and purpose through their suffering.

Devotees' View: Respondents emphasize how faith is vital in transforming their perception of suffering and how their dedication provides them with solace and strength.

Spiritual Participation

Schillebeeckx's perspective: suffering may provide a closer relationship with God and a clearer comprehension of one's spiritual path.

Devotees' Views: Schillebeeckx's theory that suffering can lead to spiritual fulfillment is also expressed by the conviction that enduring suffering with faith provides a deeper involvement in God's Kingdom.

Redemptive Perspective

Schillebeeckx's Perspective: Suffering can result in both individual and societal redemption when viewed through a theological lens, which is consistent with the Christian doctrine of salvation through adversity.

Devotees' Views: This redemptive perspective is reflected in the conviction that enduring suffering can lead to assurance in the afterlife, which aligns with Schillebeeckx's theological ideas.

Differences

Ritual Participation

Schillebeeckx's Perspective: While Schillebeeckx emphasizes the significance of community and ritual, his focus is more on the personal conversion and theological implications of suffering rather than on rituals.

Devotees' View: Respondents specifically mention rituals like *Traslacion* and First Friday Mass as integral to reframing their suffering, emphasizing the importance of communal practices that may not be explicitly emphasized in Schillebeeckx's framework.

Communal and Spiritual Connection

Schillebeeckx's Perspective: His theological framework emphasizes individual and collective suffering but may not focus extensively on the community aspect as a source of strength during suffering.

Devotees' View: The strong emphasis on communal faith practices among devotees highlights a specific cultural aspect that develops a sense of community and collective effort in the face of suffering, which may vary from Schillebeeckx's more individualistic theological reflections.

Furthermore, Schillebeeckx's theology and the devotees' lived faith emphasize suffering as a universal human experience that transcends religion, culture, and social status. In the Philippines, where suffering is everywhere, systemic poverty and social injustices are closely associated with political dynasties that concentrate wealth and power in a small number of families, especially in major areas. This makes poverty worse and restricts opportunities for the majority of Filipinos. Due to the lack of social services, unemployment, and substandard living conditions brought on by this concentration of power, millions of Filipinos are caught in cycles of suffering. In addition, the country has continued to experience criminality and violence. These

issues frequently result in their seeing themselves as vulnerable. According to Social Weather Stations, its December 2024 survey showed that the percentage of families who saw themselves as poor reached 63 percent, up 4 points from 59 percent in September 2024. Furthermore, a lack of domestic employment opportunities forces many Filipinos to work abroad, taking the risk of providing a better future for their families, which further divides families and communities. According to the Philippine Statistics Authority, the number of Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs), or Filipino workers who worked abroad from April to September 2023, was estimated at 2.16 million, an increase of 9.8 percent from the previous year's estimated number of 1.96 million. Millions of people throughout the country are affected by the harsh reality of suffering, which is reflected in these conditions.

That is why Schillebeeckx's theology of suffering and the Black Nazarene devotion serve as examples of how suffering is viewed as an active, transformational experience that fosters resilience and social bonds.

Devotees find renewed meaning in their suffering by aligning it with Christ's suffering, which empowers them to see their struggles as avenues to belonging in God's kingdom and ultimate redemption. This eschatological perspective affirms that earthly suffering is a necessary step on the path to God and shows a trust in the promise of resurrection and eternal life. A faith that is profoundly engaged with the realities of human suffering but rooted in divine promise, this devotion represents a transformative spirituality where suffering is not an endpoint but rather a process toward healing, justice, and hope.

Suffering and the Participation in God's Kingdom

Human suffering is not viewed as an end in itself, but rather as a transformative and redemptive experience within the Christian worldview, particularly when it is freely accepted as part of one's commitment to the reign of God (Asis, 2022). This concept highlights the potential for suffering to foster personal growth and social change, particularly among Filipinos who face injustices. Furthermore, Schillebeeckx (1963) believes that negative contrast experiences serve as a bridge to praxis, beginning with the recognition of evil and injustice, followed by indignation, outrage, and ultimately, the praxis of the kingdom of God.

The devotion to the Black Nazarene exemplifies this transformative power by relating the struggles of the devotees to the suffering of Christ, providing consolation, and symbolizing divine solidarity. The image of the Black Nazarene embodies the shared experience of suffering, developing a deep relationship between the Filipino community and a compassionate God who understands and participates in their hardships (Asis, 2022). In this way, the devotion serves as both a spiritual platform and a symbol of resiliency.

This understanding resonates with Edward Schillebeeckx's theological reflections, which emphasize the ability of suffering to foster empathy, personal growth, and collective solidarity. His call for Christians to engage actively in the praxis of God's Kingdom aligns with the respondents' emphasis on the ecclesial dimension and collective response to suffering. Schillebeeckx's theology and the lived experiences of Black Nazarene devotees are therefore unified by the conviction that suffering, when combined with faith, can foster social resilience and transform adversity into a means of achieving greater divine goals and promoting healing within the community.

Conclusion

Human suffering, it is hoped, should become an experience of faith inspired not by ignorance or innocence, but by an informed acknowledgement of God (Baring, 2010). This promotes seeing human suffering within the framework of faith. It highlights how important it is to acknowledge the Black Nazarene as the suffering servant to find hope. The challenge is to develop a profound understanding of the divine, seeking insight and understanding to analyze the concept of suffering from a religious perspective. It implies that the experience of human suffering can be as significant and transformative as Schillebeeckx believes in his second moment, going beyond ignorance and encouraging a deeper engagement with faith. Within the context of faith, this paradigm-shifting perspective on suffering is consistent with the idea of suffering as a component of belonging to God's kingdom. It challenges an oversimplified or naive faith and places a strong emphasis on an informed acknowledgement of God, inspiring believers to view suffering as a meaningful and active part of their spiritual development. Suffering is viewed as a transformative process, where those closely linked to God find significance in their trials as part of God's kingdom (cf. Matthew 20:23).

Consequently, the devotion to the Black Nazarene reflects the transformational potential of faith, as expressed by Edward Schillebeeckx, and serves as a profound symbol of suffering that transcends simple difficulties. Devotion to the Black Nazarene enables Christians to recognize that suffering is a means of solidarity with one another, a closer relationship with God through the Church, and to find great hope in Christ's eternal life.

Artificial Intelligence Disclosure

The researcher used QuillBot (2017) to enhance grammar, and Gemini AI (2024) assisted in organizing and interpreting the data for this research study. These tools supported the researcher in maintaining coherence, academic rigor, and efficiency throughout the research process.

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