

## Ecclesiastical evolution of St. Stephen Protomartyr Parish in Ligao City, Albay

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### Abstract

Churches served an important pillar in the cultural heritage of the community it belongs. This study aimed to trace the ecclesiastical evolution of St. Stephen Protomartyr Parish in Ligao City, Albay, by examining its historical transformations across various dimensions of church life and administration. It specifically sought to ecclesiastical development of the parish and identify the significant changes that have occurred in the parish in terms of its physical structure, leadership structure and liturgical practices. Furthermore, it aimed to develop an informational material based on the findings of the study.

Through qualitative method, the study utilized an interviews and documentary analysis. The findings revealed that the church began as a missionary church in the small settlement of Cavasi which evolved into an independent parish in Ligao City, Albay. Due to its adaptation on its society and with the aim of improving the church while preserving its purpose, significant changes occur in its physical structure, leadership structure and liturgical practices. These changes are observed in the preservation and enhancement of its physical structure, the expansion of its leadership structure and contextualization of its liturgical celebrations.

In addition, the research proposed the creation of a chronicle digest magazine titled, “Trayectoria: An Pagladaw Kan Parokya ni San Esteban.” This publication was designed to promote awareness and knowledge of this cultural heritage among resident, ensuring the preservation of parish legacy as an important institution of its community.

**Keywords:** Church Evolution; Cultural Heritage; Church History; Qualitative Method; Interviews and Documentary Analysis

### 1. Introduction

Churches and parishes have played an important role in defining societies, influencing cultural heritage, urban development, and community life. They have stood as silent witnesses to the persistent events of human history. Far more than just buildings of stone and mortar, they are living sources of faith, tradition, and community.

In the context of Ligao City, Albay, the St. Stephen Protomartyr Parish stands as a historical and religious landmark symbolizing the rich history and enduring devotion of Ligaoños. Since its foundation, the parish has undergone various phases of both visible and intangible development. From its humble beginnings as a missionary church to the construction of a permanent stone building, and from the leadership of pioneering priests to the growing involvement of the laity, the parish has continually evolved to meet the needs of its people. Despite natural disasters and societal changes over the years, it has remained a strong symbol of faith and strength. However, the enduring relevance of the parish exceeds its colonial origins; it has evolved into a vital support system for the community. Given that the Bicol region is frequently hit by typhoons, the church building serves as a sanctuary when disaster strikes. By acting as both

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a spiritual guide and a center for relief, the parish has successfully combined its religious mission with the practical necessity of community survival.

The necessity of this study is grounded in legal frameworks that mandate the preservation of cultural and historical heritage in the Philippines. Section 7 of Republic Act No. 7356 mandates that it is the duty of every citizen to preserve and conserve the nation's historical and cultural heritage. Furthermore, Section 2 of Republic Act No. 10066 (the National Cultural Heritage Act of 2009) states that "the State shall foster the preservation, enrichment and dynamic evolution of a Filipino culture based on the principle of unity in diversity."

As a Social Studies teacher and a lifelong parishioner, I see a pressing need to document the ecclesiastical evolution of St. Stephen Protomartyr Parish. Direct engagement with the church has revealed that the present generation often lacks awareness of the parish's role in shaping the local community. This underscores the critical need to preserve this heritage, ensuring the legacy of the parish continues to inspire future generations.

### **1.1. Statement of the Problem**

This study aims to trace the ecclesiastical evolution of St. Stephen Protomartyr Parish in Ligao City, Albay, by examining its historical transformations across various dimensions of church life and administration.

Specifically, it seeks to answer the following questions

- What is ecclesiastical evolution of St. Stephen Protomartyr Parish in Ligao City, Albay?
- What are the significant changes that have occurred in St. Stephen Protomartyr Parish in terms of:
  - Physical structure
  - Leadership structure
  - Liturgical practices
  - What informational material can be developed based on the findings of the study?

### **1.2. Scope and Delimitation**

The purpose of the study is to determine the history and changes of St. Stephen Protomartyr Parish in Ligao City, Albay over time. In terms of its changes, the study will focus on the changes in physical structure, leadership structure and liturgical practices. Lastly, the study aimed to create a chronicle digest magazine of the church.

The study involved two (2) former and current priests assigned in the parish, four (4) local parish employees who served the parish and four (4) elderly local parishioners. As a whole, the study will gather information from these ten (10) informants. The narratives of the parishioners outside the city are not included.

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## **2. Materials and Methods**

### **2.1. Research Design**

The study utilized historical type of research design to determine the ecclesiastical evolution of St. Stephen Protomartyr Parish in Ligao City. It was also used in analyzing the history of the parish and the significant changes that happens in terms of its physical structure, leadership structure and liturgical practices.

According to Dr. Prime, R. (2024), historical research is a qualitative research method which involves systematic inquiry into past events, aiming to reconstruct and interpret history accurately. This research method involves analyzing primary and secondary sources to understand past occurrences, their causes, and their impact on subsequent developments.

Therefore, historical research design was deemed to be the most appropriate method to be used in this study as it provides an in-depth analysis of the subjects of the study. The method includes the careful study on the primary sources derived from the oral histories of the parishioners and secondary sources including the relevant articles about the parish.

### **2.2. Key Informants of the Study**

The informants served as the primary source of data that was utilized in the study. The primary data were taken from the oral histories of 10 informants. They were composed of former and current priests assigned in the parish namely

Fr. Manuel Camu and Fr. Paulo Barandon respectively; lay persons and elderly parishioners. The criteria in selection of informants were: a) age, b) years of residence, c) character reputation, and d) experiences in the parish.

#### *2.2.1. Research Instrument*

The researcher utilized two primary tools to gather data: documentary analysis and interview.

### **2.3. Documentary Analysis**

Document analysis is a methodical process of reviewing and evaluating printed and electronic documents to uncover meaning and gain understanding (Lumivero, 2024). This includes accessing of articles, and existing literatures on church' history to validate and complement the qualitative data obtained from the informants.

The documents analyzed in this study were the record of the Succession of Pastors and articles of parish activities taken from the parish official website: [st.stephenligao.org](http://st.stephenligao.org); the informant's personal copy of Orientation Training on the General Policies for Barangay Pastoral Council and the parish history accessed in the Polangui Municipal Library. In addition, the historical literatures used in the study found in Ligao City Heritage Library and Museum were the research study of Ruivivar, Expectacion D. (1975) titled, "Ligao: An Object of Change (Historical Development of Ligao)", the book of Gerona, Danilo M. (2010) titled, "Ligao: Abaca and The Saga of Prosperity", the coffee table magazine titled, "Ligao Na Nagimátan Namũ" by Ligao Historical Society, Inc. (2021) and Ligao Town Fiesta Souvenir program dated 1996 and 1987.

### **2.4. Interview**

In order to gather primary data, the informants were interviewed on their knowledge about the past and present parish' structure and leadership; and their experiences on the parish liturgical practices. Highlighting also the significant changes that happens in the parish on these aspects.

- Preparation of Interview. In the preparation for the interview, the researcher prepared questionnaire as a guide in the interview. Questions were aligned to the statement of the problem of this study. A draft of the interview questions was submitted to the research adviser for critiquing.
- Instrument Validation. To ensure the validity and reliability of the research instrument, a dry run of the interview questionnaire was carried out to the selected Arling Pan Lipunan teachers in Bacon High School. Feedback from the dry run was analyzed and used to refine the interview questions, also considering the input from the research adviser.
- Conducting the interview. Before the actual interview to the informants, a formal request letter was given to the informants to undertake the study. Upon approval, the researcher set an appointment date for interview based on the informant's availability. During the interview, the researcher makes use of recording device to ensure the exact details of participants' responses. It was emphasized that the data gathered in the interview will be solely used in the purpose of the study.

### **2.5. Ethical Considerations**

Formal approval was sought from the parish and informants. Each informant was provided informed consent, understanding the study's purpose, procedures, and voluntary nature. Information gathered was used exclusively for research purposes and not shared externally

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## **3. Results and Discussion**

### **3.1. The Ecclesiastical Evolution of St. Stephen Protomartyr Parish**

The ecclesiastical evolution of St. Stephen Protomartyr Parish shows the gradual transformation of the community from an early missionary settlement into a fully established and significant parish in the region. Its development was transformed by missionary activities, administrative changes, physical reconstruction and sustained religious devotion despite the environmental challenges posed by the nature.

The Foundation of the Parish. The parish began as a missionary settlement in the village of Cavasi. Under the leadership of Franciscan friars, the village was initially an extension of the Parish of Polangui. The early community life was confirmed in the first recorded baptism on August 24, 1608 officiated by Fray Luis de San Juan, the first appointed pastor (Ruivivar,1975). While the existence of Ligao's first church with Saint Stephen as its patron saint was also supported by

another record of baptism in 1614 when Ligao was a sitio of Oas (Ruivivar, E. 1975). On 1665, it became an independent parish (Franciscan Communications, 2022). During this time, it was under the Diocese of Caceres. This marks the parish autonomy through the presence of resident clergy, and administration of sacraments over its growing Catholic community.

The parish journey aligns with the findings of Kinoti, M., and Nteere, N. M. (2021)<sup>1</sup>, which asserts that missionary work is the sine qua non or integral part for church growth. Its transformation from being a missionary outpost to an independent parish reflects how missionary initiatives act as a catalyst in establishing a stable and long-term religious institution. Furthermore, this transition reflects how the parish thrive to expand and spread Christianity in the community.

**Architectural Resiliency.** Alongside with administrative development was the evolution of its church structures. The earliest chapel was built in 1606 made of light and highly combustible materials consumed by fire few years after its construction (Gerona, D., 2010). Subsequent attempts were made to reconstruct another chapel with the same material; however, these attempts failed due to natural calamities such as typhoons and earthquakes.

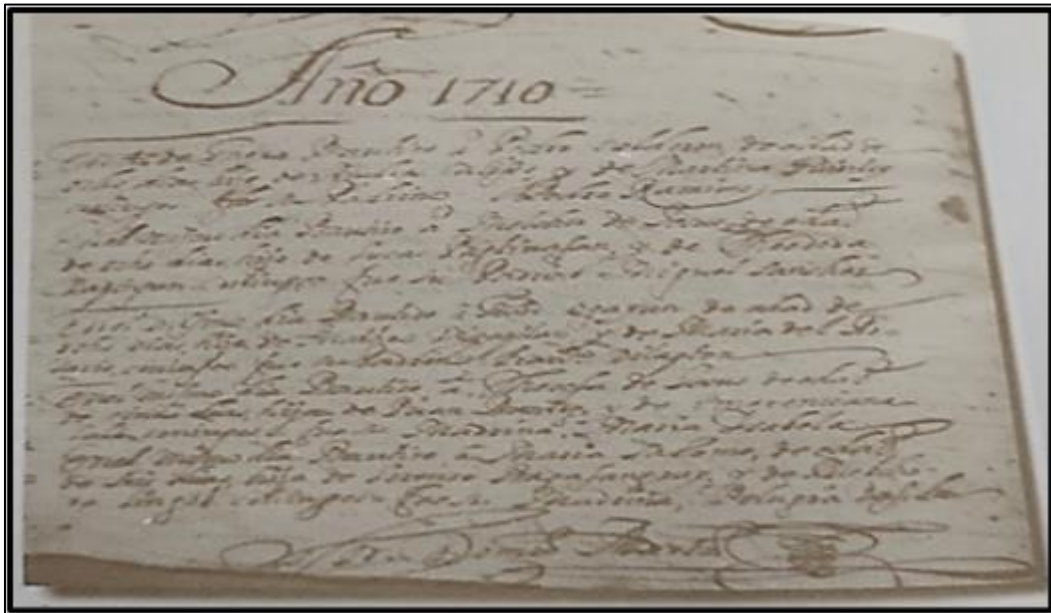


Photo was taken from Gerona, D. M. (2010). Ligao: Abaca and the Saga of Prosperity. Bikol Historical Research Center, p. 10

**Figure 1** Sample of Baptismal record dated 1710

### 3.1.1. Sanctuary Through Social Change

In the subsequent years, the church was an eye witness of the significant events in the community. It survived the Japanese (1941-1945) and American (1898-1946) period, adapting its structures in response to the changes in social, political and cultural aspects. One of the important roles of the church happened when the Japanese occupied Ligao during World War II. In the study of Delia Mendoza (2015), she cited that, “the church served as a place for people who sought refuge for peace and tranquility.” It indicates that church is not confined within religious context, rather it can also be a sanctuary for its parishioners. This proves the flexibility of the church in catering the needs of the community.



Photo Courtesy of Ruivivar, E. p. 60-A

**Figure 2** Ligao Church (1940)

Significant Milestone. In celebration of its 400 years of evangelization life, a Quadricentennial marker was placed in the Parish on December 26, 2008. As stated, the occasion was attended by Most Rev. Lucilo B. Quiambao, D.D., Bishop Administrator of Legazpi with the clergy, religious, the Parish Pastoral Council and lay parishioners (City Government of Ligao Website). This signifies that the church does not only become a trade mark but contributes to rich history and an enduring heritage of its community.

Similarly, it is aligned to Artuz, L. (2020)<sup>2</sup> study which concludes that the churches' old cultural religious practices, the culture of the devotees and praying as holy leisure play a significant part on its role in local tourism as a representation of culture while sacred vessels like the tabernacle, bell tower, patron saints and retablos play a significant part on its role in local tourism as attraction value of destinations. This is evident in the Quadricentennial marker of St. Stephen Protomartyr Parish which acts as a "sacred vessel" that reflects the church's history and provides additional attraction value. Furthermore, being a Jubilee Church, it provides a space for "holy leisure" where pilgrims experience the local culture. Therefore, this affirms Artuz' conclusion that by preserving the sacred objects and religious customs, the church can be a meaningful destination for pilgrims.

"First Parish" Claim. In an interview with Fr. Paulo Barandon, the current parish priest, he shared that, "In our research, first parish in the whole Philippines under the patronage of St. Stephen iyo an Ligao. (In our research, the first parish in the whole Philippines under the patronage of St. Stephen is the church in Ligao.)" To verify this claim as the "first parish" dedicated to St. Stephen Protomartyr Parish, comparative analysis of founding dates was conducted:

- Saint Stephen Protomartyr Parish (Ligao City). Founded in 1608
- Saint Stephen Protomartyr Parish (Ilocos Sur). Founded in 1625 by the Augustinian priests (Cabalo, n.d.)
- Saint Stephen Protomartyr Parish (Sta. Cruz Manila). Began in 1903 serving Anglican communities (St. Stephen's Parish, Manila - Episcopal Church in Santa Cruz, Manila, Philippines, n.d.-b).

These evidences confirmed that Ligao is the pioneer for this specific patronage in the country. The research analyzes that the ecclesiastical evolution of the Parish shows how it was changed and developed over time. Despite the changes, the Parish continues to follow traditional church leadership. The present Parish priest remains strong even if new forms of participation show adaptation to modern times. In the researcher's point of view, the ecclesiastical evolution of the Parish shows that it is not static but continues to grow with the community. This means that there are an increase involvement and participation of the lay members and the parishioners of St Stephen Protomartyr Parish.

### 3.2. Significant Changes in St. Stephen Protomartyr Parish

#### 3.2.1. Physical Structure

The physical structure of the parish has evolved considerably to meet the changing needs of its parishioners. The following were the notable changes in its physical structure:

#### 3.2.2. Church Building

The first church structure was made of light materials which was destroyed by fire. Later, a more permanent church structure which was made of stone and bricks was constructed during the leadership of Fr. Francisco Vicente on 1676. In 1709, construction of another church was undertaken by Fray Ildefonso de San Buenaventura near the present site of the convent. In 1812, its façade built with was completed under the term of Fr. Manuel Rojo and in 1846 the roof of tiles was finished. In 1881, the church was completed and its bell tower completed in 1882 during Fr. Manuel Crespo's term (Ruivivar, E, 1975)3.

The church building was challenged by natural calamities such as typhoon. The priest leaders in collaboration with the parishioners, continue to make efforts in preserving and enhancing it. In 1954, the roofing of the church was finished and in 1955 the belfry was repaired and the recasting of the bells with the aid of Eduardo Matias and Jesus Arcada (Ruivivar, E, 1975). The finished church got positive feedback from the priests. As stated in the book of Gerona, M. (2010) p. 51, "Fray Valentin Morales y Marin spoke of it as the most beautiful in the entire province of Albay. Also, Msgr. Justiniano Romano described the church as: The roof of the church and the convent was of red Spanish tiles, the ceiling and walls were painted beautifully and the wealth in ornamental lights, church appurtenances and furniture showed itself in spite of age." These highlights the church beauty from the point of view of Fray Valentin and Fray Romano who emphasized its architectural design and interior decorations. Also, it reflects the elegance of the church and meticulous craftsmanship. These comments signifies that the church was not only a place of worship but also a pride of the province.

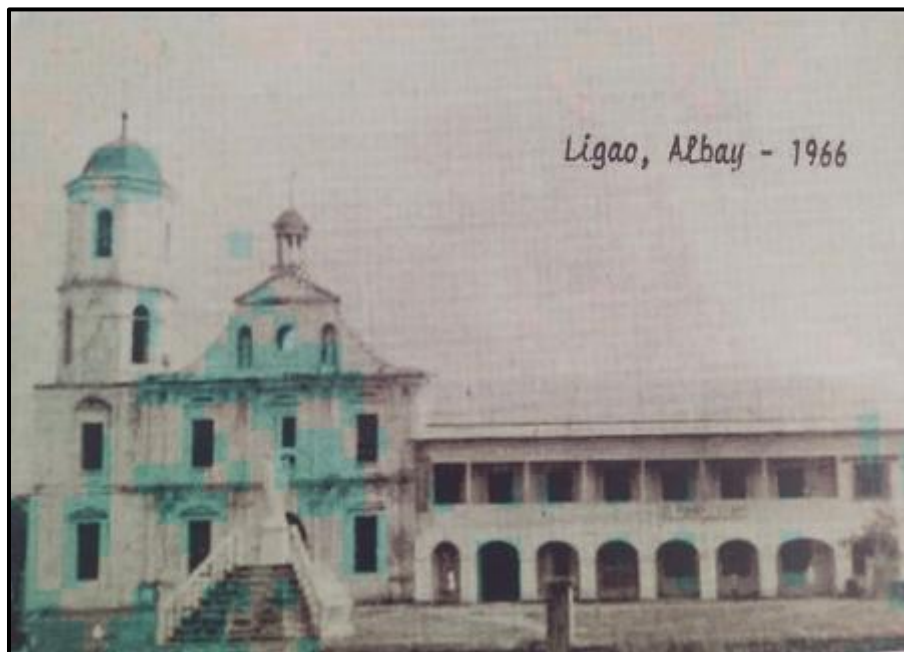


Photo Courtesy of Ligao City Library

**Figure 3** Church Façade (1966)

Over the years, the church renovation continues. In 1969, cementing the church flooring, the painting of the main and side altars plus the walls and ceilings was undergone through the leadership of Fr. Jose Ras. While Fr. Domingo Baybay contributes on the cementing of the church roof, installation of steel doors and stained-glass window. During the term of Fr. Manuel Camu, the Chapel of the Saints was created. It is located under the church tower which serves as the safe storage of the images of the saints (St. Stephen Parish Exhibit, 2025).



Photo Credits of Armageddon Views

**Figure 4** Church façade (2000-2019)

The parish priests in the modern times focused on the continued church development and restoration. The church was already painted when Rev. Fr. Monsignor Tronqued arrived in the parish as parish priest in the year 2017 as shown in Figure 4. One of his projects was the restoration of the church facade. This project started by removing layers of paint and adhesive to reveal the authentic color and architecture of the church (St. Stephen Parish Exhibit, 2025).

The researcher analyzes the restoration project of Msgr. Tronqued façade restoration. This project revealed the authentic color of the church. This means that despite having modern architectural colors, historical heritage sites should maintain their authenticity. However, the study Ibañez, A. et.al. (2020)<sup>4</sup> mentioned that scraping the church' surfaces to show its "authenticity" has been proven wrong since removing the surface of stone walls has led to the deterioration of the structure. Though maintaining the authenticity is important for the community to connect to its historical identity, the method used posed technical challenges to the structure.



Photo Courtesy of Raymond P. Rosales

**Figure 5** Present façade of St. Stephen Protomartyr Parish

The researcher analyzes that the shift from light materials to stone bricks signifies an architectural permanence and marks the beginning of the church role as a tangible heritage site. The removal of modern layers which reveals its original stone is a move for preserving its historical identity. In the researcher's perspective, this church building represents resiliency as it withstood centuries of natural calamities. This means that it is not just an old building but an active witness of its community's ability to surpass disasters over time.

### 3.2.3. *The Retablos and Altar*

The altar is the most important part of the church. It is located at the center and used for the celebration of the Mass. Whereas, the retablos are a vertical multi-tiered structure behind the altar with an elaborate frame enclosing revered objects, which may include religious paintings, sculptures, or both (Catholics at Work, 2023). Though they differ in meaning, in the perspectives of the parishioners these too are both sacred and is a symbolism of faith and worship.

According to the study of Ruivivar, E. (1975), the altar in 1709 is facing the southwest. In 1952, due to typhoon Trix the transept was unroofed, the altar was transferred to the nave section. Fr. Justiniano Romano solicited funds for the roofing. In 1954, the roofing was finished and the altar was returned to its original place. Fr. Ras continued the church improvement, and the main side of the church altars was painted. In an interview with Divina Pavilando, a parishioner, she mentioned that, "the altar she remembered was an altar made of stone during the time of Fr. Ras". Later in 1993, Fr. Eulogio Lawenko installed the permanent altar.



Photo Courtesy of Ligao City Fb Page

**Figure 6** St. Stephen Protomartyr Parish altar circa 1957

Being the center of altar reflects how the community paid respect and veneration to their patron saint. The main altar is elevated by several steps and found at the center. Statues of the Sacred Heart of Mary and Jesus are placed on both ends of the side of altar. And a communion rail was also seen in the picture. The photo was taken during the Feast of the Sacred Heart of Jesus on June 20, 1957.

Figure 7 depicts the old silver-plated retablo mayor of the Parish. The altar also reflects the pre-Vatican II reformations which was set up for a Tridentine Mass where the priest faces the altar. It emphasizes a path focusing the divine through its elevated tabernacle and a balanced architectural column. This altar is not merely a religious object but a reflection of Spanish design blended with Bicolano's artistry.



Photo Courtesy of Leo Irwin Lindio

**Figure 7** Old silver-plated retablo mayor



Photo Courtesy of City Government of Ligao FB Page

**Figure 8** Current altar of St. Stephen Protomartyr Parish

Figure 8 shows the current altar and retablos of the parish. This new transformation of the altar was made possible by the current parish priest, Fr. Paulo Barandon along with the collective efforts of its parishioners via “Sinsilyo Para sa Retablo” initiative. Even the humblest members of the community contributed to this restoration. Started in 2023, he started the restoration of the retablos inspired by the church’ original retablo design. As defined by Fr. Paulo, this is a true “community project” emphasizing the shared spirit of its members.

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#### 4. Conclusion

From the light of the foregoing findings, the following conclusions were drawn:

The parish evolution from being a missionary outpost to an independent church proves the successful establishment of a local Catholic community in Ligao City. It indicates how Ligaoños embraced the religion and continue to be a devoted Catholic community. Being one of the 2025 Jubilee churches is an indication of the expansion of its religious services extending it to pilgrims from other places. This is more than just physical growth but a reflection of an enduring spiritual identity over the years.

The significant changes in the parish physical structure were aligned to the needs of its century old structure and with the needs of its growing community members. Furthermore, the significant changes in its leadership structure and liturgical practices denotes that the parish clergy are solely not responsible for the effectivity and sustainability of church life. Instead, the active involvement of the laity as structured through the WESTECFLYC model, emphasized the importance of being active members of the parish and how cohesion builds a meaningful relationship between the parish and the community.

The creation and proposal of the chronicle digest magazine titled, "Trayectoria: An Pagladaw Kan Parokya ni San Esteban Protomartir" can be a tool in spreading awareness and preservation of the parish history. It serves as a bridge for future generation understand their past and continue the legacy of Ligaoños Christian community.

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## Compliance with ethical standards

### *Acknowledgments*

"Be strong, be fearless, be beautiful. And believe that anything is possible when you have the right people there to support you." – Misty Copeland. It was indeed impossible to accomplish this research study without the immeasurable support of the following amazing people.

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### *Disclosure of conflict of interest*

I declare that I have no conflicts of interest related to this research. I have no personal or financial relationships that could influence my work.

### *Statement of informed consent*

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study

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