

Catechesis as a Pastoral Strategy for Faith Formation in a Rural Catholic Community in Indonesia

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Abstract. This study examines catechesis as a pastoral strategy for faith formation in a rural Catholic community in Indonesia, focusing on its concrete effectiveness amid real pastoral challenges. Using a qualitative-descriptive approach, data were collected through semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and document analysis involving parishioners, catechists, and pastoral leaders. The findings indicate that catechesis generates deep personal and relational transformation among actively engaged participants, strengthening doctrinal understanding, moral discernment, and communal responsibility. However, its impact remains uneven, operating more intensively at a qualitative level than expansively at a communal scale due to structural constraints, limited catechist resources, economic demands, and low participation rates. The study further shows that catechesis in this context is not merely universal but deeply contextual, integrating local cultural practices, kinship values, and communal storytelling into its pedagogical process. In response to digital challenges, catechesis emphasizes embodied encounters and dialogical learning rather than technological sophistication. Rather than confirming normative catechetical ideals, this research offers an empirically grounded portrait of catechesis as a fragile yet meaningful pastoral practice whose transformative potential depends on specific relational, cultural, and structural conditions.

Keywords: Catechesis; Faith Formation; Pastoral Strategy; Rural Catholic Community; Contextual Theology; Digital Challenges

1 Introduction

Faith formation lies at the heart of the Catholic Church's evangelizing mission, rooted in Christ's command to "make disciples of all nations" (Mt 28:19). Within this mission, catechesis has long been recognized as a fundamental pastoral practice that nurtures believers' intellectual, spiritual, and moral development. According to *Catechesi Tradendae*, catechesis is not merely the transmission of doctrinal content but a holistic process aimed at forming mature Christian disciples [1]. Similarly, the *General Directory for Catechesis* emphasizes that catechesis constitutes an integral dimension of the Church's evangelizing activity, enabling believers to live out their faith with personal conviction and social responsibility [2].

In the Indonesian Catholic context, particularly in rural areas, catechesis plays a decisive role in sustaining faith life amid limited pastoral resources. Rural Catholic communities often function as small, semi-autonomous ecclesial units under the supervision of a central parish, commonly referred to as *stations*. These communities are typically characterized by strong interpersonal bonds, shared religious practices, and collective responsibility for spiritual growth. However, catechesis in such contexts is frequently perceived as mere religious instruction rather than a transformative encounter with Christ and the Christian community [3]. This instrumental understanding risks reducing catechesis to cognitive learning alone, neglecting its formative, relational, and existential dimensions. As noted by Hardawiryana and Wignyanta, effective catechesis must engage the whole person—mind, heart, and action—if it is to produce authentic Christian witness [4,5].

Contemporary pastoral realities further complicate faith formation processes. Global secularization, media saturation, and shifting sociocultural patterns increasingly shape how individuals internalize and express their religious beliefs. Pope Francis highlights that evangelization today must address these complex dynamics by fostering personal encounter, dialogue, and missionary engagement rather than mere doctrinal transmission [6]. Recent studies on religious education confirm that younger generations, in particular, engage more meaningfully through experiential, dialogical, and visually mediated learning processes than through traditional lecture-based instruction [7,8]. Consequently, pastoral strategies must evolve by integrating interactive pedagogies, community-based reflection, and contextual relevance. The *Directory for Catechesis* further calls for innovative catechetical models that are kerygmatic, participatory, and inculturated, ensuring that faith formation responds to concrete local realities while remaining faithful to the Gospel message [9].

Within this broader framework, this study focuses on a rural Catholic community in Indonesia specially in Labe Stasion community of Santa Teresa of Calcutta Parish, as a microcosm of these pastoral challenges and opportunities. Despite its strong communal identity, catechetical participation remains inconsistent due to time constraints, a shortage of trained catechists, and limited pedagogical creativity. Nevertheless, pastoral theology suggests that even small, lay-led communities can become powerful agents of spiritual transformation when doctrinal depth is integrated with lived experience [10,11]. This setting therefore provides fertile ground for exploring how contextualized catechesis can deepen faith, strengthen communal solidarity, and promote ethical transformation.

Empirical and theological scholarship increasingly affirms that catechesis is most effective when embedded within relational, participatory, and socially engaged frameworks. Studies indicate that integrative models—such as family catechesis, digital learning platforms, and service-based formation—significantly enhance spiritual maturity and social commitment [12,13]. These approaches embody what Pope Francis describes as a “missionary dynamism” that transforms catechesis from passive instruction into an active process of encounter, dialogue, and conversion [6].

Accordingly, this study investigates catechesis as a pastoral strategy for faith formation in a rural Catholic community in Indonesia. It seeks to analyze how catechesis contributes to doctrinal understanding, spiritual deepening, and communal participation, while also identifying structural and cultural obstacles that hinder its effectiveness. By situating this

research within its specific socio-religious context, the study contributes to the growing body of scholarship on contextual catechesis and practical theology. Ultimately, it argues that catechesis, when reimagined as a participatory and transformative process, becomes not merely a means of religious instruction but a lived journey of faith in communion and mission [14,15].

2 Methodology

This study employs a qualitative-descriptive design to examine catechesis as a pastoral strategy for faith formation within a rural Catholic community such as in Labe Station community of Santa Teresa of Calcutta Parish, Indonesia. A qualitative approach is particularly appropriate for this inquiry because it allows for an in-depth exploration of lived religious experiences, meanings, and social practices as they are interpreted by community members themselves [16]. Rather than aiming for statistical generalization, this research seeks to produce contextually grounded insights into how catechesis is understood, experienced, and enacted in everyday ecclesial life. Such an approach is especially relevant in pastoral and theological research, where faith practices are deeply embedded in relational, cultural, and symbolic dimensions of human experience.

Given the normative and faith-based nature of the research setting, particular attention was given to maintaining analytical objectivity and avoiding a merely appreciative or pastoral-reporting tone. To this end, the study adopted a reflexive qualitative stance, which emphasizes critical awareness of the researcher's positionality, assumptions, and potential interpretive biases [17]. Reflexive field notes were maintained throughout the research process to document methodological decisions, emotional responses, and emerging presuppositions. This practice enabled a continuous differentiation between empirical description and theological or pastoral evaluation. Furthermore, the analysis was guided by systematic coding procedures rather than intuitive interpretation, following the reflexive thematic analysis model proposed by Braun and Clarke [18]. This ensured that findings emerged inductively from participants' narratives rather than being imposed by predefined theological categories.

To strengthen analytical rigor and credibility, methodological triangulation was applied by integrating data from semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and parish document analysis [19]. This multi-source strategy enabled cross-validation of emerging themes and minimized the risk of idealized or one-dimensional interpretations. In addition, member checking was conducted by sharing preliminary findings with selected participants, allowing them to verify the accuracy of interpretations and to clarify possible misunderstandings [20]. This process enhanced the trustworthiness of the data and reinforced the study's interpretive transparency.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling, which is commonly used in qualitative research to identify information-rich cases relevant to the research objectives [21]. The inclusion criteria were designed to ensure diversity of perspectives, roles, and levels of involvement in catechetical activities. Parishioners were included if they had actively participated in catechetical or parish activities for at least two years, catechists were selected based on their direct involvement in organizing and facilitating catechetical programs, and pastoral leaders were chosen due to their formal leadership roles within the parish structure. A total of twenty informants participated in the study, consisting of ten parishioners, six catechists, and four

pastoral leaders. Although qualitative research does not seek statistical representativeness, this distribution enabled a sufficiently broad range of experiences and viewpoints, thereby strengthening the analytical depth and internal coherence of the findings [21].

Data were collected over a three-month period using semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. The semi-structured interviews allowed participants to articulate their experiences, motivations, challenges, and perceived transformations related to catechesis in their own words, while maintaining thematic consistency across interviews [16]. Participant observation was conducted during catechetical sessions, liturgical celebrations, and communal gatherings, enabling the researcher to examine not only verbal narratives but also embodied practices, social interactions, and communal dynamics that shape faith formation [22]. Relevant parish documents, including catechetical schedules, pastoral reports, and program outlines, were also analyzed to provide institutional and contextual background.

Data analysis followed the stages of reflexive thematic analysis, involving familiarization with the data, initial coding, theme construction, review, refinement, and final interpretation [18]. Coding was conducted inductively, allowing patterns to emerge from the data rather than from predetermined theoretical frameworks. An audit trail was maintained throughout the analytical process, documenting coding decisions, theme revisions, and interpretive shifts. This procedure enhanced the dependability and transparency of the findings and enabled readers to trace the logic of the analytical process [20]. The interpretation of themes was informed by the framework of practical theology, which integrates empirical description with theological reflection while preserving methodological accountability [23].

Ethical considerations were carefully observed throughout the study. All participants provided informed consent and were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. Pseudonyms were used to protect participants' identities, and all data were stored securely. Given the sensitivity of religious beliefs and personal faith narratives, interviews were conducted with particular attention to emotional safety, cultural respect, and pastoral sensitivity. The study adhered to internationally recognized ethical principles for qualitative research [24].

3 Results and Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that catechesis in the Labe station, rural Catholic community, contributes meaningfully to the personal faith development of participants, particularly in terms of doctrinal understanding, spiritual awareness, and moral reflection. However, rather than presenting these outcomes as universal or abstract, the data reveal that these effects occur in specific, localized, and uneven ways. Participants who attended catechetical sessions regularly reported a deeper understanding of biblical narratives, a clearer sense of Christian moral responsibility, and increased confidence in articulating their faith within family and community settings. This supports the Church's vision of catechesis as a formative rather than merely instructional process [1,6]. Yet, the impact of catechesis in Labe station must be understood as *qualitatively intensive but quantitatively limited*.

Several informants emphasized that catechesis helped them interpret everyday struggles—such as poverty, family conflict, and social tensions—through a faith-based lens. For example, one middle-aged participant described how scriptural reflections on forgiveness influenced her

decision to reconcile with a sibling after years of estrangement. Another informant explained that catechetical discussions on Christian stewardship encouraged him to reduce alcohol consumption and redirect household spending toward children's education. These narratives demonstrate that faith formation in Labe is not abstract but embedded in concrete ethical decisions and relational practices. Such transformations resonate with empirical findings that effective catechesis functions as a process of moral and relational reorientation rather than mere cognitive acquisition [12,13].

Nevertheless, the findings also reveal a structural paradox: although catechesis appears transformative for those who actively participate, overall participation remains low. The data suggest that catechesis in Labe is effective primarily on an individual and small-group level but has not yet succeeded as a broadly internalized communal habitus. Several factors contribute to this limitation, including agricultural work schedules, seasonal migration, and competing economic demands. This aligns with research showing that rural religious communities often experience strong spiritual intensity among core members while struggling with wider participation due to structural constraints [21].

This distinction between *qualitative depth* and *quantitative reach* is crucial. Catechesis in Labe cannot yet be described as a community-wide formation system but rather as a formative space for a committed minority. Such a pattern corresponds to Osmer's observation that pastoral initiatives often generate deep transformation among a limited group before expanding structurally [23]. Thus, the apparent contradiction does not invalidate catechesis as a pastoral strategy but reveals its current developmental stage. The challenge lies not in its formative power but in its limited accessibility and institutional support.

While Labe is a rural community with limited internet infrastructure, digital technologies—especially smartphones and social media—have increasingly shaped daily life, particularly among younger members. Several young participants reported that their religious imagination was more influenced by TikTok, YouTube, and Facebook than by parish activities. Catechists acknowledged that catechesis often struggles to compete with the immediacy, entertainment value, and emotional appeal of digital content.

However, the findings also show that catechesis in Labe has begun to adapt—albeit modestly—to these challenges. For instance, some catechists created WhatsApp groups to distribute short biblical reflections, prayer reminders, and voice-note catecheses for members unable to attend sessions physically. Others reported using short video clips during sessions to stimulate discussion. These practices represent early forms of what Kaggwa terms “digitally mediated faith communities,” in which technology becomes a pastoral tool rather than a competing force [13]. While these initiatives remain informal and unsystematic, they illustrate that catechesis in Labe is not merely resisting modernity but negotiating with it.

Importantly, the digital challenge is not merely technological but anthropological. Participants reported shortened attention spans, declining interest in collective rituals, and increasing individualism—patterns consistent with global trends identified by Valencia-Serrano et al. [8]. Catechesis in Labe attempts to counteract these tendencies by emphasizing face-to-face dialogue, storytelling, and communal prayer. Thus, its resistance to digital fragmentation lies not in technological sophistication but in relational intensity. This finding reframes catechesis

as a counter-cultural practice that resists the atomizing tendencies of digital life through embodied, communal interaction.

The claim of ethical transformation in family and social contexts is supported by concrete empirical narratives. Parents reported changes in disciplinary styles, moving from punitive approaches to more dialogical ones inspired by biblical reflections on compassion and patience. Several participants described renewed commitment to marital fidelity, family prayer, and mutual care for elderly relatives. On a communal level, informants noted increased willingness to participate in mutual aid, such as collective farming assistance and support for bereaved families. These practices reflect what de Mesa describes as “embedded ethics,” where faith becomes visible through everyday social habits rather than formal moral discourse [12].

Nevertheless, these ethical transformations remain localized and uneven. They are more evident among those deeply involved in catechetical activities, reinforcing the conclusion that catechesis currently produces *pockets of transformation* rather than a generalized communal shift. This again highlights the need to distinguish between normative theological expectations and empirically observable outcomes. Without such differentiation, catechesis risks being described according to what it *should* accomplish rather than what it *actually* accomplishes.

Catechesis in Labe integrates local cultural practices such as communal storytelling, collective decision-making, and traditional forms of mutual labor (*gotong royong*). Catechists often employ local metaphors drawn from farming cycles, kinship obligations, and ancestral respect to explain biblical themes. For example, one catechist compared the Parable of the Sower to traditional planting rituals familiar to the community, enabling participants to grasp theological concepts through culturally embedded experiences. This practice reflects Bevans’ model of contextual theology, where local culture becomes a theological resource rather than a passive background [10].

Moreover, catechetical sessions are frequently held in family homes rather than formal parish buildings, reinforcing the domestic and relational character of faith formation. This spatial flexibility distinguishes Labe’s catechesis from institutionalized models typical of urban parishes. Such practices reveal that catechesis here is not merely localized in geography but inculturated in social form. This confirms that contextualization is not a decorative feature but a structural principle shaping how faith is communicated and embodied.

In sum, the findings demonstrate that catechesis in Labe is neither a universal solution nor a symbolic ritual. It functions as a fragile yet meaningful formative practice that negotiates between tradition and modernity, depth and reach, intimacy and scalability. Its strength lies in its capacity to generate deep transformation among committed participants, while its limitation lies in its restricted social penetration. Recognizing this duality allows for a more honest and analytically robust evaluation of catechesis as a pastoral strategy.

This study therefore reframes catechesis not as a completed solution but as an evolving pastoral experiment. Its future effectiveness depends on structural support, catechist formation, strategic use of digital tools, and deeper integration with family life. Without such developments, catechesis risks remaining spiritually powerful but socially marginal. With them, it holds potential to become a genuinely transformative force within the rural Catholic community.

4 Conclusion

This study set out to examine catechesis not as an abstract theological ideal but as a concrete pastoral strategy operating within the lived realities of a rural Catholic community in Indonesia. The findings demonstrate that catechesis in the Labe community functions as a meaningful formative practice for those who actively engage in it, fostering deeper doctrinal understanding, moral discernment, and relational transformation. However, its effectiveness is uneven: while it produces significant qualitative depth among a limited group of committed participants, it has not yet achieved broad quantitative reach at the communal level. This distinction is crucial, as it prevents the results from merely confirming normative catechetical theories and instead offers a grounded portrait of what catechesis actually accomplishes under real pastoral conditions.

The pastoral challenges identified at the beginning of this study—low participation rates, limited catechist resources, economic pressures, and digital distractions—are not marginal but central to understanding the strategy's present limitations. Rather than invalidating catechesis as a formative practice, these constraints reveal its structural fragility. Catechesis in Labe currently operates as a relationally intense but socially narrow process that transforms a committed minority rather than the community as a whole. This finding reframes catechesis not as a finished solution but as an evolving pastoral experiment whose outcomes depend heavily on institutional support, accessibility, continuity, and strategic adaptation.

This research also demonstrates that catechesis in Labe is not a mere replication of universal models of religious education but is deeply shaped by local culture. It integrates communal storytelling, kinship values, agricultural metaphors, and practices of mutual aid into its pedagogical process, making contextualization a constitutive rather than decorative element of faith formation. In this sense, catechesis becomes a cultural practice through which theology is interpreted, embodied, and negotiated in everyday life, confirming the importance of contextual theological approaches that view local culture as a genuine theological resource rather than a passive background [25].

In response to digital challenges, this study shows that catechesis in Labe does not primarily compete with digital culture through technological sophistication but through relational depth, embodied encounters, and dialogical learning. While modest digital adaptations have emerged, they remain largely informal and unsystematic. This highlights the need for intentional pastoral planning, catechist formation, and the integration of family-based and digitally mediated models of faith formation. Ultimately, catechesis in Labe should be understood as a fragile yet meaningful pastoral practice—one that holds genuine transformative potential but remains structurally constrained. Its future effectiveness depends on whether it can evolve from a spiritually intensive practice for a few into a socially embedded habitus for the many, requiring not only theological fidelity but also empirical attentiveness, strategic creativity, and long-term pastoral commitment [26].

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