

Transforming the Spirituality of the Faithful Through Participatory Catechesis: A Theological and Empirical Inquiry

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Abstract

This article examines how participatory catechesis can serve as a catalyst for transforming the spirituality of the faithful by integrating theological reflection with empirical insights from a rural Catholic community in Flores, Indonesia. Despite the regularity of parish activities, many communities continue to experience a devotional life marked by routine participation, limited personal reflection, and minimal integration of faith into daily life. Drawing on the framework of Shared Christian Praxis, experiential learning theory, and contemporary theological understandings of Christian spirituality, this study investigates how dialogical, reflective, and experience-based catechesis can deepen spiritual awareness and foster interior transformation. Employing a qualitative descriptive design, data were collected through interviews, participant observation, and document analysis in Stasi Waekekik of Paroki Mok, Flores, Indonesia. The findings reveal that participatory catechesis enhances engagement, encourages critical reflection on lived experiences, strengthens communal identity, and nurtures a spirituality rooted in active discipleship rather than passive observance. The study concludes that participatory catechesis is a vital pastoral approach capable of renewing the spiritual life of the faithful, particularly in rural communities where traditional didactic methods remain dominant. Practical recommendations are offered for catechists, parish leaders, and pastoral agents to cultivate catechetical environments that promote spiritual growth through participatory, contextual, and transformative learning.

Keywords: Christian spirituality, experience-based catechesis, faith formation, participatory catechesis, pastoral theology, shared praxis, Flores-Indonesia.

INTRODUCTION

In many rural Catholic communities, liturgical attendance and ritual observance remain important social markers, yet they frequently coexist with an underdeveloped reflective spirituality and limited translation of faith into sustained personal and communal transformation. Traditional catechetical models—centered on didactic instruction and one-way transmission of doctrine—have been shown in recent pastoral and empirical studies to leave gaps in interior formation, especially among adults who require learning approaches attentive to experience, context, and practical wisdom (Groome, 2011; Kolb, 1984; Directory for Catechesis, 2020). Contemporary theological voices and pastoral guides therefore argue for a shift toward catechetical approaches that prioritize encounter, participation, and praxis so that catechesis becomes a locus of transformative encounter rather than mere information delivery (Pope Francis, 2013; Directory for Catechesis, 2020).

The concept of participatory catechesis builds upon the pedagogical principles of Shared Christian Praxis and experiential learning, integrating narrative sharing, communal reflection, theological interpretation, and concrete action as elements that foster conversion and spiritual maturity (Groome, 1980; Kolb, 1984; Sweetman, 2021). Empirical research across varied contexts suggests that participatory, dialogical catechesis enhances religious identity, increases

ownership of faith practices, and supports concrete changes in moral behavior and communal solidarity (Araújo et al., 2021; Mondesir, 2023; Rosales & Bantogon, 2024). In Indonesian pastoral contexts, recent field studies and program evaluations point to similar potentials: when catechesis engages local narratives, socio-economic realities, and communal rituals, it more effectively nurtures lived faith and social responsibility (Habur, 2016; Halek, 2025; Woldehanna et al., 2024).

Nevertheless, a persistent implementation gap remains between theological ideals of participatory catechesis and parish reality (Chingamthara Vincent, 2025). Factors such as limited catechist formation, heavy demands of subsistence livelihoods, geographic isolation, and the persistence of top-down pedagogies inhibit the uptake of dialogical methods in many rural parishes (Setiyaningtyas & Soares, 2023; Goma, 2025). These structural constraints are compounded by psychological dimensions—motivation, perceived relevance, and sense of belonging—which determine whether parishioners will engage in reflective practice even when opportunities are present (Park, 2021; Sweetman, 2021). Therefore, theological argumentation for participatory catechesis must be accompanied by empirically grounded pastoral strategies that address both social conditions and psychological dynamics.

This article explores how participatory catechesis can catalyze spiritual transformation by bringing together theological foundations and empirical evidence from a rural Indonesian parish (Stasi Waekekik, Paroki Mok, Flores). Drawing on Shared Christian Praxis, experiential learning theory, and recent pastoral guidance (Directory for Catechesis, 2020; Pope Francis, 2013), the study analyzes how dialogical catechetical practices shape interior conversion, communal identity, and active discipleship. The research employs qualitative field methods (interviews, participant observation, document analysis) to discern both the transformative potentials and the practical obstacles of implementing participatory catechesis in a context marked by economic precarity and strong local traditions. By integrating theological reflection with grounded empirical data, the article aims to offer pastoral-theological recommendations for cultivating catechetical processes that are both faithful to tradition and responsive to local realities.

The study rests on an integrated theoretical foundation that brings together contemporary theological formulations of Christian spirituality, pedagogical models for faith formation, and social-psychological theories relevant to communal participation. Christian spirituality, as a field of theological reflection, has increasingly emphasized the embodied, communal, and praxis-oriented nature of faith: spiritual formation is not merely cognitive assent to doctrines but a transformation of life that occurs through encounter with God, communal practices, and sustained moral formation (Groome, 2011; Pope Francis, 2013; Meddi, 2022). Official catechetical teaching likewise highlights catechesis as a process of initiation into a Christian way of life that involves proclamation, sacramental participation, and the integration of faith into daily praxis (Directory for Catechesis, 2020; Curro, 2021). From this theological vantage point, spirituality is understood as a dynamic interplay among Word, sacrament, community, and concrete action — a perspective that orients this research toward participatory and experiential modes of catechetical practice (Meddi, 2021).

Pedagogically, the concept of participatory catechesis draws on models that center experience and reflection as the core of learning. Groome's Shared Christian Praxis (1980;

2011) proposes a cyclical movement: attention to lived experience, theological reflection, and Christian action — an approach that fosters conversion through communal interpretation of everyday realities. This praxis model intersects fruitfully with experiential learning theory (Kolb, 1984), which describes learning as a cycle of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. When applied to catechesis, these frameworks suggest that spiritual transformation is more likely when catechetical encounters invite participants to narrate their experiences, reflect theologically together, and translate insights into concrete commitments and practices (Kolb, 1984; Groome, 2011; Rahmi, 2024; Komkat KWI, 2020).

The literature on adult faith formation and andragogy further supports participatory methods for mature discipleship. Adult learners bring a reservoir of life experience that can serve as primary material for theological reflection; hence, pedagogical strategies should emphasize dialogical facilitation, problem-centred learning, and practical application (Knowles, 1984; Yuliani, 2024; Komkat KWI, 2024). Empirical studies in diverse pastoral contexts show that catechetical sessions designed with adult learning principles — where facilitators assume the role of accompanier rather than lecturer — enhance ownership of faith, increase motivation for ongoing formation, and strengthen communal ties (Sweetman, 2021; Rosales & Bantogon, 2024). These findings are pertinent for rural parish settings in which catechists' capacities to lead participatory processes are a decisive factor (Setiyaningtyas & Soares, 2023).

From a sociological perspective, theories of social capital and community participation illuminate how structural and relational conditions affect the capacity of catechetical initiatives to effect spiritual change. Social capital — the networks, norms, and trust that enable coordinated action — facilitates mobilization for religious activities and fosters mutual accountability that sustains long-term spiritual practices (Putnam, 2000; Mondesir, 2023). In contexts where strong interpersonal networks and shared obligations exist (for example, active small Basic Christian Communities), participatory catechesis can leverage these relations to deepen reflection and translate insights into communal service (Woldehanna et al., 2024; Tibo & Haertanti, 2025). Conversely, socio-economic constraints (e.g., subsistence labor, geographic isolation) can limit participation irrespective of theological appeal, pointing to the need for pastoral strategies that attend to structural realities (Goma, 2025; Rahmi, 2024).

Psychological theories of religious motivation and identity provide a complementary lens for understanding intra-individual dispositions that mediate responsiveness to participatory catechesis. Research distinguishing intrinsic from extrinsic religious motivation suggests that internally oriented faith commitments (pursuit of personal meaning, intimacy with the divine) are associated with sustained, reflective participation, whereas extrinsic motivations (social conformity, status) often yield irregular, formalistic involvement (Allport & Ross, 1967; Park, 2021). Identity-theory approaches indicate that when an individual's religious identity is salient and integrated with other life roles, participation in communal religious practices functions as identity reinforcement and moral formation (Araújo et al., 2021; Sweetman, 2021). In pastoral terms, this implies that participatory catechesis that nurtures interior appropriation of faith narratives will be more effective in producing spiritual transformation than methods that rely primarily on external exhortation.

A theological anthropology that integrates these pedagogical, sociological, and psychological insights yields a working model for this study: spiritual transformation through participatory catechesis depends on (a) the presence of dialogical, experience-centered catechetical methods (Groome, 1980; Kolb, 1984), (b) facilitation competencies and formation of catechists capable of enlivening shared praxis (Setiyaningtiyas & Soares, 2024; Yuliani, 2024; Komkat KWI, 2024), (c) enabling social structures such as robust small communities and social capital (Putnam, 2000; Woldehanna et al., 2024), and (d) the cultivation of intrinsic religious motivation and coherent religious identity among participants (Park, 2021; Araújo et al., 2021). The model also recognizes mediating constraints—economic pressure, geographic isolation, limited institutional support—which can attenuate programmatic impact unless addressed pastorally (Goma, 2025; Na’u et al., 2025).

Finally, official Church teaching provides normative contours for participatory catechesis: Vatican documents and contemporary catechetical directives call for catechesis that is missionary, dialogical, and incarnational—attentive to culture and life experience while faithfully transmitting the Gospel (Directory for Catechesis, 2020; Pope Francis, 2013). This ecclesial endorsement strengthens the theological rationale for participatory approaches and frames the empirical inquiry: to what extent do local catechetical practices conform to these principles, and how do they contribute to measurable shifts in spirituality among the faithful? The empirical sections of the article will test and refine the working model above in the specific context of Stasi Waekekik, Paroki Mok, Flores, identifying both enabling mechanisms and practical obstacles to transformative catechesis.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design to explore how participatory catechesis contributes to the spiritual transformation of the faithful within the sociocultural context of Stasi Waekekik in Paroki Mok, Flores. A qualitative approach is well suited for investigating lived experience, religious meaning-making, and the subtle dynamics of spiritual growth, which cannot be adequately captured through quantitative measures alone. The design allows for in-depth interpretation of how catechetical practices, communal life, and individual dispositions interact to shape the spiritual development of parishioners.

The research was conducted during February until June 2025, in Stasi Waekekik, Paroki Mok, a rural Catholic community characterized by strong kinship networks, traditional devotional practices, and uneven participation in catechetical activities. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure representation of diverse perspectives, including catechists, members of the parish council, leaders of small Christian communities, and parishioners with varying levels of involvement in catechetical programs. A total of 16 informants were included, representing both genders and multiple age groups. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained prior to each interview.

Data were collected through three complementary techniques: semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. Semi-structured interviews explored personal experiences, perceptions of catechetical practices, and the perceived impact of participatory methods on spiritual growth. Participant observation was conducted during catechetical gatherings, small community meetings, and parish liturgical celebrations to

capture interactional patterns, modes of facilitation, and indicators of engagement. Document analysis included parish catechetical reports, program schedules, and instructional materials used by catechists. These multiple sources enabled triangulation of data to enhance reliability.

Data analysis followed the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2018), involving iterative cycles of data condensation, coding, thematic categorization, and conclusion drawing. Codes were generated inductively from the data while also informed by the theoretical framework, particularly themes related to participation, shared praxis, intrinsic motivation, and spiritual transformation. Emerging themes were compared across participants and data sources to identify convergences and inconsistencies. To enhance credibility, member checks were conducted by returning preliminary findings to selected participants for validation, and an audit trail was maintained to document analytical decisions throughout the research process.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The empirical inquiry in Stasi Waekekik produced a multifaceted picture of how participatory catechesis operates locally and how it relates to processes of spiritual transformation. At the descriptive level, participation patterns reveal a clear stratification by activity type: liturgical celebrations (Sunday Mass, feast days) attract broad attendance, whereas regular catechetical sessions, small group reflections, and volunteer ministries show more limited and uneven engagement. Observations and interviews indicate that attendance at catechetical events often depends on social signaling (e.g., family expectation, role obligations) and occasion-specific factors (festival, sacramental preparation), rather than sustained personal appropriation of faith (Na'u et al., 2025; Goma, 2025; Wardana, 2023). This baseline profile accords with broader studies in pastoral contexts that differentiate quantitative presence from qualitative engagement (Sweetman, 2021)

A recurring theme across informants was the distinction between formal participation and transformative participation. Formal participation—marked by physical presence and ritual observance—remains important for communal identity, but rarely produces changes in daily moral choices or sustained spiritual practices. Transformative participation, by contrast, is characterized by reflective appropriation, narrative re-framing of personal experience in light of the Gospel, and concrete commitments to neighborly service. Instances of the latter were frequently reported where catechetical sessions employed dialogical methods, personal storytelling, and practical planning (shared praxis), leading participants to report shifts in attitudes and behaviors (Groome, 1980, 2011; Kolb, 1984; Na'u et al., 2025). These empirical patterns mirror findings in other settings: participatory, experiential catechesis tends to correlate with deeper spiritual outcomes than didactic instruction alone (Araújo et al., 2021; Rosales & Bantogon, 2024; Tibo, 2025).

The analysis identified several mechanisms through which participatory catechesis appears to contribute to spiritual transformation. First, narrational-sharing in small groups functions as a hermeneutic gateway: when parishioners recount concrete moral struggles (family conflict, economic stress, ecological loss), the group's reflective dialogue often reinterprets those experiences theologically, providing new meaning and enabling moral reorientation (Groome, 1980; Rahmi, 2024). Second, communal discernment processes—when

facilitated well—help translate biblical motifs into local praxis: catechetical reflection that links Scripture with day-to-day concerns (e.g., stewardship of land, family solidarity) fosters an embodied spirituality rather than abstract piety (Habur, 2016 ; Halek, 2025; Scarpa, 2025).

Third, participatory catechesis cultivates social reinforcement: social capital in active small communities sustains changes by normalizing new practices and creating mutual accountability (Putnam, 2000; Mondesir, 2023; Woldehanna et al., 2024). These mechanisms were corroborated in interviews in Stasi Waekekik, Paroki Mok, where participants described not only enhanced knowledge but tangible shifts—improved neighbor-helping practices, renewed prayer habits linked to daily work, and greater willingness to participate in parish outreach (Na’u et al., 2025).

Despite these enabling mechanisms, the research also highlights significant barriers that attenuate the reach of participatory catechesis. Structural constraints—intensive agricultural labor cycles, seasonal migration, and geographic dispersion—limit the temporal availability of parishioners and reduce continuity in small-group processes (Goma, 2025; Rahmi, 2024). Cognitive and pedagogical limits are also salient: many catechists lack systematic training in dialogical facilitation, theological reflection, and adult-learning techniques, which restricts the depth of group engagement (Setiyaningtiyas & Soares, 2024; Yuliani, 2024). Psychologically, the prevalence of extrinsic motivation (attendance for social conformity) undermines the conversion potential of programs that are not intentionally designed to foster intrinsic appropriation (Allport & Ross, 1967; Park, 2021). These obstacles suggest that participatory catechesis cannot be expected to produce uniform spiritual transformation without parallel investments in catechist formation, scheduling sensitivity, and contextual adaptation.

The quality of facilitation emerged as a decisive variable. In Stasi Waekekik, Paroki Mok, sessions led by catechists who practiced listening, invited personal testimony, and guided theological reflection produced noticeably deeper engagement than sessions dominated by lecture-format instruction. This resonates with adult-learning literature emphasizing the role of the facilitator as accompanier rather than instructor (Knowles, 1984; Sweetman, 2021). Where catechists employed shared praxis steps—eliciting experience, prompting critical reflection, relating insights to Scripture/tradition, and encouraging concrete commitments—participants were able to translate reflections into concrete practices (Groome, 2011; Kolb, 1984; Komkat KWI, 2020). Conversely, absence of such facilitation techniques often left participants with conceptual knowledge but little transformative follow-through.

Another critical dimension is contextualization—the extent to which catechetical content and methods are sensitive to local culture, language, and socio-economic realities. Empirical data from the parish show that catechesis that integrates local narratives, customary metaphors, and practical problem-solving resonates more powerfully with participants (Habur, 2016; Sudarto, 2022; Komkat KWI, 2024). Studies elsewhere corroborate that contextualized catechesis increases perceived relevance and thus participation (Rosales & Bantogon, 2024; Tibo & Haertanti, 2025). This finding underscores a theological point: incarnational catechesis—rooted in the concrete lived world of the faithful—affirms the sacramentality of ordinary life and facilitates conversion that is both spiritual and social.

The psychological processes observed warrant particular attention. Where participatory catechesis succeeded in moving participants from extrinsic to more intrinsic forms of

motivation, the researchers noted increased stability of religious practice, greater emotional openness in prayer and confession, and enhanced sense of mission in daily life. These observations align with motivational and identity theories suggesting that intrinsic religious motives and identity integration are strong predictors of sustained involvement and prosocial religious action (Araújo et al., 2021; Park, 2021; Sweetman, 2021). Importantly, the data suggest that participatory catechesis functions as an identity-shaping practice: through repeated communal reflection and enacted choices, parishioners begin to reconceive themselves not merely as congregants but as agents of Christian service.

From a theological vantage, the empirical data support conceiving catechesis as a space of encounter in which Word, sacrament, and life converge. Participatory catechesis, when properly implemented, functions as an epiclesis of communal discernment: it gathers the faithful, invokes the interpretive work of the Spirit through mutual listening and reflection, and sends forth translated commitments into daily life (Groome, 2011; Directory for Catechesis, 2020). This theological reading affirms ecclesial documents that call for catechesis to be missionary, dialogical, and incarnational (Pope Francis, 2013; Directory for Catechesis, 2020).

The implications for pastoral praxis are clear and multifold. First, systematic investment in catechist formation is essential—training must include skills in facilitation, theological reflection, group dynamics, and contextual adaptation (Setiyaningtiyas & Soares, 2024; Yuliani, 2024). Second, pastoral schedules and program designs must be sensitive to local labor rhythms and family obligations to enable regular participation (Goma, 2025; Rahmi, 2024). Third, parish leaders should deliberately cultivate small-group structures of Christian Basic Community that can sustain iterative cycles of experience, reflection, and action; these groups build the social capital necessary for transforming insights into communal practices (Putnam, 2000; Woldehanna et al., 2024; Komkat KWI, 2020; Scarpa, 2025). Fourth, measurement of catechetical success should expand beyond attendance metrics to include indicators of reflective appropriation, behavioral change, and communal service (Sweetman, 2021; Araújo et al., 2021).

Finally, the broader scholarly significance of these findings is that they add an empirically grounded case to the growing international literature affirming participatory catechesis as a promising route to spiritual renewal. The Waekekik case demonstrates the dialectic between theology and social reality: theological frameworks (shared praxis, incarnational catechesis) provide normative orientation, but their efficacy depends on addressing material and psychological conditions that either foster or inhibit transformation (Groome, 2011; Kolb, 1984; Putnam, 2000). For scholars and pastoral leaders worldwide, the study underscores that transformative catechesis is integrative work—simultaneously theological, pedagogical, sociological, and psychological—and that durable spiritual renewal requires coordinated efforts across these domains (Rosales & Bantogon, 2024; Tibo, 2025; Na'u et al., 2025).

CONCLUSION

The study's findings highlight that participatory catechesis significantly fosters spiritual transformation when grounded in the lived experiences of the faithful and conducted through authentic dialogue, communal reflection, and shared discernment. In the rural parish of Stasi Waekekik, spiritual growth arose not from mere attendance or doctrinal teaching but through

processes enabling individuals to reinterpret their daily challenges and aspirations in the light of the Gospel. This approach nurtured an integrated spirituality linking faith with moral and social commitments. However, its effectiveness depends on skilled facilitation, catechists' readiness to accompany rather than instruct, and communities' capacity for ongoing reflective engagement. Overcoming structural and psychological barriers—such as economic constraints, time limits, and passive learning habits—is crucial for lasting renewal. The study concludes that participatory catechesis offers a viable pastoral method to revitalize spiritual life by transforming faith into lived discipleship within a supportive community. Future research could explore longitudinal impacts of participatory catechesis programs across diverse cultural and socio-economic contexts, examining how sustained facilitation and community support affect the durability of spiritual transformation.

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Agustinus Manfred Habur

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