

Pedagogical Competence and the Role of Catechists in Catechetical Pastoral Ministry for Children: A Descriptive Study in Catholic Sunday Schools

Syilverani Viola Carvallo*
Laurensius Goa

IPI Malang Pastoral College, Indonesia

ABSTRACT

This study examines the critical role of catechists in the Catholic Children's Pastoral Ministry, specifically within Sunday School, as a foundational element for building children's faith during a vital developmental period. Recognizing the challenges posed by limited catechist competencies and the evolving digital era, the research aims to map the current competencies and actual roles of catechists in delivering faith education that is pedagogically sound, personally authentic, and professionally relevant. Employing a descriptive literature method, the study systematically reviews various sources to portray the readiness and effectiveness of catechists in adapting their teaching methods to the psychological and social needs of digital native children. Findings reveal significant disparities in catechists' pedagogical skills and digital literacy, which affect children's engagement and spiritual growth. The study highlights the necessity for continuous training programs focusing on interactive, contextualized, and technology-enhanced catechesis while reinforcing spiritual and professional development. It also underscores the multidimensional role of catechists as proclaimers, educators, and living examples of faith who facilitate meaningful encounters between children and Christ amid complex modern challenges. The results call for strategic efforts by the Church to support catechists through resource provision, community building, and fostering digital spirituality to ensure effective pastoral care, thus strengthening the future faith identity of Catholic youth.

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Introduction

The pastoral ministry of the Catholic Church seeks to realize salvation and make the Kingdom of God present in the world through various forms of faith formation for the faithful. One of the most strategic forms of ministry is the

*Corresponding author: Syilverani Viola Carvallo  violacarvalo759@gmail.com

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Children's Categorical Pastoral Ministry, commonly known as Sunday School, as it serves as the primary setting for faith formation during the golden stage of children's development. At this stage, Christian values are introduced, internalized, and cultivated as the foundation of a life of faith that will influence children's future participation in the life and mission of the Church. Therefore, the Catholic Sunday School functions not only as a means of teaching the doctrines of the Church but also as a place where children encounter Christ through catechesis that is contextual, engaging, and appropriate to their psychological development.

The success of this ministry is largely determined by the competence and role of catechists as proclaimers, educators, spiritual mentors, and witnesses of faith who connect the teachings of the Church with children's lived experiences of faith. Pastoral accompaniment in the Catholic Church is a ministry intended to guide the faithful toward deeper faith and greater spiritual maturity (Saputra, 2025). However, various challenges indicate that catechists' competence in facilitating adaptive faith formation remains suboptimal (Elbert, 2024). Many ministries continue to be carried out primarily through personal vocation and voluntary commitment without sustained formation and professional training, resulting in disparities in pedagogical, professional, and personal competencies. Consequently, catechetical methods tend to remain traditional, lack variation, and have not fully addressed the characteristics and learning needs of today's children.

These challenges have become increasingly complex with the rapid advancement of digital technology, which has transformed the way children learn, communicate, and access information. The Church is called to adapt to digital culture, as the digital environment has become an integral part of the lives of the faithful (Kristeno, 2024; Widiatna, 2020). On the one hand, technology provides significant opportunities to expand evangelization and faith formation through various digital media. On the other hand, the widespread circulation of unverified information has the potential to weaken the authority of the Church and influence children's understanding of the faith (Tio, 2025). Therefore, catechists need to develop more contextual, interactive, and experience-based catechetical approaches by utilizing technology creatively so that faith formation remains relevant to the digital generation (Doa & Tarihoran, 2024).

Previous studies have examined pastoral accompaniment and the challenges of children's catechesis. Saputra (2025) investigated pastoral accompaniment in general, while Elbert (2024) highlighted various challenges in children's faith formation. The studies conducted by Kristeno (2024) and Tio (2025) focused primarily on the Church's adaptation to digital developments. Nevertheless, these studies have not provided an empirical description of catechists' pedagogical, professional, and personal competencies as well as the implementation of their roles in Sunday School ministry at the parish level. Furthermore, descriptive data integrating catechists' competencies with the demands of child psychological development, contemporary social dynamics, and Indonesia's digital cultural context remain limited.

Based on these research gaps, this study offers a novel contribution by providing a comprehensive descriptive mapping of the competency profile and the actual roles of catechists in the Children's Categorical Pastoral Ministry within Sunday Schools. This study not only describes the levels of pedagogical,

professional, and personal competencies but also analyzes how these competencies are implemented in fulfilling the roles of proclaimers, educators, spiritual mentors, and witnesses of faith in accordance with the pastoral mission of the Church and the needs of children in the digital era.

This study aims to describe the levels of pedagogical, professional, and personal competencies of Sunday School catechists, portray the actual roles they perform in children's pastoral ministry, and analyze the implementation of these roles in fostering children's faith within Sunday Schools. The findings are expected to provide empirical evidence regarding the current state of catechists' competencies and roles, thereby serving as a foundation for developing more contextual, adaptive, and sustainable formation programs to enhance the quality of children's pastoral ministry in the Catholic Church.

Method

This article employs a qualitative descriptive research method based on a systematic literature review, drawing data from various scholarly articles, theological journals, and Church documents concerning the competencies and roles of catechists in the categorical pastoral ministry for children in Sunday Schools. This method aims to systematically, factually, and comprehensively describe the phenomenon without intervention or experimentation, in accordance with the focus on identifying the pedagogical, personal, and professional competencies, as well as the actual roles, of catechists. Data analysis adopts the qualitative descriptive analysis model proposed by [Miles & Huberman \(1994\)](#), which consists of three main components: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing or verification. This model was selected because it is flexible to analyze textual data derived from the literature and enables the inductive mapping of pastoral phenomena within the contextual framework of Catholic theology.

Results

Pedagogical Competence

Pedagogical competence was identified as the area requiring the most urgent improvement. Although catechists possess a sincere willingness and a genuine calling to serve, the study revealed significant inconsistencies in their ability to manage adaptive, interactive learning that is aligned with children's psychological development. As digital natives, children require catechetical methods that are visual, experiential, and supported by digital technology. The literature review confirms that catechists with strong pedagogical competence are those who are capable of facilitating enjoyable and transformative learning processes, enabling the teachings of the faith to become part of children's everyday life experiences ([Atjas, 2022](#)).

Catechists' pedagogical competence encompasses the ability to design adaptive learning experiences, utilize Information and Communication Technology (ICT) such as animated videos and interactive platforms, and tailor instruction to the psychological characteristics of digital-native children, who tend to learn more effectively through visual and experiential approaches. According to [Atjas \(2022\)](#), this competence includes mastery of Catholic Religious Education content,

teaching methodologies, learning assessment, and continuous professional development to strengthen commitment to ministry. The existing gap arises from these inconsistencies, as catechists frequently rely on personal willingness to serve without receiving formal pedagogical training, resulting in monotonous teaching methods that are less engaging for children. This gap highlights the need for continuous professional development in instructional design, the effective use of digital media, and the application of appropriate assessment techniques.

Professional Competence and Personal Competence

Professional competence (mastery of the faith) and personal competence (integrity, spirituality, and exemplary witness) constitute the foundation already possessed by many catechists by virtue of their vocation. However, the findings indicate that strengthening profound and contextual theological understanding remains essential. Catechists are required not only to know Church doctrine but also to articulate it in ways that are relevant to children amid the constant flow of information that often contradicts the teachings of the Church. The personal dimension is emphasized through the role of the catechist as a living witness and spiritual mentor, whose effectiveness is largely determined by their own spiritual integrity.

In the context of children's pastoral ministry, the role of the catechist as a proclaimer, educator, and witness of the faith is implemented in a multidimensional manner. As proclaimers of the Good News, catechists are called to adapt their ministry. Proclamation can no longer rely solely on verbal or dogmatic instruction but must be presented creatively, adaptively, and contextually to capture the attention of the digital generation. The utilization of digital technology has become an important medium for expanding the reach of evangelization (Kristeno, 2024; Doa & Tarihoran, 2024). The challenge lies in ensuring that evangelization through digital media remains authentic, does not mislead, and preserves the authority of the Church's teachings (Tio, 2025).

Furthermore, as educators of the faith (facilitators), the catechists' roles have shifted from merely teaching to facilitating children's encounter with Christ. Catechists are expected to create safe and interactive environments in Sunday School, employing methods that enable children to experience the faith rather than merely receive theoretical instruction. The effective implementation of this role depends largely on pedagogical competence, particularly the ability to select and diversify catechetical methods (Sukendar et al., 2018). In the digital context, faith educators must also be capable of guiding children in digital literacy by teaching them to use technology wisely in accordance with Christian values.

Another essential role of the catechist is that of a witness or role model of the faith as well as a spiritual companion, which remains the most crucial function and cannot be replaced by technology. Catechists serve as bridges connecting the teachings of the Church with children's lived experiences. The effectiveness of this role is measured by the catechist's integrity of life and the ability to establish empathetic pastoral relationships with children. As spiritual mentors, catechists contribute to shaping children's Christian identity amid the complexity of contemporary social and cultural challenges.

The primary gap lies in pedagogical competence, as catechists frequently rely on monotonous traditional methods, such as lengthy lectures, that are insufficiently adapted to the psychology of digitally native children. Consequently, faith formation often becomes less engaging and less transformative. In terms of digital literacy, many catechists possess limited ability to utilize media such as animated videos, religious applications, Zoom, or TikTok for catechesis. This limitation creates difficulties managing hybrid learning environments and in producing or responding to viral content that is relevant to children's daily lives.

This inconsistency is evident among catechists themselves. Senior catechists are often proficient in teaching Catholic Religious Education content but demonstrate limited technological competence, whereas junior catechists generally show enthusiasm for technology but possess insufficient understanding of evaluation methodologies, such as interactive quizzes or experience-based reflection. Research reveals significant variation: catechists serving on a voluntary basis without formal certification (approximately 70% of cases) experience difficulties in designing contextual learning, while those who have received partial training perform better as facilitators but still demonstrate limited competence in integrating information and communication technology. Contributing factors include inadequate facilities (computers and internet access), time constraints, and a lack of motivation to innovate, resulting in catechetical outcomes perceived to be unsatisfactory.

These challenges should be addressed through continuous professional development for catechists, including public speaking workshops, ICT certification for Catholic Religious Education, and In-House Training (IHT) organized by the Indonesian Bishops' Conference or local parishes, with a focus on digital module design and ramification. Collaboration between senior and junior catechists, mentoring, and triangulated evaluation involving feedback from children and parents have proven effective. One practical example is blended learning that integrates spiritual YouTube content with field-based practice. Non-formal approaches, such as Catholic Religious Education teacher communities and the utilization of interactive learning technologies, have the potential to transform catechists into relevant digital evangelists (Bano et al., 2024).

The fact that many catechists serve out of a genuine sense of vocation represents a spiritual strength that should be preserved. Nevertheless, within a Church that must adapt to digital transformation, enthusiasm alone is insufficient; robust technical and methodological competencies are equally necessary (Kristeno, 2024). If catechetical methods remain monotonous and traditional, they will gradually diminish the interest and engagement of digitally native children, thereby weakening the foundations of faith that should be established through Sunday School. The lack of descriptive empirical data from parishes, as highlighted in the introduction, further indicates that issues concerning the quality and preparedness of catechists have not yet been comprehensively identified or systematically addressed at the grassroots level.

Adapting to the digital era requires both philosophical and methodological transformation. Catechists need not only to acquire technical skills in using digital devices but also to develop a digital spirituality—the capacity to make Christ present within digital spaces and to employ technology as a meaningful medium of

encounter. The greatest challenge is not technology itself but the potential weakening of the Church's traditional authority through the widespread dissemination of misleading information (Tio, 2025). Consequently, the role of catechists as filters, guides, and critical mentors who assist children in discerning the information they encountered in the digital world has become increasingly urgent.

Conclusion

This study underscores the urgency of enhancing the competencies of Catholic Sunday School catechists, particularly in the pedagogical domain, as a response to developments in child psychology and the challenges of the digital era. Furthermore, strengthening the personal and professional competencies of catechists remains essential to enable them to fulfill their roles as proclaimers, educators, and witnesses of the faith in a holistic and contextual manner. The effectiveness of children's pastoral ministry is largely determined by catechists' ability to create learning processes that are interactive, creative, and relevant to the spiritual needs of children as members of the digital native generation. Therefore, adaptation to digital technology has become an essential prerequisite for ensuring that the proclamation of the faith remains meaningful and contextually relevant.

Recommendations

Based on the research findings, the Church and pastoral institutions are encouraged to develop comprehensive and sustainable training programs for Catholic Sunday School catechists, with a particular emphasis on strengthening pedagogical competence, digital literacy, and spiritual accompaniment. Such training should encompass the effective use of interactive learning technologies as well as the development of contextualized catechetical materials that are aligned with the psychological characteristics of children. To support these initiatives, the Church should provide adequate resources and technical assistance to foster innovation in digital catechesis.

Furthermore, the systematic mapping and assessment of catechists' competencies at the parish level are necessary as a foundation for formulating targeted development strategies. Establishing catechist communities as platforms for sharing experiences and best practices is also essential to enhance the quality of catechetical ministry. In addition, the development of digital spirituality among catechists deserves special attention so that they are equipped to guide children critically and wisely in navigating the continuous flow of information. The implementation of these recommendations is expected to strengthen the role of catechists as educators, proclaimers of the Gospel, and role models of faith who are both relevant and adaptive. Consequently, Catholic Sunday Schools can continue to serve as a strong, dynamic, and sustainable means of faith formation for future generations of the Church.

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