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Personal Experience of Christ for Catholic Youth (OMK) through IPA (Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis) Approach

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Abstract

This article explores the personal experience of Catholic Youth (OMK) with Christ in the context of their daily lives amid contemporary challenges. In a social setting marked by digitalization, value relativism, and spiritual disruption, personal faith experience becomes a vital aspect in shaping the maturity of young people's faith. The aim of this study is to deeply understand how young Catholics experience the presence and relationship with Christ, and how these experiences shape their spirituality and daily faith practice. This qualitative research uses the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) method. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with six youth members from the Parish of Saint Mary Regina Purbowardayan, Surakarta. The findings reveal two major themes: personal relationship with Christ and the embodiment of Christ's love in real-life actions. Christ is experienced as a companion, healer, and source of strength in life. These experiences form a transformative spirituality that motivates the youth to actively engage in service and witness. In conclusion, the personal experience of Christ serves as a relevant and contextual spiritual resource for youth in facing the challenges of the times and underscores the need for pastoral approaches rooted in lived experience.

Keywords

Christ, Faith, Love, Experience, Catholic Youth (OMK)

INTRODUCTION

Christ is the center of faith and spirituality in the Christian tradition. From the early history of the Church, reflection on the person and work of Jesus Christ has been the foundation of the faithful's spiritual life. The Council of Nicaea (325 AD) firmly declared that Christ is *Homoousios* with God the Father of the same substance with Him. [1] This dogma affirms the divinity of Christ and serves as the basis for understanding the mystery of salvation. However, this doctrinal understanding

[1] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997), no. 465.

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cannot remain merely conceptual; it must be embodied in the lived experience of believers, particularly the youth who face a world full of challenges and uncertainties.

Catholic Youth (OMK) live in a context marked by digital dynamics, a plurality of values, and a search for identity.[2] In such a reality, faith cannot be sustained solely as doctrine or moral obligation; it demands a transformative personal encounter with Christ. Pope Francis, in *Christus Vivit* (2019), emphasizes the importance of a personal experience of Christ as the foundation of authentic faith, especially for young people.[3] This encounter is not always dramatic but often occurs in the simplicity of daily life through relationships, inner struggles, service, and prayer.[4]

Previous studies, such as James Fowler's theory of faith development (1981), suggest that late adolescence and early adulthood are critical phases for forming reflective and personal faith. [5] In the context of spirituality research, phenomenological approaches as developed by Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) have been widely used to explore the subjective meaning and depth of spiritual experiences.[6] However, within the Indonesian pastoral context, particularly among Catholic Youth, there is still a lack of research that explicitly explores personal experiences of Christ as a source of spiritual strength and faith formation.

Most existing pastoral approaches tend to be structural and programmatic, and often fail to engage with the existential and inner experiences of young people. Yet, it is precisely within these personal experiences that faith finds its most authentic transformative power. Therefore, this article seeks to fill that gap by exploring the faith experiences of OMK through the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach, which emphasizes personal, reflective, and spiritual meaning-making.[7]

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[2] Youth Commission of the Indonesian Bishops' Conference*, Sahabat Zepeziarah: Pedoman Karya Pastoral Orang Muda Katolik Indonesia,* (Jakarta: Komkep KWI, 2014), 37.

[3] Francis, *Christus Vivit: Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation to Young People and to the Entire People of God*, Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2019, nos. 124–129.

[4] Youth Commission of the Indonesian Bishops' Conference, *Book on gradual and ongoing faith formation for young Catholics,* (Jakarta: Komkep KWI, 2017), 51.

[5] James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981).

[6] Jonathan A. Smith, Paul Flowers, and Michael Larkin, *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis: Theory, Method and Research* (London: SAGE Publications, 2009).

[7] Linda Finlay, "Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis," in *Phenomenology for Therapists: Researching the Lived World* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 139–151.

The central theological question addressed in this study is: *How do Catholic Youth experience and live out a personal relationship with Christ in their daily lives, and how does this experience shape their spirituality and actions?* This question touches upon the fields of pastoral Christology and contextual spirituality, which are crucial for formulating a more relevant and transformative model of youth accompaniment.

This study employs a qualitative approach using the IPA method, rooted in the hermeneutic phenomenology of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger.[8] This method was chosen because it enables researchers to explore and interpret spiritual experiences deeply within their everyday context. The research involved six OMK participants from the Parish of Saint Mary Regina Purbowardayan, Surakarta, selected purposively based on their active involvement in Church life and their willingness to reflect deeply on their faith experiences.

Data were collected through in depth interviews lasting 60–90 minutes using a semi-structured guide that encouraged open reflection. The analysis followed the stages of IPA as developed by Smith et al. (2009): repeated reading of transcripts, identifying significant themes, formulating experiential patterns, and constructing thematic interpretations that are connected to theological reflection.[9] Validation was ensured through member checking and triangulation with pastoral theological frameworks and Church documents.

The objectives of this study are:

1. To describe and analyze the personal encounters of OMK with Christ in their daily lives;
2. To demonstrate how these experiences shape their spirituality, morality, and pastoral involvement;
3. To offer a foundation for contextual pastoral reflection relevant to the faith accompaniment of youth amid today's challenges.

By integrating phenomenological methodology with theological reflection, this article aims to contribute to the development of contextual pastoral theology especially in the accompaniment of young people and to affirm that personal experience of Christ is an irreplaceable foundation for authentic faith life.

[8] Dermot Moran, *Introduction to Phenomenology* (London: Routledge, 2000).

[9] Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis*, 79–107.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study identified two main categories that represent the core of Catholic Youth's (OMK) personal experience of Christ: (1) Personal Relationship with Christ, and (2) The Embodiment of Christ's Love in Daily Life. These two categories are closely interconnected and shape a unique dynamic of youth spirituality, while also contributing to pastoral and Christological understanding within the context of today's young generation.

Personal Relationship with Christ

All participants shared experiences of a personal and transformative relationship with Christ. This relationship did not emerge instantly, but developed through a journey of faith struggles, life experiences, and community accompaniment. Statements such as "Christ is the friend who never leaves me," *or "Christ is present when I feel alone and don't know where else to turn."* These findings affirm James Fowler's (1981) theory of reflective faith development, in which individuals form personal convictions beyond inherited tradition.[10] Pastoral theology, as emphasized in *Christus Vivit* (2019), encourages a living and relational encounter with Christ that gives existential meaning to young people.[11]

This relationship is often deeply contemplative, even if not expressed in formal theological language. Christ is encountered as a source of strength, consolation, and guidance especially during times of family crisis, academic or career decisions, and personal identity struggles.[12] For example, one friend said, *"I found Christ precisely when I felt like I had no support. He became my most tangible support."* Another interesting answer came from another friend: *"I'd been struggling with who I was for a long time. I often felt inadequate. But one day in adoration, I suddenly felt loved for who I was. From there, I began to make peace with myself."* This confirms that young people's faith is not merely religious activity but a deeply existential experience.

Embodiment of Christ's Love in Daily Life

The experience of Christ is not limited to a private personal sphere; it motivates participants to manifest Christ's love through real actions. This is evident in their

[10] James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981), 179–196.

[11] Francis, *Christus Vivit*, nos. 130–135.

[12] Francis, *Christus Vivit*, nos. 117-121.

commitment to church ministry and social concern. Some serve in youth ministry, help peers in crisis, or defend marginalized friends within the community.

One participant stated, *"If I experience God's love, I feel responsible to share that love with others."* This statement became even more profound when another subject said*: "Every time I feel God strengthening me, I realize that that strength is not just for me. I want to share it with others too."* This aligns with the spirituality of *missio amoris* (mission of love), as articulated in Pope Francis' *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013), which emphasizes that mission flows from personal experience of love and is embodied in transformative social relationships.[13]

Such experiences indicate that Christ becomes the source of concrete moral and ethical action. Faith is not abstract it moves youth toward love and solidarity, forming the foundation of a missionary spirituality that seeks social transformation, not merely personal salvation.

Integration of Spirituality and Contemporary Context

These two categories show that youth spirituality is deeply shaped by their life context. Participants shared challenges such as academic pressure, anxiety about the future, identity crisis, and the influence of digital media. Yet, their experience of Christ becomes a compass and source of meaning amid these struggles.

This affirms the theology of experience promoted by pastoral scholars such as Empereur (2000) and Schneiders (2003), who assert that lived human experience is a legitimate locus of God's revelation.[14] Therefore, youth faith experiences must be theologically interpreted and inform relevant pastoral strategies.[15]

Dialogue with Previous Research

This study resonates with Maria Arulrajan's (2021) findings on the role of religious experience in shaping youth spirituality in Asia, which stress participatory and narrative approaches in youth accompaniment.[16] It also supports the *see–judge–*

[13] Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, nos. 20–24.

[14] Michael J. Schneiders, "Experiencing the Word: Toward a Theology of Experience," *Theological Studies* 62, no. 3 (2001): 496–512.

[15] Charles E. Curran and Richard A. McCormick, eds., *The Distinctiveness of Christian Ethics* (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), 95–108.

[16] Maria Arulrajan, "Youth Spirituality in the Asian Context: A Participatory and Narrative Approach," *Asian Horizons* 15, no. 4 (2021): 897–910.

act pastoral method adopted in FABC documents, where experience becomes the starting point for faith reflection and action.[17]

However, this research goes beyond earlier studies that focused primarily on structural pastoral programs. It shows that personal experience of Christ fosters deeper internal motivation, vocational awareness, and spiritual resilience among youth facing contemporary realities.

CONCLUSION

This study sought to deeply explore the personal experience of Catholic Youth (OMK) with Christ in everyday life, and how such experiences shape their spirituality and practice of faith. Using a qualitative Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) method, the findings reveal that the experience of Christ among OMK is deeply personal, existential, and transformative.

Key conclusions include:

- Christ is experienced as a personal companion, comforter, and guide not only through formal religious practices, but especially through life struggles, personal prayer, and formative events.
- Christ's presence is healing and restorative, particularly during moments of crisis, inner wounds, or disorientation. In Christ, youth discover the strength to forgive, accept themselves, and rise anew.
- The relationship with Christ inspires concrete action such as serving others, being involved in Church communities, and striving to live a more meaningful and mission-oriented life. Faith is not confined to internal sentiment but is expressed through acts of love and solidarity.
- Youth spirituality emerges in dialogue with today's challenges digitalization, moral relativism, social pressures, and disillusionment with institutions. Yet in this context, Christ remains a steady anchor that gives direction and hope.

Thus, the study concludes that OMK's personal experience of Christ is a living and impactful foundation for an authentic and contextual life of faith. Faith is not merely inherited doctrine, but a continually renewed relationship with the living Christ.

[17] Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC), *FABC Papers No. 160: Pastoral Challenges for the Church in Asia Today* (Manila: FABC Office of Social Communication, 2020), 34–36.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on these findings, the following recommendations are offered:

- **For the Church and pastoral ministers:** Create more reflective and spiritual encounter spaces, such as faith-sharing groups, personal mentoring, small retreats, or youth-based communities. These spaces should be places where young people's personal experiences of Christ are listened to without judgment, interpreted theologically in a language that is accessible to them, and accompanied pastorally patiently and continuously, not just in short-term programs.
- **For pastoral theology development:** Research is needed that integrates narrative approaches (listening to life stories), psychospiritual (understanding inner dynamics), and cultural (considering the pluralistic Indonesian context). This will help the Church understand young people's spirituality as it is experienced, not simply as envisioned by Church structures. This approach paves the way for a more inclusive, context-sensitive, and humane pastoral theology.
- **For youth faith formation:** An experiential and relational approach to Christ needs to be developed more seriously. Formation should not only emphasize material or doctrine, but also provide space for young people to share their lives, process experiences, ask questions, engage in dialogue, and express their faith creatively through art, music, theater, social service, or community-based activities. In this way, faith becomes alive and relevant, not merely routine.

This study also opens up opportunities for further exploration in the areas of experiential theology, contextual spirituality, and new forms of youth evangelization: evangelization that occurs through friendship, social engagement, and the witness of everyday life, as envisioned by Pope Francis in *Christus Vivit*. In other words, the Church's mission among young people is not primarily to provide answers, but to walk alongside them in the process of discovering Christ in their life stories.

Ultimately, young people's faith experiences demonstrate that Christ is present not only in liturgy and devotions, but also in the struggles, choices, wounds, and hopes that shape their daily lives. The Church's task is to accompany, listen, and nurture that presence.

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