

Encountering Christ in the Eucharist: A Qualitative Study on Youth Faith Formation and Ecclesial Participation

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Abstract: This study explores the role of the Eucharist in the spiritual formation and ecclesial engagement of young Catholics. Drawing from in-depth interviews with ten members of the Catholic Youth Community (KOMKA) at St. Luke Parish, Temindung, Samarinda, the research employs a qualitative method with a thematic-descriptive approach. The findings reveal that young people perceive the Eucharist as a personal and transformative encounter with Christ, which strengthens their daily lives and fosters ethical commitment and community belonging. However, several barriers—including digital distractions, limited catechesis, and perceived liturgical irrelevance—hinder deeper engagement. The study highlights the importance of contextualized faith formation, active participation, and creative pastoral strategies that integrate Eucharistic spirituality with the realities of youth life. Theologically grounded in the teachings of the Church, particularly *Christus Vivit*, *Gaudium et Spes*, and St. Augustine's concept of *communio*, the research affirms the Church's vocation as a home for education, character formation, and mission among youth. It calls the Church to walk with the young and cultivate the Eucharist as a daily source of identity, vitality, and love.

Keywords: catholic youth; ecclesial participation; eucharist; faith formation

INTRODUCTION

The Eucharist is the center of the faith life of Catholic believers. It is referred to as "the source and summit of the entire Christian life" (LG 11). The Eucharist is not merely a form of worship but also the foundation and strength of the faithful's belief. Through the Eucharist, believers experience the real presence of Christ, who becomes spiritual nourishment to strengthen their faith. In the Eucharist, Christ is truly present, offering Himself as a sacrifice and becoming food for the faithful (cf. CCC 1358). The sacrifice of Jesus on the cross to redeem human sin is remembered and celebrated in the Eucharistic Celebration. Christ's sacrifice is tangible proof of His love for humanity. That love is concretely expressed through the event of the cross. For Christians, the cross is the gateway to salvation. In and through the cross, the faithful receive the gift of salvation that God has bestowed. The Apostle Paul says, "*For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God*" (1 Cor 1:18).

The Eucharist is a source of strength for Catholics. Those who sincerely and devoutly live the Eucharist do not deny that they experience peace and strength to live amidst various challenges. In life, hardships such as disasters and suffering often cause people to lose hope, peace, and closeness with the Creator. It is not uncommon for people to become angry with or even insult God when facing severe trials (Keller, 2019). However, a lived and mature faith is

reflected in daily life, especially through gratitude, a flourishing life, and acts of love toward others and the surrounding environment. Believers who grow in faith will become increasingly aware of their calling to be witnesses of Christ's love for the world and their communities (Debora Pantas, 2007). The ability of the faithful to fulfill this calling faithfully is only possible when they truly build an intimate relationship with the Creator and are willing to make His presence real in their daily lives. As the source and summit of Christian life, the Eucharist brings Christ into the midst of His people, encompassing all age groups—from children and youth to the elderly.

Today, the Church is placing increasing focus on young people. The Church fully realizes the importance of their presence. Young people are the future of the Church and the nation and will inherit the baton of evangelizing mission for the future, to realize a hopeful future for both Church and society (Ta'ek & Hibur, 2021). They are the next generation who will shape the direction of the Church and the world. Within them lies great potential to continue the Church's mission, both in proclaiming the Gospel and building a civilization of love. Therefore, the Church sees young people as a treasure that must be formed, accompanied, and empowered so that they may fulfill their calling.

The Church is also aware of the challenges of the times faced by the youth. In this digital era, technological development, global culture, and social change bring both opportunities and challenges. On one hand, young people have wide access to knowledge and information; on the other, they are vulnerable to negative influences such as individualism, materialism, and identity crises, all of which can affect their love for the Eucharist.

A study by Taek et al. explored the extent to which Catholic youth understand and live out the Eucharist, and how this affects their involvement in Church life (Taek et al., 2024). Their findings indicate a positive correlation between a good understanding of the Eucharist and a higher level of involvement in Church activities. A similar study aimed at youth in general by Oktavia and Ola yielded comparable results, showing a significant correlation between a deep understanding of the Eucharist and increased participation in Church activities. According to Oktavia and Ola, the better the understanding and appreciation of the Eucharist, the greater the youth's involvement in the life of the Church.

This paper draws on the findings of both Taek et al. and Oktavia and Ola. It argues that young people's understanding of the Eucharist influences their activeness and involvement in the Church. The Church must care and be present to guide and help young people find the true meaning of life in Christ. This paper aims to explore the extent of young people's awareness of the importance of the Eucharist and how it affects their daily lives. The author's view, which underpins this paper, is twofold: first, young people represent the real and concrete future of the Church; second, youth are both an opportunity and a challenge for the Church. They are an opportunity if they are properly formed and given space to participate in evangelization, and a challenge if the Church fails to pay attention to their faith development. This study seeks to determine whether young people's understanding of the importance of the Eucharist is truly

reflected in their spiritual life and involvement in Church activities and celebrations. What do they truly understand about the Eucharist in their lives?

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative method with a descriptive analytical approach. Descriptive analysis is a type of data analysis that helps describe, demonstrate, or summarize data points so that patterns may emerge that align with all the conditions present in the data (Nasution, 2017). The aim is to provide an in-depth depiction of the participants' opinions and experiences regarding their understanding and appreciation of the Eucharist.

The research subjects consisted of 10 members of the Catholic Youth Community (KOMKA) from St. Luke Parish, Temindung, Samarinda, with diverse backgrounds in terms of age (ranging from 18 to 30 years) and duration of involvement in the community (ranging from 1 to 10 years).

Data were collected through in-depth interviews and participant observation. These techniques allowed the researcher to explore the participants' experiences and understandings in a comprehensive manner. The interview data were analyzed thematically to identify patterns in the participants' understanding, appreciation, and challenges related to the Eucharist. The analysis focused on descriptive expressions, such as emphasized words and positive affirmations, that indicated meaningful experiences of the Eucharist. Finally, the findings were synthesized into a conclusion based on the thematic analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study indicate that the Eucharist is profoundly meaningful in the lives of Catholic youth, functioning not merely as a ritual but as a vital moment of spiritual encounter with Christ. One respondent (age 25, 7 years in KOMKA) stated, "The Eucharist for me is a moment of encounter with Christ that gives me strength to live with faith. It reminds me of His sacrificial love and becomes a source of strength for facing daily challenges." This perception reflects a recurring theme among participants: the Eucharist is experienced as a source of renewal, especially during times of struggle and doubt.

Participants also emphasized that the Eucharist is rightly called the "source and summit" of Christian life. A respondent (age 23, 3 years in KOMKA) shared, "The Eucharist is the remembrance of Jesus' sacrifice that unites us with Christ and the Church. Through it, we receive spiritual strength to live as witnesses of faith and love." For many, this union leads to a concrete ethical commitment in daily life, particularly in serving others and maintaining hope in times of difficulty. "In daily life, the Eucharist reminds me to love and serve others," noted one respondent (age 27, 9 years in KOMKA), "and to renew my faith commitment even when life is hard."

However, the study also revealed challenges faced by young people in appreciating the Eucharist. These include time constraints, superficial understanding, and the sense that the liturgy lacks direct relevance to their lives. One participant (age 21, 4 years in KOMKA)

explained, “My challenges include being too busy, lacking a deep understanding of the Eucharist, and often feeling that the Mass doesn't relate to my life. Social media also distracts me from reflecting on its meaning.”

Regarding the theological reflection of St. Augustine—that the Eucharist is a communion renewing love—respondents affirmed its relevance. “Yes, this view is relevant,” said a 24-year-old respondent, “because it reminds me that the Eucharist is not just a ritual, but also an experience that renews love for Christ and for others.”

Despite occasional boredom during the Mass—“Sometimes I find the Eucharist boring, especially when the liturgical language or homily is hard to understand” (age 23, 3 years)—youth also expressed that a deeper understanding transforms the experience. “But when I understand its meaning more deeply, I find it very meaningful and enriching for my faith.”

Respondents offered several suggestions for how the Church might help youth engage more fully. “The Church can offer more relevant faith education, prepare homilies that speak to youth issues, and involve us in activities that make the Eucharist more alive and meaningful,” proposed a participant (age 25, 4 years).

Active participation in Eucharistic celebrations was unanimously viewed as essential. “It’s very necessary,” one youth (age 26, 7 years) affirmed, “because by being involved, we feel closer to the Church community and better understand the meaning of the Eucharist. It also gives us a sense of responsibility in our faith life.”

Regarding the positive impact of active Eucharistic participation, a respondent (age 28, 10 years) noted, “It helps us know Christ better, strengthens our faith, and gives us a sense of belonging in the community. It also helps us live according to Christ’s teachings in everyday life.”

Finally, participants suggested concrete steps to improve Eucharistic appreciation among peers, such as inviting friends to liturgical ministries, joining faith-sharing groups, and creating small communities to discuss the relevance of the Eucharist. One participant (age 27, 5 years) concluded, “We could also create creative activities that connect the Eucharist with our everyday experiences as young people.”

These findings suggest that when properly accompanied and engaged, the youth find in the Eucharist not only a ritual of faith but a deep wellspring of personal and communal transformation.

The analysis of interview data with young Catholics reveals six interrelated themes that demonstrate a dynamic and nuanced understanding of the Eucharist as both a theological mystery and a lived experience. The first major theme is the Eucharist as a personal and transformative encounter with Christ. For the participants, the Eucharist is not merely a religious obligation or routine, but a sacred space where they encounter Christ intimately. One respondent affirmed, “The Eucharist is a moment of meeting Christ that gives me strength to live with faith.” This understanding resonates with the Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC 1324–1327), which describes the Eucharist as “the source and summit of the Christian life.” It also aligns with Henri Nouwen’s reflection on the Eucharist as a “holy presence that heals and

empowers” (Nouwen, *With Burning Hearts*, 1994), emphasizing that the liturgical celebration becomes a wellspring of spiritual strength that sustains the believer’s interior life.

Closely linked to this personal encounter is the second theme: the ethical implications of Eucharistic spirituality in daily life. Participants consistently expressed that the Eucharist inspires them to embody Christ’s love in their interactions with others. One noted, “The Eucharist reminds me to love and serve others and to renew my faith commitment even when life is hard.” This theological insight reflects the teaching of *Gaudium et Spes* (GS 38), which asserts that Christian participation in the Eucharist should animate a life of justice, charity, and social transformation. The Eucharist thus becomes a “sacrament of mission,” sending the faithful into the world as agents of love and reconciliation.

However, several barriers to Eucharistic participation among youth emerged as a third theme. Respondents identified various obstacles such as the lack of catechetical depth, busyness, and digital distractions. As one participant put it, “Social media also distracts me from reflecting on its meaning.” This reflects the concerns raised in *Christus Vivit* (CV 102–104), where Pope Francis acknowledges the fragmented cultural context that often alienates young people from profound spiritual experiences. Theologian Karl Rahner’s notion of “anonymous Christianity” becomes particularly relevant here, as he warned of the danger that sacramental participation might occur without conscious engagement or interior transformation unless supported by personal spiritual integration (*Theological Investigations*, Vol. 7).

A fourth theme affirmed by participants is the relevance of St. Augustine’s Eucharistic theology, especially his emphasis on the Eucharist as *communio*, a transformative participation in the Body of Christ that renews love and forges unity. One young person stated, “It reminds me that the Eucharist is not just a ritual, but also an experience that renews love for Christ and for others.” This insight echoes Augustine’s well-known exhortation: “Be what you see; receive what you are” (Sermon 272), which calls the faithful to not only partake of the Eucharist but to become the living Body of Christ in the world. The fact that this theological vision is intuitively embraced by youth today shows their capacity to grasp Eucharistic identity as both mystical and ecclesial.

The fifth theme underscores the importance of youth participation and a sense of ecclesial belonging. Respondents indicated that active involvement in liturgical and ministerial roles deepens their understanding of and connection to the Eucharist. One respondent explained, “With involvement, we feel closer to the Church community and better understand the meaning of the Eucharist.” This response echoes *Christus Vivit* (CV 203), where Pope Francis urges the Church to recognize young people not just as recipients but as protagonists of ecclesial life. Similarly, Joseph Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI) teaches that “the Eucharist builds the Church” (*Sacramentum Caritatis*, 14), meaning that full participation in Eucharistic life cultivates a deeper sense of mission and identity within the Church.

The final theme centers on the need for contextualized faith formation and creative pastoral strategies. Youth expressed a strong desire for catechesis that connects the Eucharist with their lived realities. One suggested, “We could create small groups and creative activities that

connect the Eucharist with our daily lives.” This proposal reflects the pedagogical vision of Thomas H. Groome’s shared praxis model, which emphasizes participatory and contextualized religious education (Christian Religious Education, 1980). Their desire for more relevant homilies and engaging liturgical experiences also mirrors the call of Sacrosanctum Concilium (SC 10), which stresses the need for the liturgy to be pastorally effective and spiritually nourishing.

In synthesis, these thematic findings demonstrate that young Catholics possess an implicit and emerging theological understanding of the Eucharist as encounter, communion, and mission. Their experiences affirm the Eucharist’s central role in shaping not only personal spirituality but also social responsibility and community belonging. At the same time, their testimonies reveal an urgent need for the Church to accompany, educate, and empower them in meaningful and context-sensitive ways. As Pope Francis reminds us, “We must not abandon the young to themselves, but walk with them” (*Christus Vivit*, 91). The Eucharist must therefore not be limited to a weekly obligation, but cultivated as a daily source of Christian identity, vitality, and hope.

The Catholic Church understands itself as a communion of the People of God, called to be a nurturing home for the faith education and holistic formation of young people (Dien, 2020). Rooted in the Eucharist as “the source and summit of the Christian life” (CCC 1324), the Church provides young people with not only doctrinal instruction but also concrete encounters with Christ that sustain their identity, vitality, and hope. As revealed in the interviews, many youth described the Eucharist as “a source of strength for facing daily challenges”—an affirmation that reflects both the mystical and practical dimension of the Church’s role in accompanying young people through the complexities of life.

Faith education in the Church aims not merely to inform but to transform. Through catechesis, sacramental life, and pastoral engagement, the Church invites young people to experience Christ as a living presence who empowers them to live out love, compassion, and responsibility. As one respondent stated, “Through the Eucharist, we receive spiritual strength to live as witnesses of faith and love.” This experiential emphasis aligns with the theological vision that the Eucharist is not only a liturgical act but also a formative encounter that sends believers into the world as agents of God’s love (GS 38; Nouwen, 1994).

In this sense, faith education is inseparable from character formation. The Church fosters growth in values such as honesty, solidarity, and responsibility (Komara, 2018), not through abstract teachings alone, but through shared spiritual practices—especially the Eucharist. One participant highlighted, “Active participation in the Eucharist helps us know Christ more closely and gives us a sense of community,” reflecting Augustine’s vision of the Eucharist as *communio*—a transformative participation that strengthens both identity and mission (Sermon 272).

Equally important is the Church’s role in connecting doctrine with daily experience. In a world where many youth feel alienated from institutional religion, the Church serves as a bridge that integrates faith with reality. By offering contextualized catechesis, dialogical homilies, and

community-based engagement, the Church can ensure that liturgy becomes a lived expression of God's love rather than a distant ritual (SC 10; Groome, 1980). Such efforts are vital to overcoming barriers like liturgical irrelevance and digital distractions, which were noted by several respondents as challenges to Eucharistic engagement.

The Church's commitment also extends to building supportive communities. Communal formation helps youth internalize their belonging to the living Body of Christ, where each one plays a meaningful role. In the interviews, young people affirmed the value of "a sense of togetherness in the community," especially in moments of active service and shared worship (Tobing et al., 2023). This supports Pope Francis's call in *Christus Vivit* (CV 203) for youth to be protagonists in the Church, not passive observers.

By cultivating both spiritual depth and social solidarity, the Church becomes not only a teacher but a home—where faith is nourished, identity is affirmed, and mission is formed. Echoing the theological synthesis of Eucharist as encounter, communion, and mission, the Church is invited to walk with young people, creating spaces where faith is not reduced to obligation, but becomes a daily wellspring of life, love, and commitment (CV 91).

CONCLUSION

This study affirms that the Eucharist holds a central and transformative role in the lives of young Catholics. For many respondents, the Eucharist is not merely a ritual obligation but a personal encounter with Christ that provides spiritual strength, shapes ethical behavior, and fosters a sense of belonging to the Church. Their testimonies reflect a theological understanding of the Eucharist as both mystical and practical—encountering Christ, being nourished by His love, and being sent forth as witnesses of faith and charity. These lived experiences confirm that young people are not spiritually indifferent; rather, they are seeking deeper meaning, relevance, and active participation within the Church's sacramental life.

However, the findings also reveal that young people face significant challenges in appreciating the Eucharist in today's context. The disconnect between liturgy and daily life, distractions from digital media, and a lack of contextual catechesis hinder deeper engagement. Despite these barriers, the desire of youth to participate actively in liturgy, learn more about their faith, and find community shows immense potential. Their responses highlight the importance of renewed faith formation—rooted in dialogue, experience, and creativity—that connects Eucharistic theology with the reality of youth culture today.

The Church, therefore, is called to embrace its identity as a home for education and formation of young people, integrating the Eucharist into the heart of pastoral care and catechesis. By fostering spaces of encounter, belonging, and mission, the Church can help youth internalize the Eucharist not only as a source of personal strength, but as the foundation of Christian identity and vocation. Echoing Pope Francis's call to "walk with the young" (*Christus Vivit*, 91), the Church is invited to accompany them with patience, relevance, and

hope—so that the Eucharist may truly become a daily source of life, vitality, and love for a new generation of faithful disciples.

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