



Mystagogy as a Pedagogical Approach in Catholic Catechist Formation: A Phenomenologically Grounded Qualitative Study

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ABSTRACT

Catholic higher education is increasingly shaped by digital culture, technological mediation, and shifting patterns of religious engagement, raising critical questions about how catechists are formed to accompany faith meaningfully. While existing formation models continue to privilege instructional competence, doctrinal transmission, and standardized pedagogical outcomes, such approaches often prove insufficient for nurturing holistic, lived, and transformative Christian discipleship. Drawing on mystagogy as an experiential and relational pedagogical paradigm, this study examines the transformation of catechist identity from instructor to mystagogue within Catholic higher education institutions in Indonesia. Employing a qualitative, phenomenologically oriented design, data were generated through in-depth interviews, reflective narratives, and focus group discussions with lecturers involved in catechetical formation. Thematic analysis reveals four interrelated findings: catechist formation remains predominantly instructional and institutionally driven; educators increasingly recognize the need for mystagogical accompaniment; persistent tensions exist between academic demands and spiritual formation; and digital culture simultaneously fragments attention while opening new spaces for engagement and meaning-making. The study argues that mystagogy provides a coherent theological and pedagogical framework for reimagining catechist formation as a process of identity transformation grounded in relational accompaniment, experiential interpretation, and communal discernment. In the Indonesian context, this approach is particularly significant for negotiating the intersection of Catholic identity, higher education, cultural plurality, and digitally mediated religious experience. By situating formation within digitally mediated and pluralistic contexts, this research contributes to contemporary debates on religious education, synodal pedagogy, and digital spirituality, proposing a shift toward a more holistic, relational, and transformative model of catechetical formation in higher education.

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■ INTRODUCTION

Contemporary higher education is increasingly shaped by rapid digitalization, accelerated information flows, and shifting epistemologies that challenge traditional pedagogical models (Maranatha & Tandana, 2025; Pabbajah et al., 2021; Kurnia Saputra, 2024). Within Catholic higher education, these transformations raise critical questions regarding the adequacy of instruction-centered approaches for preparing catechists who are expected not only to communicate doctrinal knowledge but also to accompany others in living and interpreting Christian faith. Existing formation models remain largely oriented toward doctrinal transmission, assessment-driven learning, and standardized curricula, often giving limited

attention to the experiential, relational, affective, and spiritual dimensions central to authentic faith formation (Rhudy & Torres, 2024). Although these approaches may strengthen conceptual understanding, they risk reducing catechist formation to mastering religious content rather than cultivating an integrated Christian identity and the capacity for spiritual accompaniment. This concern is especially significant in digitally mediated contexts, where attention is increasingly fragmented, religious authority is negotiated across multiple platforms, and meaning-making and identity formation have become more complex (Maranatha & Tandana, 2025; Evolvi, 2022).

Mystagogy, rooted in early Christian praxis, offers a compelling framework for

reimagining catechist formation in response to these challenges. Historically, mystagogy accompanied newly initiated Christians into deeper participation in the mystery of faith through reflection on lived experience, liturgical participation, Scripture, and communal life (Komkat KWI, 2024). Its educational logic therefore extends beyond doctrinal explanation toward a process through which believers interpret their experiences in the light of faith. Contemporary scholarship affirms the continuing pedagogical relevance of mystagogy by emphasizing its capacity to reorient religious education toward lived experience, interpretive meaning-making, and transformative learning rather than mere transmission of religious information (Elshof, 2017). Mystagogy thus provides a holistic approach that integrates cognition, affect, relationships, embodiment, and spirituality. Such an orientation is particularly important in digital culture, where beliefs and identities are continuously negotiated across physical and mediated spaces (Curro, 2021).

Pedagogically, mystagogy can be operationalized through a cyclical process of experience, recollection, interpretation, discernment, and communal response. The process begins by inviting learners to attend to a concrete experience, such as a personal encounter, social issue, liturgical event, ethical dilemma, or digital interaction that raises questions of meaning and faith. Students then recall and describe the experience attentively, including the emotions, tensions, questions, relationships, and bodily dimensions involved. Rather than immediately providing doctrinal explanations, the educator facilitates theological interpretation by bringing the experience into dialogue with Scripture, Christian tradition, liturgical symbols, and the lived faith of the ecclesial community. Learners then discern how the interpreted experience challenges, deepens, or transforms their understanding of God, self, others, and Christian discipleship. The process culminates in communal sharing and a concrete response through which students identify possible changes in attitudes, relationships, practices, or participation in the faith community.

This operational structure distinguishes mystagogy from conventional character education. Although both approaches concern personal formation, mystagogy does not primarily seek the acquisition of predetermined moral values or desirable behaviors. Rather, its central purpose is to help learners interpret lived experience within the mystery of Christian faith and, through that interpretation, experience transformation in identity, relationships, spirituality, and participation in the ecclesial community. Moral transformation may emerge

from this process, but it is understood as a response to theological meaning rather than simply as internalizing behavioral norms. Accordingly, the educator's role also changes. The educator functions less as a transmitter of predetermined moral or doctrinal content and more as a mystagogue who accompanies learners in recognizing theological meaning and discerning God's presence and action within concrete experiences.

Recent studies in Christian and religious education reinforce the importance of such a shift. Effective faith formation requires more than content mastery; it also demands spiritual accompaniment, relational presence, existential interpretation, and sensitivity to learners' concrete realities (Rhudy & Torres, 2024). Scholars have therefore called for educators to reconfigure their roles from instructors to transformative mentors who integrate theological depth, relational sensitivity, and digital discernment (Maranatha & Tandana, 2025). In this sense, the mystagogical educator is not simply responsible for explaining what Christians believe but for facilitating processes through which learners interpret experiences, discern meaning, and integrate faith with daily life. Theological reflections on mystagogy similarly emphasize its potential to resist the reductionism and instrumentalism frequently embedded in contemporary educational systems by offering a more holistic vision of formation centered on encounter, community, interpretation, and transformation (Elshof, 2017).

Despite its conceptual promise, empirical research on mystagogical formation in Catholic higher education remains underexplored. Existing research has examined digital catechesis as a means of evangelization (Kristeno & Tarihoran, 2024; Sarma & Tarihoran, 2024), technological mediation in faith learning (Rahayu, 2023), and the importance of spiritual formation in ministry preparation (Stones & Fraser-Pearce, 2022). These studies demonstrate increasing scholarly attention to the changing context of religious education. However, comparatively little attention has been given to how catechist identity is being reconfigured from an instructor who primarily communicates religious knowledge to a mystagogue who accompanies others in interpreting experience and discerning faith. This gap matters because digital environments do more than provide new educational tools; they also reshape religious authority, community, relationships, and processes of self-understanding. Traditional instructional paradigms may therefore lack the interpretive, relational, and accompaniment-oriented resources required to address these complexities.

Against this backdrop, the present study investigates the reconceptualization of catechist formation within Catholic higher education through a mystagogical lens. It focuses on the tensions between institutional instructional logics and the relational, experiential, interpretive, and spiritually grounded competencies required for contemporary faith accompaniment. Specifically, the study asks: How is catechist formation in Catholic higher education being reconceptualized and enacted through a mystagogical approach, particularly in relation to catechist identity, pedagogical and spiritual transformation, the tensions between academic expectations and faith accompaniment, and the opportunities and constraints presented by digital culture?

By addressing this question, the study responds to growing calls for integrative models of catechist formation that move beyond content transmission toward whole-person transformation involving cognitive, affective, relational, and spiritual dimensions (Elshof, 2017; Rhudy & Torres, 2024). The study contributes conceptually by positioning mystagogy as a contemporary paradigm of catechist formation and empirically by examining how this paradigm is understood and enacted within Catholic higher education. In doing so, it contributes to emerging interdisciplinary conversations among theology, religious education, higher education, and digital pedagogy while offering an empirically grounded account of the transition from an instruction-centered model toward a relational and transformative model of mystagogical accompaniment.

Literature Review

In Catholic ecclesial teaching, catechesis is not merely cognitive instruction but an integral process of evangelization and holistic formation that leads believers into deeper communion with Christ (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1992; Paul VI, 1975; Pontifical Council for Promoting the New Evangelization [PCPNE], 2020). The Directory for Catechesis emphasizes that catechesis must culminate in a personal encounter with Christ and integrates knowing, celebrating, living, and praying the faith as inseparable dimensions of Christian formation (PCPNE, 2020). Consequently, catechists are not only transmitters of doctrine but witnesses whose lives embody the Gospel, since effective catechesis requires personal testimony alongside theological clarity (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2021; PCPNE, 2020; Hannam et al., 2020; Sciarpa, 2025; Anggal, 2023; Hall et al., 2024). Contemporary theological and

pastoral scholarship affirms this view, describing catechesis as a dynamic encounter with the Holy Spirit that nurtures spiritual growth, communal belonging, and existential integration of faith (Yuniarto & Imbang, 2023; Lovat, 2022).

This theological grounding rejects reductive models that privilege doctrinal transmission over encounter, context, and lifelong formation (Sultana, 2024). Rooted in the magisterial tradition articulated in *Catechesi Tradendae* (John Paul II, 1979) and renewed in the 2020 Directory, Catholic pedagogy seeks to immerse learners in the mystery of Christian life, enabling them to interpret faith within concrete experiences (PCPNE, 2020). Scholarly literature further indicates that mystagogical practices such as narrative reflection, ritual participation, and communal engagement enhance learners' ability to integrate lived experience with theological meaning (Johnson-Miller & Espinoza, 2018; Melley, 2021). Thus, mystagogy functions not only as a retrieval of early Christian pedagogy but also as a robust contemporary framework that fosters personal conversion and active ecclesial participation (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2021; Habur, 2026).

Moving further ahead, Mystagogy, originally developed in the early Church to accompany the newly baptized into deeper sacramental and existential understanding, is increasingly recognized as a relevant paradigm for contemporary religious education. It foregrounds experience, transformation, and meaning-making rather than the mere transmission of information (Elshof, 2017; Hannam et al., 2020; Mazur, 2021; Curro, 2021; Hall et al., 2024). Although Elshof's (2017) influential work was published before 2020, it continues to shape contemporary scholarship in religious education, particularly studies that emphasize experiential and interpretive approaches to faith learning (Elshof, 2017; Conroy et al., 2012). In this respect, mystagogical pedagogy enables learners to engage dwellingly with religious meaning through reflection, relationality, and communal discernment, which is especially vital in digitally mediated and pluralistic contexts. By privileging encounter over explanation, mystagogy reframes learning as a participatory process in which faith is discovered through lived experience, ritual practice, and shared interpretation, rather than absorbed as abstract content (Elshof, 2017; Melley, 2021). This paradigm thus aligns with contemporary educational theories that understand learning as transformative, dialogical, and contextually embedded.

Meanwhile, the shift from doctrinal instruction to mystagogical accompaniment implies a profound transformation of catechist

identity. In traditional instructional paradigms, catechists function primarily as content transmitters evaluated through measurable outcomes, often privileging cognitive mastery over personal transformation (Johnson-Miller & Espinoza, 2018). Mystagogical pedagogy, by contrast, redefines the catechist as a companion in faith who guides learners in interpreting their experiences in light of the Gospel (Elshof, 2017; Melley, 2021; Hannam et al., 2020). This shift reflects both early Christian catechetical traditions and contemporary reconceptualizations of religious education that emphasize relationality, participation, and lived meaning. Moreover, empirical research consistently shows that deep religious understanding emerges not through information delivery alone but through reflective, narrative, and dialogical engagement (Johnson-Miller & Espinoza, 2018; Lovat, 2022). Within this framework, the mystagogical catechist becomes an interpreter of experience, helping learners recognize the sacred in everyday life, including digitally mediated contexts (Melley, 2021). By emphasizing accompaniment, communal discernment, and reflective agency, mystagogical pedagogy reframes faith formation as a lifelong, integrative process of meaning-making rather than a finite instructional event (Elshof, 2017; Hoven et al., 2024).

More importantly, digital mediation is essential to religion. Digital culture profoundly reshapes how faith is lived, communicated, and interpreted, as digital religion studies demonstrate that online environments transform religious practice, community, and authority structures (Grigore & Cobzeanu, 2025; Alrissa et al., 2025; Evolvi, 2022). Digital platforms foster hybrid forms of religious engagement that blur boundaries between online and offline faith expressions, while simultaneously challenging traditional patterns of authority and depth of communal belonging (Grigore & Cobzeanu, 2025). The Directory for Catechesis explicitly acknowledges this cultural shift, calling for catechesis that equips believers to discern truth within the “culture of the instantaneous” and to engage digital media ethically and critically (PCPNE, 2020). Consequently, catechetical pedagogy must move beyond linear, instructor-centered approaches toward dialogical, participatory, and meaning-oriented models.

Recent research further emphasizes that digital engagement in faith formation requires not only technical competence but also reflective, ethical, and relational capacities essential for spiritual growth (Rhudy & Torres, 2024). Studies on digital catechesis suggest that interactive and dialogical uses of digital tools can foster deeper

reflection and engagement when intentionally designed (Habur, 2025; Toron et al., 2023; Kurnia Saputra, 2024). Within this context, the mystagogical paradigm offers a particularly effective framework, enabling learners to interpret digital experiences through theological and existential lenses. This approach broadens catechesis beyond static content transmission to include narrative meaning-making, communal belonging, and spiritual discernment across both online and offline contexts (PCPNE, 2020; Rhudy & Torres, 2024).

For this reason, bridging theological and educational theory with the Indonesian context is significant (Utami, 2022). This study's findings suggest that integrating mystagogical pedagogy with digital culture cannot be understood as simply transferring a Western pedagogical framework into Catholic higher education in Indonesia. Rather, its relevance emerges through negotiation with an educational culture that still values structured instruction, lecturer authority, doctrinal clarity, and institutional expectations. In this context, mystagogy's emphasis on reflective practice, learner agency, embodied experience, and interpretive engagement with real-life contexts (Conroy et al., 2012) both resonates with and challenges established patterns of catechetical formation. The Indonesian context therefore does not merely confirm the theoretical assumption that meaningful formation extends beyond knowledge acquisition; it reveals the practical tension between learner-centered and relational formation on the one hand and established instructional expectations on the other. Similarly, the emphasis in digital religious education on integrating theological depth with digital literacy, ethical discernment, and participatory learning (Boiliu et al., 2025) becomes particularly significant when educators must negotiate these competencies within institutional structures that may still prioritize academic performance and standardized learning outcomes. Interdisciplinary scholarship further argues that digital environments are constitutive contexts that shape religious identities, practices, and communities (Grigore & Cobzeanu, 2025). The Indonesian findings extend this insight by showing that digital culture does not simply create new technological opportunities for catechetical engagement; it also introduces tensions concerning attention, authority, participation, and the interpretation of faith experiences. Thus, the encounter between mystagogical theory and Indonesian educational culture is neither a straightforward validation nor a rejection of Western theory. Instead, it demonstrates that mystagogical catechist formation requires

contextual adaptation: theological depth must be integrated with relational accompaniment, while reflective and participatory learning must be negotiated with local expectations concerning academic authority and institutional formation. Together, these perspectives position catechist formation as a process of identity transformation that is grounded in mystagogical engagement, contextual interpretation, and relational accompaniment, while remaining attentive to the cultural and institutional realities of Catholic higher education in Indonesia, particularly in an era marked by digital mediation, cultural plurality, and shifting modes of religious experience.

■ **METHOD**

Research Design and Procedures

This study employed a qualitative research design grounded in an interpretive, constructivist paradigm, appropriate for examining meaning-making, lived experience, and identity transformation rather than measuring predefined variables (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Denzin, 2012). Because the shift from instructional to mystagogical catechist formation involves personal, relational, and spiritual dimensions, the study adopted a phenomenological orientation. Phenomenology focuses on how individuals interpret and ascribe meaning to their lived experiences, making it particularly suitable for investigating faith formation and vocational identity (van Manen, 2016). This approach also aligns with the mystagogical framework, which emphasizes experience, reflection, and transformation as core elements of religious learning.

The research was conducted in Catholic higher education institutions in Indonesia offering programs in catechetics, religious education, or pastoral theology. Indonesia provides a distinctive context due to its religious pluralism, rapid digitalization, and the growing role of Catholic universities within national education systems. These institutions are shaped by both ecclesial traditions and modern academic structures, creating a productive setting for examining tensions between instructional models and mystagogical aspirations. The increasing use of digital technologies in teaching further enabled an exploration of how digital culture influences pedagogical practices and educators' spiritual self-understanding.

Ethical approval was obtained from the ethic committee of Universitas Katolik Indonesia Santu Paulus Ruteng to meet academic standards. Verbal informed consent was obtained prior to data collection. Written consent was not required because the study involved minimal risk and focused on participants' professional

experiences in catechist formation rather than sensitive personal data. Moreover, within relatively small ecclesial-academic networks, written consent could increase participant identifiability. Participants were fully informed about the study's purpose, procedures, voluntary nature, confidentiality measures, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. Verbal consent was audio-recorded to ensure ethical accountability and documentation.

Participants

Participants were selected through purposive sampling, targeting lecturers or formators involved in catechist preparation, employed in Catholic higher education, and having at least three years of relevant teaching experience (Patton, 2015). The three-year criterion was not intended to imply that length of service alone demonstrates mystagogical competence. Rather, it was established as a minimum period of sustained professional engagement through which participants were expected to have experienced repeated cycles of teaching, accompaniment, reflection, and interaction with students in catechetical formation. Such sustained exposure provided a reasonable basis for participants to reflect on changes in their understanding of the catechist role, the tensions between instructional responsibilities and spiritual accompaniment, and the development of their formative practices over time. The criterion therefore served as a methodological threshold to ensure sufficient experiential exposure to the phenomenon under investigation, rather than as a proxy measure of spiritual or pedagogical maturity. This purposive criterion aligns with experience-based participant selection in qualitative inquiry, where participants are selected because their sustained involvement enables them to provide information-rich accounts of the phenomenon being studied (Patton, 2015).

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed a thematic interpretive process informed by phenomenological and hermeneutic principles, while remaining attentive to the narrative character of participants' accounts (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The analysis involved systematically managing and interpreting interview transcripts from all 35 participants. Each interview was transcribed verbatim and organized using participant identifiers to maintain anonymity while allowing the researchers to trace statements across the dataset. The transcripts were first read repeatedly to achieve familiarization with the participants' experiences, expressions, and

recurring meanings. During this stage, the researchers also recorded preliminary analytical notes and reflections concerning statements related to catechist formation, pedagogical practice, spiritual accompaniment, institutional expectations, and experiences of digital culture.

The coding process was conducted inductively while remaining sensitive to the phenomenological meaning of participants' experiences. Following Braun and Clarke (2006), meaningful units within each transcript, including significant words, phrases, sentences, and short narrative segments, were identified and assigned initial descriptive codes. Codes were generated primarily from the participants' own accounts rather than being imposed in advance from the theoretical framework. For example, statements about learning through personal and faith experiences were coded as experiential learning, reflection, and meaning-making; accounts emphasizing listening, presence, and spiritual guidance were coded as accompaniment and relational presence; and statements about technology, fragmented attention, and online religious engagement were coded in relation to digital culture. Coding was carried out across all 35 transcripts, and similar or conceptually related codes were continuously compared, merged, differentiated, and refined. This constant comparison helped ensure that recurring patterns were identified across participants while distinctive or contradictory experiences were retained rather than prematurely eliminated.

In the next stage, related codes were clustered into broader categories based on conceptual similarity and shared meaning. These categories were subsequently examined in relation to the research questions and compared across the 35 participants to identify patterns that were sufficiently recurrent, meaningful, and analytically coherent. Through repeated movement between individual transcripts, coded segments, emerging categories, and the complete dataset, the categories were progressively refined into five overarching themes: (1) From Instruction to Experience, (2) The Catechist as Mystagogue, (3) Catechesis within a Synodal Horizon, (4) Digital Culture and AI, and (5) Institutional Tensions. Theme development was therefore not based merely on the frequency of particular statements, but on the interpretive significance of the patterns for understanding how catechist formation was being reconceptualized and experienced by the participants.

The five themes were then reviewed against the original transcripts to determine whether each theme adequately represented the coded data and whether clear conceptual distinctions existed among themes. Themes

that overlapped were reconsidered and refined, while discrepant accounts were examined to prevent the analysis from presenting participants' experiences as artificially homogeneous. The final stage involved interpretive synthesis. Rather than merely describing recurring patterns, the analysis sought to interpret the deeper meanings of participants' experiences in relation to the study's theoretical framework, particularly the concepts of mystagogy, accompaniment, and identity transformation (van Manen, 2016). This interpretive movement enabled the researchers to connect participants' concrete experiences with broader questions concerning the transition from catechist as instructor to catechist as mystagogue, the relational and spiritual dimensions of formation, the influence of digital culture, and institutional conditions that either support or constrain mystagogical formation.

To ensure rigor, the study applied the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Credibility was strengthened through triangulation of participants' accounts and member checking of key interpretations (Denzin, 2012). Transferability was supported by providing sufficiently thick descriptions of the research context, participants' experiences, and thematic findings. Dependability was enhanced through an audit trail documenting the progression from raw transcripts to initial codes, categories, theme development, and final interpretations. Confirmability was supported through reflexive journaling, which enabled the researchers to document analytical decisions, theoretical assumptions, and potential interpretive biases throughout the coding and thematic development process. Together, these procedures provided a transparent analytical pathway from the 35 participant transcripts to the five final themes while maintaining the interpretive depth required by the study's phenomenological-hermeneutic orientation.

■ RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 below summarizes the main findings of this study, highlighting the transformation of catechist formation in Catholic higher education from an instructional paradigm toward a mystagogical, synodal, and digitally situated model. The figure and the table below organize the data into five interrelated themes that capture shifts in pedagogical orientation, identity construction, ecclesial vision, and institutional challenges.

The thematic analysis of the interview data revealed five interrelated themes that illuminate the changing character of catechist formation in Catholic higher education: (1)

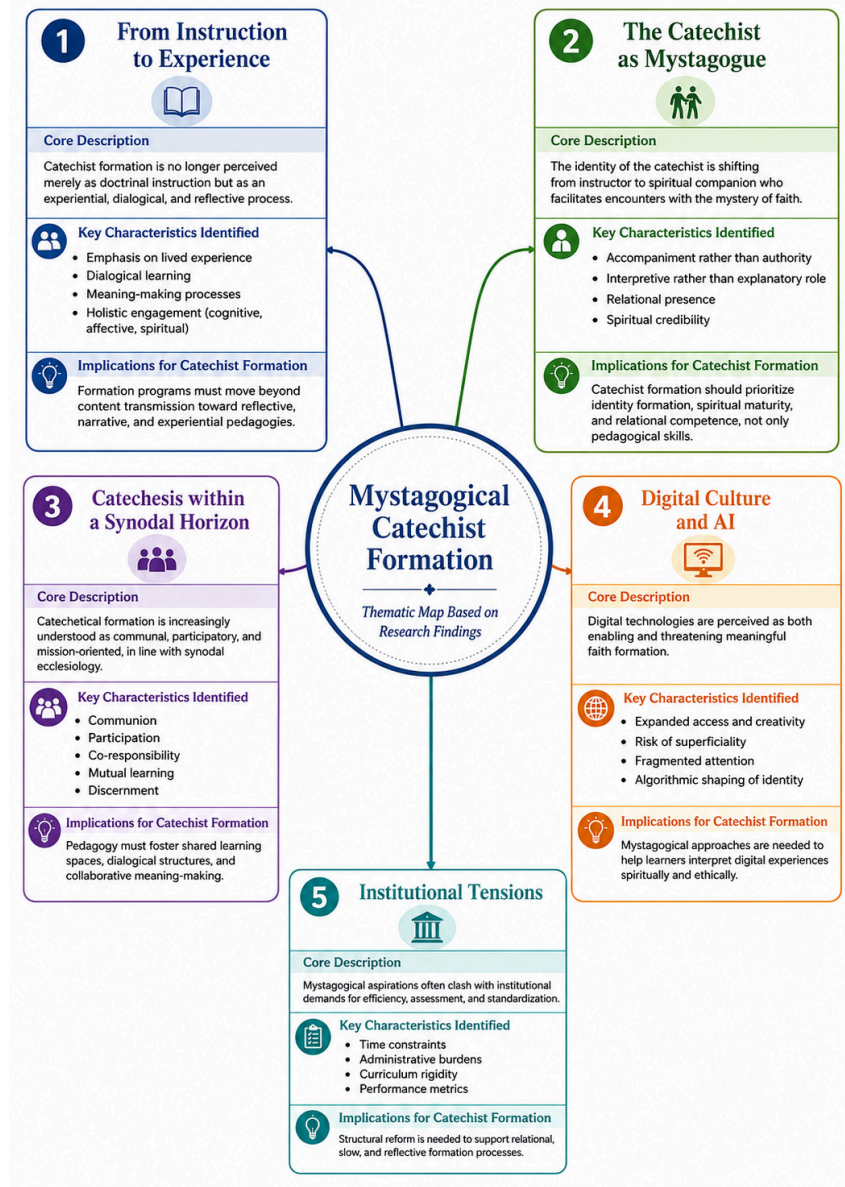


Figure 1. The interrelated themes of catechist formation

From Instruction to Experience, (2) The Catechist as Mystagogue, (3) Catechesis within a Synodal Horizon, (4) Digital Culture and AI, and (5) Institutional Tensions. As summarized in Table 1, these themes indicate that the transformation of catechist formation is multidimensional. It involves not only changes in pedagogical methods but also shifts in epistemological orientation, vocational identity, ecclesial relationships, engagement with digital culture, and institutional structures.

The findings presented below are grounded in semi-structured interviews with participants involved in catechist preparation within Catholic higher education in Indonesia. The selected excerpts reflect recurring patterns across the

interview data and show how participants articulated the five themes through their lived experiences and professional reflections.

Theme 1. From Instruction to Experience

The first theme indicates a significant shift away from understanding catechist formation primarily as the transmission of doctrinal content toward an experiential and interpretive process in which theological knowledge connects with the concrete realities of learners' lives. Participants repeatedly described effective formation as occurring when doctrine becomes meaningful through reflection on personal, pastoral, relational, and spiritual experience.

Table 1. Transformation of Catechist Formation in Catholic Higher Education

No	Theme	Core Description	Key Characteristics Identified	Implications for Catechist Formation
1	From Instruction to Experience	Catechist formation is no longer perceived merely as doctrinal instruction but as an experiential, dialogical, and reflective process.	a. Emphasis on lived experience b. Dialogical learning c. Meaning-making processes d. Holistic engagement (cognitive, affective, spiritual)	Formation programs must move beyond content transmission toward reflective, narrative, and experiential pedagogies.
2	The Catechist as Mystagogue	The catechist's identity is shifting from instructor to spiritual companion who facilitates encounters with the mystery of faith.	a. Accompaniment rather than authority b. Interpretive rather than explanatory role c. Relational presence d. Spiritual credibility	Catechist formation should prioritize identity formation, spiritual maturity, and relational competence, not only pedagogical skills.
3	Catechesis within a Synodal Horizon	Catechetical formation is increasingly understood as communal, participatory, and mission-oriented, in line with synodal ecclesiology.	a. Communion b. Participation c. Co-responsibility d. Mutual learning e. Discernment	Pedagogy must foster shared learning spaces, dialogical structures, and collaborative meaning-making.
4	Digital Culture and AI	Digital technologies are perceived as both enabling and threatening meaningful faith formation.	a. Expanded access and creativity b. Risk of superficiality c. Fragmented attention d. Algorithmic shaping of identity	Mystagogical approaches are needed to help learners interpret digital experiences spiritually and ethically.
5	Institutional Tensions	Mystagogical aspirations often clash with institutional demands for efficiency, assessment, and standardization.	a. Time constraints b. Administrative burdens c. Curriculum rigidity d. Performance metrics	Structural reform is needed to support relational, slow, and reflective formation processes.

One participant expressed this connection between theological knowledge and lived experience:

“When students connect doctrine with their own pastoral struggles or family life, theology becomes real. Otherwise, it stays at the level of information.” (Formator 7, L, 42 years old)

This account reveals a distinction between knowing religious content and appropriating theological meaning. For the participant, doctrine gains formative significance only when learners can interpret their own experiences through it. The statement therefore points to an epistemological shift: experience is not treated merely as an illustration added after theological

instruction but becomes an important locus through which theological meaning is recognized and appropriated.

Another participant described how this experiential orientation changes classroom practice:

“I begin my classes by asking students to share their ministry experiences. We reflect together, sometimes in silence or prayer. It engages not only their intellect, but also their emotions and spiritual awareness.” (Formator 12, L, 38 years old)

This narrative extends the meaning of experiential formation beyond cognitive engagement. Reflection, dialogue, silence,

and prayer create a learning process in which intellectual understanding interacts with affective and spiritual awareness. The participant's practice suggests that catechist formation becomes holistic when learners are invited not only to understand theological concepts but also to examine how these concepts illuminate their relationships, emotions, ministry experiences, and spiritual lives.

Taken together, these accounts show that the movement from instruction to experience is not merely a methodological preference for more interactive teaching. It represents a deeper reorientation of formation from delivering religious information toward processes of reflection, interpretation, and meaning-making. Within such an orientation, knowledge remains important, but its formative value depends on the learner's ability to integrate doctrine with lived experience.

Theme 2. The Catechist as Mystagogue

The second theme concerns a transformation in the perceived identity of the catechist. Participants increasingly described themselves not primarily as authoritative transmitters of established knowledge, but as companions who help learners interpret their experiences in the light of faith. One formator explained:

"I no longer see myself as the authority who provides all the answers. My role is to accompany students as they interpret their experiences in the light of faith." (Formator 3, L 52 years old)

The significance of this statement lies not in rejecting theological authority but in reconfiguring how authority is exercised. The formator does not abandon responsibility for theological formation; instead, authority becomes relational and interpretive. The educator creates conditions in which students are helped to discern meaning rather than simply being given predetermined answers. In this sense, accompaniment becomes a pedagogical and spiritual practice through which learners actively participate in interpreting faith. A second participant emphasized another dimension of this transformed identity:

"Students today are sensitive to authenticity. If we do not embody what we teach, they notice it immediately. Spiritual credibility matters more than academic eloquence." (Formator 19, L 39 years old)

Here, the catechist's credibility lies not solely in academic expertise but in the perceived

coherence between teaching and life. The participant's emphasis on authenticity suggests that catechetical authority is embodied: learners evaluate not only what educators know but also whether the faith they communicate is visible in their relationships, attitudes, and way of life. Spiritual credibility therefore becomes inseparable from pedagogical competence.

These narratives reveal the emerging figure of the catechist as mystagogue—an educator whose role is to accompany learners toward deeper interpretation of lived experience within the mystery of faith. The transition from instructor to mystagogue is consequently a transformation of identity rather than simply a change of instructional technique. It requires relational presence, interpretive sensitivity, spiritual maturity, and an embodied coherence between theological teaching and personal witness.

Theme 3. Catechesis within a Synodal Horizon

The third theme situates catechist formation within an increasingly communal, participatory, and synodal understanding of Church life. Participants described formation as a process in which listening, dialogue, shared responsibility, and communal discernment replace passive reception and strictly hierarchical interactions. One participant explained:

"Formation must model communion. I encourage students to listen to one another, to question respectfully, and to discern together rather than simply receive conclusions." (Formator 22, L, 45 years old)

The phrase "formation must model communion" is particularly important because it suggests that synodality is not merely content to be taught but a relational practice that should be embodied within the formation process itself. Listening, respectful questioning, and communal discernment become formative practices through which students experience the kind of ecclesial relationships they are later expected to facilitate.

Another participant stressed the principle of co-responsibility:

"Students are not passive recipients of Church teaching. They are co-responsible for the Church's mission, even during their formation." (Formator 10, 51 years old)

This perspective challenges the view of students as recipients who must complete formation before becoming active ecclesial agents. Instead, formation itself becomes participation in mission. Learners are treated as emerging

subjects of ecclesial responsibility whose voices, experiences, and discernment contribute meaningfully to the formation community.

Together, these findings position synodality as both an ecclesiological orientation and a pedagogical principle. Communion, participation, mutual learning, co-responsibility, and discernment reshape the educator-learner relationship. Formation becomes less hierarchical and more dialogical, without eliminating the formator's distinctive responsibilities. The resulting pedagogical environment is one in which faith is interpreted communally rather than transmitted unilaterally.

Theme 4. Digital Culture and AI

The fourth theme reveals an ambivalent relationship between catechist formation and digital culture. Participants recognized that digital technologies expand access to theological knowledge and offer new possibilities for creative teaching, while simultaneously expressing concern about fragmented attention, superficial engagement, and the increasing influence of algorithms and artificial intelligence on how students encounter religious knowledge. One participant emphasized the opportunities created by digital technologies:

“Digital platforms expand access to theological resources and allow creative forms of teaching that were impossible before.” (Formator 15, L, 47 years old)

Digitalization is therefore not perceived simply as a threat to traditional formation. It broadens access to resources, supports new forms of communication, and enables pedagogy that extends beyond conventional classroom boundaries. However, the same participant immediately identified a contrasting experience:

“Students’ attention is fragmented. They move quickly from one source to another without staying long enough for contemplation.” (Formator 15, L, 40 years old)

The juxtaposition of these two statements captures a central tension within digital formation: greater access does not automatically produce greater depth. The abundance and speed of digital information may widen learners’ exposure to religious content while simultaneously making sustained theological reflection more difficult. The participant's problem is therefore not technological access itself but the relationship between digital habits and the contemplative attentiveness required for deeper faith formation.

Another participant drew attention to the emerging influence of artificial intelligence:

“Artificial intelligence shapes how students search for truth. Algorithms influence what they consider relevant, even in matters of faith.” (Formator 28, L, 53 years old)

This account moves the discussion beyond AI as an educational tool. It raises an epistemological concern about how technologically mediated systems help determine what information learners encounter, prioritize, and interpret as credible. Algorithms therefore influence not simply information retrieval but potentially the construction of meaning, religious authority, and identity.

The findings suggest that digital competence in catechist formation cannot be limited to proficiency in using technological tools. It requires spiritual, theological, and ethical discernment that enables learners to interpret digitally mediated experiences critically. From a mystagogical perspective, digital culture becomes another dimension of lived experience that must be reflected upon rather than either uncritically embraced or categorically rejected.

Theme 5. Institutional Tensions

The fifth theme concerns tensions between mystagogical aspirations and institutional structures. Although participants generally valued relational accompaniment, reflection, and spiritual development, they described academic schedules, administrative requirements, curricular demands, and performance metrics as conditions that frequently restrict such practices.

One participant stated:

“We value reflection and accompaniment, but the semester schedule forces us to complete the syllabus quickly.” (Formator 5, L, 38 years old)

This statement reveals a temporal tension at the heart of mystagogical formation. Reflection and accompaniment require time, attentiveness, and openness to processes that cannot always be predetermined. Academic schedules, by contrast, prioritize coverage and completion. The resulting pressure may lead educators to recognize the value of contemplative and relational formation while being unable to provide sufficient space for it within institutional routines.

Another participant described a related difficulty:

“Administrative requirements and performance metrics focus on measurable

outputs. Spiritual growth is difficult to quantify.” (Formator 31, L 42 years old)

The issue here is not merely administrative workload. More fundamentally, the participant identifies a tension between different conceptions of educational value. Institutional accountability tends to privilege visible and measurable outcomes, whereas spiritual maturation, relational depth, vocational discernment, and identity transformation unfold in ways that are less easily quantified.

These findings indicate that the transition toward mystagogical formation cannot depend exclusively on individual educators changing their classroom practices. Without corresponding curricular, evaluative, and institutional support, relational and contemplative approaches remain vulnerable to pressures for efficiency, standardization, and measurable performance.

Interpretive Synthesis of the Findings

Across the five themes, the findings reveal a transformation that is not merely methodological but paradigmatic. Epistemologically, catechist formation is moving from the transmission of doctrinal content toward experiential meaning-making. Vocationally, the catechist's identity is shifting from authoritative instructor to mystagogue who accompanies learners in interpreting experience through faith. Ecclesialogically, formation increasingly reflects the synodal principles of communion, participation, discernment, and co-responsibility. Culturally, digital technologies create both new possibilities and new vulnerabilities, requiring theological and spiritual discernment. Institutionally, however, the aspirations of mystagogical formation remain constrained by structures organized around efficiency, curriculum coverage, administration, and measurable performance.

Phenomenologically interpreted, the narratives reveal a shared desire for integration: between doctrine and life, knowledge and experience, authority and accompaniment, technology and contemplation, institutional responsibility and spiritual depth. Mystagogy therefore emerges from the data not simply as a pedagogical technique but as an interpretive horizon through which catechist identity, pedagogy, ecclesial participation, and engagement with contemporary culture can be reconceptualized.

From Doctrinal Transmission to Experiential Meaning-Making

The first major contribution of the findings is identifying a paradigmatic movement from instruction-centered formation toward an

experiential, relational, and meaning-making orientation. Participants did not reject doctrinal knowledge; rather, they questioned whether doctrinal transmission by itself is sufficient for catechist formation. Their narratives indicate that theological knowledge becomes genuinely formative when learners can connect it with pastoral experiences, relationships, personal struggles, prayer, and concrete situations of life.

This finding corresponds with scholarship in religious education that conceptualizes formation as a holistic process integrating cognitive, affective, spiritual, and communal dimensions rather than simply transmitting doctrinal content (Hannam et al., 2020; Kühle & Larsen, 2021; Groome, 2011; Faas et al., 2016). Previous empirical work similarly demonstrates the formative significance of reflective engagement with lived experience, dialogical learning, and participation within communities of faith (Elshof, 2017; Hall et al., 2024; Li et al., 2023). The present findings extend these perspectives by showing how catechist formators articulate this shift: experiential learning is not an additional pedagogical strategy but a means by which doctrine moves from information to personally appropriated theological meaning.

Contemporary research on digital religion further strengthens this interpretation. Meaning-making in digital and hybrid contexts involves active negotiation, identity construction, and interpretive agency rather than passive reception of information (Campbell, 2017; Evolvi, 2022; Grigore & Cobzeanu, 2025; Hutchings, 2017; Lövheim, 2013). Learners encounter religious narratives across multiple online and offline contexts, making a linear transmission model increasingly inadequate for understanding how faith is actually interpreted and appropriated. This dialogical orientation is also consistent with ecclesial teaching. The Directory for Catechesis (PCPNE, 2020) calls for formation “that integrates life experience with the mystery of Christ,” emphasizing dialogue, accompaniment, and participation in community. The present findings demonstrate how such integration may be enacted pedagogically: lived experience becomes the starting point for reflection, while theological tradition becomes an interpretive resource through which that experience is discerned. Experiential formation should therefore not be understood as substituting experience for doctrine; rather, it creates a reciprocal relationship in which Christian tradition illuminates experience and experience becomes the context in which theological meaning is appropriated.

From Instructor to Mystagogue: Reconfiguring Catechist Identity

The second major finding concerns the transformation of educator identity. Participants' descriptions of catechists as companions, interpreters, witnesses, and persons of spiritual credibility demonstrate that the transition toward mystagogy involves more than adopting dialogical teaching methods. It requires redefining what it means to be a catechist.

This interpretation corresponds with research on teacher identity in faith-based and values-oriented educational settings, where effective educators are understood to embody an integrated identity in which spiritual authenticity, moral witness, relational presence, and pedagogical competence are closely connected (Rhudy & Torres, 2024; Buchanan, 2015; Kelchtermans, 2009; Stones & Fraser-Pearce, 2022). Identity formation is dynamic and relational, developing through reflective practice, vocational discernment, and sustained interaction with learners' lived experiences (Day, 2018; Hannam et al., 2020).

The present study adds a specifically mystagogical dimension to these discussions. Formator 3's statement that the educator no longer needs to "provide all the answers" does not indicate withdrawal from theological responsibility. Instead, it suggests a different exercise of pedagogical authority: one based on accompaniment and interpretation. Similarly, Formator 19's emphasis on spiritual credibility reveals that catechetical authority is perceived as inseparable from embodied witness. Thus, the mystagogue's authority is neither merely institutional nor purely intellectual; it is relationally mediated through trust, authenticity, and coherence between teaching and life.

Research on digital religion and mediated identity further complicates this role. Religious identities in digital and hybrid environments involve intersecting offline and online self-understandings (Campbell, 2017; Lövheim, 2013; Grigore & Cobzeanu, 2025). Learners therefore require accompaniment as they navigate religious meaning across embodied, communal, and technologically mediated spaces. Within this environment, the catechist as mystagogue becomes an interpreter who helps learners discern rather than merely consume religious information.

This understanding resonates with the emphasis on accompaniment articulated in the Directory for Catechesis (PCPNE, 2020). The present findings suggest that identity transformation must therefore become an explicit dimension of catechist preparation. Preparing mystagogues requires more than increasing pedagogical skills; it requires sustained

formation in spiritual maturity, relational presence, reflective practice, discernment, and theological interpretation.

Synodality as a Pedagogical and Formative Horizon

The emergence of synodality as the third theme is significant because it connects pedagogical transformation with a broader ecclesiological reorientation. Participants did not describe communion, participation, discernment, and co-responsibility simply as theological concepts. Rather, they presented them as practices that should shape the formation process itself.

Synodality, understood in terms of communion, participation, and mission, is increasingly considered a way of being Church in which listening, shared discernment, participation, and co-responsibility reshape relationships and authority. These principles have direct implications for curriculum, classroom interaction, and formative leadership (Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity & Pontifical Council for Culture, 2020; Francis, 2020; Rymarz, 2023; O'Malley, 2022; Hoven et al., 2024). The findings of the present study make these implications empirically visible. Formator 22's insistence that "formation must model communion," for example, indicates that synodality is learned not merely through conceptual explanation but through participation in relational practices of listening, questioning, and discerning together.

Within religious education, participatory and dialogical models that emphasize learner agency, intercultural dialogue, and co-construction of meaning closely correspond with such synodal forms of relational learning, particularly in pluralistic, multicultural, and digitally mediated contexts (Rymarz, 2023; Faas et al., 2016; Hoven et al., 2024; Hall et al., 2024; Li et al., 2023). Research suggests that these approaches can strengthen engagement, shared ownership, and communal discernment while challenging overly hierarchical and transmission-oriented educational structures (Biesta, 2017; Jackson, 2018).

The present findings contribute to this discussion by showing that co-responsibility begins during formation, not after it. Formator 10's description of students as already "co-responsible for the Church's mission" indicates that learners are not simply future agents awaiting authorization after graduation. Formation itself becomes participation in ecclesial mission. This understanding repositions the relationship between formator and student: while their roles remain distinct, both participate

in a shared process of listening, interpretation, discernment, and mission.

Synodality can therefore be understood as the ecclesiological context within which mystagogical pedagogy becomes possible. If mystagogy involves accompanying people in interpreting experience through faith, synodality provides the relational conditions—listening, dialogue, communion, participation, and shared discernment—within which such accompaniment can occur.

Digital Culture and AI: From Technical Competence to Digital Discernment

The fourth theme demonstrates that digital culture is not peripheral to contemporary catechist formation. Participants experienced technology as both an expansion of educational possibilities and a potential obstacle to deep reflection. This ambivalence aligns with research showing that digital environments increase access, participation, interactivity, and connectivity while also raising challenges related to attentiveness, theological depth, and sustained meaning-making (Campbell, 2017; Evolvi, 2022; Grigore & Cobzeanu, 2025; Hutchings, 2017).

The significance of these findings lies in how participants frame the problem. The contrast within Formator 15's two statements is instructive: digital platforms create unprecedented opportunities for theological learning, yet the accelerated movement between sources can diminish the contemplative attention required for deeper formation. The problem is therefore not whether to use digital technology, but what form of human and spiritual engagement accompanies its use.

This finding aligns with scholarship showing that digital religion reshapes configurations of religious authority, identity, and community and therefore requires critically informed pedagogical responses (Lövhelm, 2013; Campbell & Evolvi, 2020; Papakostas, 2025; Zhang et al., 2025; Papakostas, 2026). Comments on artificial intelligence deepen this concern. Formator 28's observation that algorithms shape what students consider relevant suggests that AI shapes the epistemic environment in which faith is explored. Digital systems do not simply provide neutral access to information; they mediate visibility, relevance, and consequently the conditions under which meaning is constructed.

Recent studies in digital catechesis and faith-based digital pedagogy indicate that guided dialogue, multimedia storytelling, participatory platforms, and reflective online activities can facilitate deeper engagement when they are grounded in clear theological and pedagogical purposes (Habur, 2025; Monika, 2021; Toron

et al., 2023; Kristeno & Tarihoran, 2024; Sarma & Tarihoran, 2024; Kurnia Saputra, 2024). Conversely, uncritical technological adoption may reinforce consumerist, content-driven patterns of formation, weakening the reflective and communal dimensions of religious learning (Biesta, 2017; Rymarz & Cleary, 2018).

The findings therefore suggest that catechist formation should move beyond a narrow conception of digital competence as technical proficiency. Critical digital literacy, theological discernment, and reflective practice need to become core formative competencies. A mystagogical approach offers a particularly relevant framework because it asks not merely how digital technologies can deliver religious content but how digitally mediated experiences can themselves become objects of theological interpretation. Digital culture, in this sense, becomes part of the lived experience that catechists and learners must learn to discern spiritually and ethically.

Institutional Tensions and the Temporal Logic of Mystagogical Formation

The fifth theme demonstrates that the movement toward mystagogical formation encounters significant institutional constraints. Participants' accounts reveal a mismatch between the relational and time-intensive character of accompaniment and institutional systems organized around curriculum completion, measurable outcomes, administrative efficiency, and standardized performance.

This tension reflects broader concerns identified in research on religious education and formation. Standardized assessments, performance indicators, and outcome-based evaluation frameworks tend to privilege readily measurable dimensions of learning, potentially marginalizing meaning-making, moral development, spiritual maturation, and other complex formative processes (Kühle & Larsen, 2021; Faas et al., 2016; Conroy et al., 2012). Accountability regimes may consequently influence educators to prioritize institutional expectations of efficiency, comparability, and visible outputs over relational depth and reflective engagement (Biesta, 2017, 2021; Priestley et al., 2015).

The participant data make this structural problem concrete. Formator 5's statement about the pressure to complete the syllabus shows that mystagogical formation operates under a different temporal logic than conventional curriculum delivery. Accompaniment, interpretation, silence, dialogue, and discernment require time; their outcomes cannot always be predicted or accelerated. Similarly, Formator 31's

observation that “spiritual growth is difficult to quantify” exposes an evaluative tension between institutional accountability and formative processes whose significance conventional performance metrics cannot capture.

Contemporary scholarship emphasizes that formation-oriented education, particularly in faith-based settings, develops through narrative, accompaniment, and communal discernment, processes that require temporal openness and pedagogical patience (Groome, 2011; Elshof, 2017; Kühle & Larsen, 2021). Faith educators must therefore negotiate an ongoing tension between institutional accountability and formation that is slow, relationally grounded, and spiritually attentive.

The Directory for Catechesis (PCPNE, 2020) similarly cautions against technicist and instrumental approaches that reduce catechesis to quantifiable competencies or skill acquisition. It instead foregrounds dimensions such as communal discernment, spiritual maturation, vocational growth, and character formation, which are essential despite their resistance to simple quantification. The present study therefore suggests that mystagogical renewal cannot be achieved solely by encouraging individual formators to become more reflective or relational. Structural conditions must also change. Curriculum design, workload, time allocation, and assessment systems need to provide legitimate space for accompaniment, reflection, and spiritual discernment.

Integrative Contribution: Mystagogy as a Formation Paradigm

Taken together, the five themes provide an integrative account of catechist formation that connects pedagogy, identity, ecclesiology, digital culture, and institutional structures. By foregrounding identity transformation and a mystagogical orientation, the study contributes to interdisciplinary discussions at the intersection of theological formation, religious education research, and digital pedagogy. Recent scholarship has increasingly called for approaches that connect empirical educational research with theological anthropology and ecclesial praxis in responding to the challenges of pluralistic and digitally mediated contexts (Rymarz, 2023; Monika, 2021; Utami, 2022; Hall et al., 2024). This study responds to that need by showing how a relational, participatory, reflective, and digitally attentive model of catechist formation is experienced and articulated within Catholic higher education (Kühle & Larsen, 2021; Jackson, 2018).

A particularly important contribution concerns the relationship between digital culture and mystagogy. Existing digital religion

frameworks demonstrate how technological environments shape religious identity, practice, learning, agency, embodiment, and ethical engagement (Campbell, 2017; Lövheim, 2013; Grigore & Cobzeanu, 2025). The present study situates those dynamics within a broader formational horizon. Rather than treating digital competence as an independent technical skill, it positions digital engagement within processes of identity formation, theological interpretation, spiritual discernment, and ethical participation (Biesta, 2017; Rymarz & Cleary, 2018). This integration connects theological reflection, pedagogical practice, and digital literacy within a unified framework of faith formation.

The findings also demonstrate that the transition from instructor to mystagogue functions as the organizing movement across all five themes. Moving from instruction to experience changes how theological knowledge is understood; the mystagogical identity changes how authority is exercised; synodality changes how formation relationships are organized; digital discernment changes how contemporary experience is interpreted; and institutional tensions reveal the structural conditions required for such formation to become sustainable. Mystagogy, therefore, should not be understood as one additional pedagogical method among others. It represents a broader paradigm through which the purpose, process, relationships, and institutional conditions of catechist formation can be reconsidered.

Practically and institutionally, these findings call for structural, curricular, and evaluative transformation within Catholic higher education. Catechist formation programs need to move beyond exclusively standardized and outcome-driven models toward pedagogies that intentionally cultivate spiritual maturity, dialogical competence, reflective agency, and relational presence. Narrative reflection, communal discernment, accompaniment, and critically informed digital engagement should therefore be integrated as core elements of catechetical curricula rather than treated as supplementary activities.

At the institutional level, assessment frameworks should likewise acknowledge relational, interpretive, vocational, and transformative dimensions of learning that resist simple quantification. This does not imply abandoning academic standards or accountability; rather, it calls for evaluation methods broad enough to recognize dimensions of formation central to catechetical identity. Theologically, the findings suggest that mystagogy is not peripheral to contemporary catechist formation. It provides a formative orientation through which educators may become

not only competent teachers of religion but credible witnesses, interpreters, and companions capable of accompanying others into the mystery of faith within a rapidly changing and digitally saturated world.

■ CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that catechist formation in Catholic higher education is undergoing a substantive paradigmatic reorientation from instruction-centered models toward a mystagogical, relational, and synodal horizon of formation. Catechists are no longer primarily construed as transmitters of doctrinal content, but as companions in faith and interpreters of lived experience, accompanying learners in discerning meaning through the Gospel within concrete historical, cultural, and digital realities. This shift represents not merely a pedagogical refinement but a deeper transformation of educator identity, authority, and vocation, aligning catechetical formation with contemporary ecclesial visions of synodality and with learner subjectivities shaped by pluralism, relationality, and digital mediation. By foregrounding identity transformation rather than technical competence alone, the study repositions mystagogy as a comprehensive pedagogical paradigm that integrates theological depth, experiential learning, and communal discernment.

The findings further reveal that digital culture constitutes the formative environment within which contemporary faith learning unfolds, rather than an external challenge to be managed. While digital contexts expand access, participation, and creative expression, they simultaneously intensify risks of fragmentation, acceleration, and the instrumentalization of learning. Within this tension, a mystagogical approach provides a critical and constructive framework by privileging discernment, relational presence, and narrative meaning-making over efficiency and content accumulation. In digitally mediated settings, the catechist as mystagogue emerges not as a technical specialist but as an interpretive and relational guide, helping learners cultivate depth amid speed, coherence amid data saturation, and vocational orientation amid algorithmic logics that often shape identity and attention.

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