

## SHARED CHRISTIAN PRAXIS CATECHESIS AS A CATALYST FOR STRENGTHENING RELATIONSHIPS IN THE POST-MARRIAGE PERIOD OF 0–10 YEARS

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### Abstract

This study aims to identify the challenges faced by Catholic couples in building marital relationships in the early years (0–10) and formulate a new catechetical model based on “Shared Christian Praxis” (SCP) to strengthen couples' love relationships. How can catechesis transition from a limited preparation model to a sustainable accompaniment model that is responsive to the specific challenges of young couples? The method used was a hermeneutic phenomenological approach, with in-depth interviews with 17 Catholic couples in Santo Damian Lau Baleng Parish, Archdiocese of Medan, as well as participatory observation and documentation study. The findings show that couples face various challenges, including economic problems, poor communication, and a lack of pastoral assistance from the Church. Despite this, couples show good resilience skills by integrating spiritual and practical aspects into their daily lives. High expectations for the Church's role in sustainable mentoring were expressed by informants, who wanted a more systematic and relevant program. This study recommends the development of a holistic and sustainable mentoring program, as well as the establishment of a community support network to assist young Catholic couples in facing the challenges of marriage. Thus, SCP-based catechesis is expected to bridge the gap between the Church's teachings and the experiences of young Catholic couples.

**Keywords:** *Catechesis, Shared Christian Praxis, 0-10 Years Marriage Relationship.*

### Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengidentifikasi tantangan yang dihadapi pasangan Katolik dalam membangun relasi perkawinan pada tahun-tahun awal (0-10 tahun) dan merumuskan model katekese baru berbasis “Shared Christian Praxis” (SCP) untuk memperkuat relasi cinta pasangan suami istri. Bagaimana katekese dapat bertransisi dari model persiapan yang terbatas menuju model pendampingan berkelanjutan yang responsif terhadap tantangan spesifik pasangan muda? Metode yang digunakan adalah pendekatan fenomenologi hermeneutik, dengan wawancara mendalam terhadap 17 pasangan Katolik di Paroki Santo Damian Lau Baleng, Keuskupan Agung Medan, serta observasi partisipatif dan studi dokumentasi. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa pasangan menghadapi berbagai tantangan, termasuk masalah ekonomi, komunikasi yang buruk, dan minimnya pendampingan pastoral dari Gereja. Meskipun demikian, pasangan menunjukkan kemampuan resiliensi yang baik dengan mengintegrasikan aspek spiritual dan praktis dalam kehidupan sehari-hari. Harapan yang tinggi terhadap peran Gereja dalam pendampingan berkelanjutan diungkapkan oleh informan, yang menginginkan program yang lebih sistematis dan relevan. Penelitian ini merekomendasikan pengembangan program pendampingan yang holistik dan berkelanjutan, serta pembentukan jaringan dukungan komunitas untuk membantu pasangan muda Katolik dalam menghadapi tantangan pernikahan. Dengan demikian, katekese berbasis SCP diharapkan dapat menjembatani kesenjangan antara ajaran Gereja dan pengalaman hidup pasangan, sehingga memperkuat fondasi keluarga Katolik di Indonesia.

**Kata Kunci:** *Katekese, Shared Christian Praxis, Relasi Perkawinan 0-10 Tahun*

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### A. Introduction

Catholic marriage is understood as a sacred sacrament, reflecting Christ’s love for the Church (Paus Yohanes, 1995). However, many young Catholic couples (0–10 years of marriage) face challenges in building strong relationships, both spiritually and emotionally. Catholic marriage, as both a sacrament and a vocation, constitutes a crucial foundation for family life, the Church, and society. The early years of marriage, particularly the first 0–10 years, are often identified as a critical period filled with dynamics, challenges, and opportunities for shaping long-term relational patterns (Amato, 2010). Yet, global and national realities indicate an alarming trend concerning marital stability, including among Catholics (Yodanis et al., 2012). Studies suggest that approximately 30% of divorces occur among Christian couples within the first decade of marriage (Amato, 2010) and the Catholic Church faces this phenomenon as a serious pastoral concern. Consequently, a renewed catechetical approach based on “Shared Christian Praxis” (SCP) is needed, one that not only conveys doctrine but also deepens shared faith experiences within the lived reality of marriage (Groome, 1980b). Young Catholic couples in their early years of marriage often encounter economic pressures, emotional immaturity, and limited understanding of marital spirituality (Ellison et al., 2013). In Indonesia, although comprehensive official statistics on Catholic divorce are difficult to access, pastoral reports and internal studies indicate increasing vulnerability among young marriages, accompanied by symptoms such as declining participation in parish life, unresolved conflicts, and communication crises (P. O. S. L. T. Tibo, 2021).

This phenomenon calls for more innovative, contextual, and effective pastoral responses, especially in the area of catechesis, which has traditionally focused more on marriage preparation (“pre-marital”) than on ongoing accompaniment in the post-celebration phase of the early years of marriage.

A significant gap exists between traditional marital catechesis and the lived realities of young couples, since Catholic marriage catechesis often remains dominated by one-directional doctrinal approaches, intensively concentrated on the pre-marital stage (Fransiskus, 2016). Such models are insufficient for equipping couples to face the “real” complexities and dynamics that emerge after the celebration of marriage, including role adjustment, financial management, extended family conflicts, work pressures, childbirth, and decreased spiritual intensity (Johnson, 2020). This issue raises a critical question: how can catechesis transition from a time-limited preparatory model to a form of ongoing accompaniment that responds to the specific challenges of each stage within the first 10 years? (Cowan & Cowan, 2019).

Another major concern is the insufficient integration of lived experiences with the heritage of faith in the formation of couples. Many existing marriage programs, although well-intentioned, tend to separate or inadequately connect couples’ daily struggles (experiences, conflicts, hopes, joys) with the richness of Catholic teaching on marriage (Crisfiani et al., 2022). Teachings on fidelity, unity, mutual respect, and the sacramental nature of marriage are often delivered as abstract norms rather than as living resources discovered through critical reflection on personal experiences (Groome, 1999). This gap raises the question: how can catechesis be designed to dynamically bridge the authentic life experiences of young couples with the Tradition of faith, so that Church teachings are not perceived as burdens but as sources of light and strength? (Fransiskus, 2016).

The lack of space for dialogue, critical reflection, and shared learning among couples further limits catechesis. A top-down, instructional approach often minimizes opportunities for couples to share their experiences, listen to one another’s struggles, engage in critical reflection together, and actively construct their faith understanding collectively (Groome, 1980). Yet, authentic adult learning (andragogy) and spiritual growth often emerge through dialogical interaction and communal reflection (Knowles et al., 2005). This raises another question: how can a catechetical environment be created that is safe and supportive, where couples engage in “shared praxis”—sharing experiences, critically reflecting on them in the light of faith, and together formulating new life commitments? (Groome, 1999).

Today, young Catholic couples in Indonesia live amid significant pressures: economic demands, the influence of media and individualistic culture, mobility that separates them from extended family networks, and the challenges of child-rearing. These pressures significantly test marital resilience and can erode both intimacy and shared spiritual life (Syafiq & Putri, 2022). Catechesis thus emerges as an effective tool to help couples build relational and spiritual resilience in the face of such complex contextual challenges (Paulinus Tibo dan Ona Sastri Lumban Tobing, 2022).

The issues outlined above are not trivial; they strike at the core of Catholic family life and the Church’s mission. The urgency of developing a new catechetical model based on “Shared Christian Praxis” (SCP) for marriages in the 0–10 year range is rooted in the need to prevent marital crises and strengthen family foundations. The first decade of marriage is a formative period in which relational patterns are established that determine long-term stability. The statistical risk of divorce or separation is significantly higher

during this decade (Amato, 2010);(P. Tibo, 2018). roactive, relevant, and sustainable pastoral interventions through SCP-based catechesis hold strong potential to identify and address conflicts early before they harden into intractable problems. Such interventions may strengthen communication skills and conflict resolution rooted in Christian values (KWI, 1965). build resilience against life pressures, and renew sacramental commitment by grounding it in the lived reality of daily life (Fransiskus, 2016).

Developing a catechetical model that effectively prevents the disintegration of young marriages by equipping couples with tools to build healthy, resilient, faith-rooted relationships is essential. The growing vulnerability of Catholic young marriages requires more than reactive crisis intervention; it demands proactive, formative, and continuous accompaniment. Contextualizing and actualizing Church teaching on marriage is crucial: Catholic teaching on marriage is rich and profound (FC, 1981; GS, 1965; AL, 2016), yet often does not “come alive” in the experiences of young couples. SCP-based catechesis offers a methodology to bridge this gap, by facilitating processes in which doctrine is discovered as relevant through critical reflection on lived experiences (Groome, 1999). It transforms catechesis from passive doctrinal transmission into an active dialogical encounter between Tradition and contemporary experience. It empowers couples to become active subjects of learning rather than passive recipients of information. The goal is to create catechetical spaces where Church teaching on marriage is not only “known” but “experienced” as liberating and empowering wisdom for life.

The SCP model is inherently communal. Catechesis based on SCP for young couples can create safe spaces to share struggles and hopes, reducing feelings of isolation that many young couples experience. It facilitates peer learning, where couples learn from one another’s experiences and solutions. It strengthens social support networks within the parish community, which are crucial for family resilience, and fosters solidarity among young Catholic families, forming the foundation of vibrant base communities (Sianipar, 2019).Orientasi dasar adalah mengembangkan katekese yang tidak hanya memperkuat relasi Its core orientation is not only to strengthen intra-couple relationships but also to build inter-couple networks of support and learning within the Church community. This is especially important in addressing the social fragmentation and alienation faced by many urban Catholic families, restoring a sense of belonging as members of the Body of Christ (Derung et al., 2022).

Preparing families to become resilient “Domestic Churches” (*Ecclesia Domestica*) is another crucial pastoral priority. Catholic families are called to be the “Domestic Church,” where faith is lived, nurtured, and transmitted (Yohanes Paulus II, 1981). The strength and depth of the marital relationship serve as the foundation of this vocation. Effective SCP-based catechesis can directly strengthen the spousal relationship at the heart of the “*Ecclesia Domestica*,” provide a living model of faith engaging with daily reality for children, and spiritually and relationally prepare couples for their role as the first and primary educators of faith (Dokpen KWI, 1983). In this way, young Catholic couples may become the strong foundation of resilient “Domestic Churches,” capable of witnessing Christ’s love in the world and ensuring that new generations of Catholic families have the relational and spiritual resilience needed to proclaim the Gospel in increasingly complex family and societal contexts (Goleń, 2018).

The unique dynamics and challenges of Catholic marriages in the early years (0–10 years) demand a new catechetical approach that goes beyond conventional pre-marital models. The gaps between doctrine and lived experience, the absence of continuous

accompaniment, and the pressures of modern socio-cultural contexts require innovative pastoral solutions. Thomas Groome's "Shared Christian Praxis" provides a promising theoretical and methodological framework for such catechesis (Groome, 1980a). By taking couples' concrete life experiences as a starting point, facilitating critical dialogue with the Tradition of faith, and creating spaces for communal learning and shared commitments, SCP-based catechesis has the potential to address the urgent issues facing young Catholic marriages.

One fundamental gap in Catholic marital catechesis lies in the dominance of pre-marital catechesis without systematic post-marital accompaniment. Approximately 78% of pastoral marriage programs remain focused on preparation, with minimal or no structured support for couples in the post-celebration phase (P. Tibo, 2018). This is problematic given that "the third to seventh years of marriage represent the peak period of relational crisis, yet no structured modules exist to guide couples through this critical stage" (Hawkins & Ooms, 2012).

A second gap concerns the way Catholic marital teachings are presented as abstract norms detached from couples' real struggles. Groome critiques conventional catechesis for often failing to render doctrine a living resource capable of addressing daily challenges (Groome, 1999). Indeed, "85% of young Catholic couples in Medan reported that they did not find the teachings of *Familiaris Consortio* relevant to their struggles with economic pressures, extended family conflicts, and diminished intimacy" (Preliminary Survey, 2023:23). Yet, Church documents such as *Gaudium et Spes* 48, *Familiaris Consortio* 19, and *Amoris Laetitia* 163 offer profound insights for precisely such struggles.

The dominance of top-down catechetical approaches poses another barrier to fostering spaces of critical reflection and peer learning among couples. Only 20% of parish programs in Indonesia provide safe spaces for couples to share openly and learn from one another (Syafiq & Putri, 2022). Moreover, no comprehensive evaluation systems currently exist to measure the spiritual-relational impact of marital catechesis programs. Program success is often measured in terms of participation rates and participant satisfaction, rather than in the transformation of relational quality and faith growth (Ellison et al., 2013).

Although Thomas Groome's Shared Christian Praxis has proven effective in various catechetical contexts, it has not yet been systematically operationalized in Catholic marital accompaniment in Indonesia. Studies on SCP in Indonesia have largely focused on general catechesis and religious education, with little exploration of its potential in the specific domain of marital pastoral care (Crisfiani et al., 2022).

This research is thus urgent not only to prevent marital crises and strengthen individual families but also to ensure that young Catholic families can fully live out their vocation as vibrant "Domestic Churches" that bear witness to Christ in the world. The development and implementation of this new catechetical model are expected to make a significant contribution to the formation of resilient Catholic families in Indonesia (Lavner & Bradbury, 2012). Accordingly, an in-depth examination of the effectiveness

and application of the Shared Christian Praxis model in the context of young Catholic marital accompaniment constitutes both a pastoral and academic necessity.

## B. Method

This study employs Martin Heidegger's hermeneutic phenomenological approach, which focuses on the interpretation of lived experiences (*being-in-the-world*) of the informants in relation to marriage and catechesis. Heideggerian hermeneutic phenomenology was chosen to uncover the deeper meaning of the subjective experiences of married couples after the celebration of their wedding, within the context of their cultural, historical, and socially constructed realities. This interpretation is explored through the interaction of *Dasein* with everyday life, particularly regarding their theological understanding of marriage, the lived reality of spousal life, and their vision or commitment to building a family in the future.

This approach emphasizes the concept of *Dasein* (human existence) within the context of *thrownness* the condition in which individuals do not choose the circumstances or contexts into which they are born and raised, but are instead situated within a particular socio-cultural world (Heidegger, 1962), he aim is to reveal how couples interpret their experiences authentically (*authentic being*) through the dynamics of marriage and faith formation. The research was conducted in the Parish of Saint Damian, Lau Baleng, Archdiocese of Medan (Karo Regency, North Sumatra). The site was selected based on two critical considerations: (1) the distinctive characteristics of the Karo Catholic community, which integrates customary values (*adat merga silima*) into religious life, and (2) the high rate of young labor migration, which poses a potential challenge to marital cohesion.

The informants in this study consisted of all Catholic couples within 0–10 years of marriage in the parish (approximately 46 couples). From this population, specific informants were selected, including 17 married couples whose marital duration ranged between 0–5 years and 6–10 years, representing diverse educational backgrounds and professions; 4 parish leaders (the Parish Council Chair, Community Chair, and a Catechist); and 1 parish priest as the pastoral authority. The selection technique combined purposive sampling and snowball sampling (John W. Creswell, 2015). The purposive criteria included: (a) couples' involvement in parish activities (both active and non-active), (b) participation in previous marriage catechesis, and (c) experiences of marital conflict or socio-economic pressures. Snowball sampling was applied to identify additional relevant couples through recommendations from the initial informants.

Data were collected from March to June 2025 using three techniques: in-depth open-structured interviews (60–90 minutes per couple) to explore lived marital experiences (*everydayness*), the meaning of the sacrament of marriage within the Karo cultural context, and responses to the Shared Christian Praxis model, all of which were audio-recorded and transcribed; participant observation of couples' interactions during parish catechesis activities and daily life (Heidegger, 1962). and documentary study of pastoral records, catechesis modules, and parish archives. Data analysis followed a hermeneutic thematic model (Samsu, 2017): focusing on everydayness to identify patterns of marital experiences within routine contexts (conflict, traditional ceremonies, gender roles), thrownness to analyze the influence of Karo culture, economic pressures, and Church doctrine in shaping experiences, and authenticity to explore couples' efforts to find authentic meaning in Catholic marriage through catechesis. Triangulation of

interview, observation, and documentary data was conducted to validate the findings (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002)

## **C. Results and Discussion**

### **1. Research Findings**

This study successfully collected data from 17 informants across various stations and communities in the Lau Baleng area. Interviews were conducted between March and June 2025 using an instrument of nine main questions regarding perceptions, challenges, and expectations concerning Catholic marriage. Informants included married couples aged 21–61 years from various stations, including St. Serafinus Lau Baleng, St. Bonaventura, Santa Maria Community, St. Damian, Santa Veronika, St. Maximilian Kolbe, Santa Maria Queen of the Rosary G. Pamah, and Pari Mbelang. The diversity of informants' locations and ages provided a comprehensive picture of Catholic marriage in the region.

#### **a. Perceptions of Catholic Marriage**

All informants demonstrated a positive and profound understanding of Catholic marriage. JCG (36 years old) from St. Serafinus described it as a “unified, apostolic, and sacred marriage,” while MAS (25 years) from Bonaventura explained, “Catholic marriage is one of the sacraments of the Church, binding couples in faithfulness as a sacred covenant of God’s love.” YS (28 years) from Santa Maria emphasized its sacred nature, stating, “Catholic marriage is sacred because in Catholicism, marriage is once in a lifetime.” Similarly, KST (61 years) described it as “holy because two become one,” and RPA (35 years) elaborated, “Catholic marriage is sacred and lifelong; those united by God cannot be separated by humans, and the marriage is open between the couple.” These consistent views indicate a solid understanding of the sacramental nature of Catholic marriage, with informants generally perceiving it as sacred, lifelong, faithful, and indissoluble by human means.

#### **b. Challenges in Marriage**

Various challenges faced by married couples were identified. Economic issues were the most frequently mentioned. YS noted “economics, lack of mutual support, and children” as challenges, while KST cited “economics, selfishness, and family/social celebrations.” RPA shared detailed experiences: “In years 1–5, we were tested by the absence of children, but we encouraged each other, and in year 6 we were blessed with a child. When the child arrived, we were tested by health issues, which challenged our patience.” FS (43 years) added challenges including “economic difficulties, lack of sincere and honest communication, frequent arguments, domestic violence, and selfishness.” Communication emerged as a significant challenge; JCG highlighted “a lack of communication where both spouses bring their ego,” and NSM (31 years) explained, “Challenges include managing finances, balancing work and household responsibilities, and prioritizing one’s ego.” Overall, key marital challenges included economic

difficulties, communication issues, selfishness, time management, children's health, domestic violence, and insufficient mutual support.

c. Accompaniment Activities Experienced

A notable finding was the scarcity of systematic accompaniment for couples in Lau Baleng. Most informants reported not having participated in structured programs. JCG stated "none," RPA noted "none until now, this is the first," and FS emphasized "there has never been any structured accompaniment for couples to strengthen marital relations." Some informants reported certain activities: YS mentioned "family visits and couple retreats," KST reported "occasional family visits," and MAS referred to "counseling to help couples with communication and financial issues." RSG (23 years) listed "marriage counseling, guidance, and communication training," while KBT (46 years) described more positive practices: "In our family, to strengthen marriage, we celebrate wedding anniversaries with Mass and renew vows; at New Year, we discuss each other's strengths and weaknesses; six months ago we had a retreat." In summary, most informants had not experienced systematic accompaniment, with reported activities including family visits, counseling, retreats, anniversary Masses, and annual couple evaluations.

d. Strategies to Maintain Marital Happiness

Informants described various strategies to maintain marital happiness. Spirituality was emphasized by many, with JCG noting "growing closer to God through prayer and striving for patience with one another," and FS highlighting "praying, yielding for the good, mutual encouragement, changing negative attitudes, and accepting each other's strengths." Communication and mutual understanding were also cited: MAS emphasized "building good communication, showing affection, and mutual respect," YS stressed "forgiving mistakes and fulfilling each other's needs," and RPA noted "openness and mutual respect." RSG provided a comprehensive strategy: "effective communication, honesty, attentiveness, and maintaining special moments." KBP (21 years) offered practical strategies: "avoiding arguments, respecting each other, and preparing for the husband's needs when he leaves for work." Overall, strategies included spiritual devotion, effective communication, mutual respect, honesty, forgiveness, and acceptance of each other's strengths and weaknesses.

e. Expectations of the Church

Informants expressed high expectations for the Church's role in accompanying marriages. JCG hoped the Church would "conduct in-depth visits or discussions on family well-being and pray for couples," MAS desired "more intensive and ongoing accompaniment, especially during critical periods of marriage," and YS expected "guidance and motivation for households." KST wished "an appointed section would execute its duties effectively," RPA hoped for "family counseling and recreation as well as active Church involvement," and FS emphasized "spiritual healing and special guidance for couples." RSG wanted the Church to "help maintain marital unity," while SMG (40 years) from Pari Mbelang suggested "regular communication between

parishioners and church leaders and routine couple formation at the parish level.” Informants’ expectations included sustained intensive accompaniment, family counseling, regular formation, spiritual family recreation, in-depth faith visits, and active communication to maintain marital unity.

**f. Relevant Activities for Married Couples**

Informants proposed various activities to address couples’ needs. JCG recommended “quality time with spouse and children, and participating in communal prayers,” MAS suggested “shared hobbies, attention, support, open conversation, and affection,” and YS emphasized “couple recollections and motivation.” KST stressed “family recollections,” RPA proposed “praying together and family retreats,” and FS suggested “spiritual picnics/camping, relaxation, and retreats.” NSM offered practical advice: “build good communication, spend time together, have coffee, walk, and eat together,” while EBP (21 years) recommended “frequent discussions to exchange thoughts.” Proposed activities included quality time, recollections, retreats, communal prayer, open communication, spiritual outings, and simple shared activities.

**g. Efforts to Achieve Marital Happiness**

Informants shared concrete efforts to foster marital happiness. JCG practiced “listening to the spouse’s stories or complaints, remaining silent during emotional moments to avoid escalation, and praying for the spouse,” MAS emphasized “mutual listening and support,” and YS focused on “being an understanding wife.” RPA practiced “shared meals and giving surprises/gifts,” FS emphasized “positive communication, cooperation, and supporting tasks not yet completed by the spouse, such as cooking.” NSM described “accepting each other’s strengths and weaknesses, spending time together, joking, creating short prayer activities, and completing tasks together,” while RNB (28 years) practiced “shared dinners, attending church on Sundays and other celebrations, family outings, and sharing work-related challenges.” Efforts included attentive listening, mutual support, gift-giving, positive communication, acceptance, quality time, family prayer, and sharing problems.

**h. Factors Causing Marital Breakdown**

Informants identified factors that could damage marital bonds. JCG cited “lack of communication where each spouse brings their ego” as primary, MAS mentioned “divorce caused by communication issues, financial problems, infidelity, violence, and third-party involvement,” and YS identified “economic problems, interference from both sides, differing opinions, and jealousy.” KST noted “lack of openness, insufficient family guidance, poor communication, and economic issues,” RPA mentioned “lack of mutual respect and transparency,” and FS cited “domestic violence and humiliation of the spouse.” RSG highlighted “infidelity, financial problems, and differences of opinion,” KBP noted “affairs leading to fights and separation,” EBP stated “lack of mutual acceptance and selfishness,” and SMG cited “worldly illnesses, societal changes, economic pressure, selfishness, personality differences, and weak faith.” Overall, factors undermining marriage included poor communication, selfishness, financial problems,

infidelity, domestic violence, family interference, unfaithfulness, differing opinions, and lack of openness and respect.

## **2. Discussion**

### **a) Theological Understanding of Catholic Marriage**

The findings indicate that informants possess a sound understanding of the sacramental nature of Catholic marriage. The concepts of unity, sanctity, and indissolubility were well understood by all informants. This understanding aligns with Catholic Church teachings as articulated in the Code of Canon Law (1983), which emphasizes marriage as a sacrament binding couples in a union that remains inseparable until death. The Catechism of the Catholic Church (Pope John Paul II, 1995) further asserts that Catholic marriage is monogamous, indissoluble, and open to life, as reflected in the perspectives shared by RPA and FS. The emphasis on the sacred and spiritual dimensions of marriage demonstrates that Catholics in Lau Baleng have a strong theological foundation, consistent with *Familiaris Consortio* (John Paul II, 1981), which highlights marriage as a “*communio personarum*” or sacred personal communion. This understanding serves as an important resource for couples in confronting various marital challenges, as also observed in the study by Crisfiani, Adinuhgra, & Maria (2022) on young Christian families’ appreciation of Catholic marriage.

### **b) Contemporary Challenges in Marriage**

The challenges faced by couples in Lau Baleng reflect broader socio-economic realities in Indonesia. Economic issues were the most prominent challenge for nearly all informants, consistent with Amato (2010), who identifies financial difficulties as a primary predictor of marital instability. Economic stability is a key prerequisite for marital harmony, corroborated by Lavner & Bradbury (2012), who note that even initially satisfied couples can experience crises due to external pressures such as financial stress. Communication challenges reported by informants indicate the need to enhance marital communication skills, as ego and lack of openness were major barriers. This aligns with *Gaudium et Spes* (CBCI, 1965), which emphasizes dialogue and communication as essential for building authentic family communities. These findings suggest a need for targeted marital guidance, consistent with *Amoris Laetitia* (Francis, 2016), which underscores the importance of holistic pastoral accompaniment. Reports of domestic violence by some informants indicate serious issues requiring special attention from the Church and society. Goleń (2018) highlights that the Church has a responsibility to provide protection and targeted support to families experiencing difficulties, including domestic violence.

### **c) Limited Pastoral Accompaniment**

The scarcity of systematic accompaniment for couples emerged as a major concern. Most informants reported never having experienced structured pastoral guidance, contrary to the Church’s teaching in *Familiaris Consortio* (John Paul II, 1981), which emphasizes the importance of ongoing support for Christian families. Goleń (2018)

notes that pastoral accompaniment should extend beyond pre-marital preparation throughout the marital journey. The lack of guidance can undermine couples' ability to manage marital crises effectively, as demonstrated in Ellison, Wolfinger, & Ramos-Wada (2013), highlighting the stabilizing role of religious support. Informants who experienced accompaniment expressed high appreciation, indicating that structured guidance is impactful and necessary, in line with adult education principles outlined by Knowles, Holton III, & Swanson (2005), emphasizing relevance to participants' practical needs.

#### d) Resilience Strategies in Marriage

Despite various challenges, informants demonstrated considerable resilience in maintaining their marriages. The strategies adopted combined spiritual and practical approaches. Emphasis on spiritual practices, such as prayer and drawing closer to God, underscores the role of faith in navigating marital crises, aligning with Catholic spiritual traditions highlighted in *Amoris Laetitia* (Francis, 2016). Derung, Marsela, & Keling (2022) show that deep theological understanding of fidelity strengthens couples' capacity to face challenges. Communication and mutual understanding strategies reflect experiential learning, with couples who sustain their marriages generally cultivating healthy communication patterns and mutual respect, corroborated by Yodanis, Lauer, & Ota (2012). These resilience strategies also align with Johnson's (2020) concept of spiritual growth, emphasizing the integration of faith and practical action in navigating life challenges.

#### e) Expectations of the Church

High expectations regarding the Church's role in marital accompaniment reflect parishioners' recognition of ecclesial authority and competence. Couples view the Church not only as the institution that validates marriage but also as an ongoing companion in the marital journey. This aligns with the pastoral vision of *Familiaris Consortio* (John Paul II, 1981), which presents the Church as a "family of families" that supports Christian households. The need for intensive and continuous accompaniment suggests that one-off interventions are insufficient to meet the complex dynamics of marriage. Tibo (2021) emphasizes the importance of holistic, sustained pastoral guidance that addresses psychological, spiritual, and social aspects of marital life. Expectations for varied activities, including counseling, retreats, and family visits, indicate the necessity of a holistic and personalized approach to marital accompaniment, consistent with adult education principles by Knowles, Holton III, & Swanson (2005).

#### f) Implications for Family Pastoral Ministry

The findings have important implications for pastoral family development in Lau Baleng. First, systematic and continuous marital accompaniment programs are needed, covering communication, financial management, and conflict resolution, as emphasized in *Amoris Laetitia* (Francis, 2016). Second, pastors, catechists, and family ministry teams require training in basic counseling skills and contemporary marital dynamics. Goleñ (2018) highlights that effective family accompaniment combines theological understanding with practical pastoral skills. Third, the development of community

support networks, such as buddy systems or peer-sharing groups, can provide effective supplemental guidance, consistent with communion ecclesiology in *Gaudium et Spes* (CBCI, 1965). Fourth, integration of spiritual and practical guidance is essential, with programs addressing both theological and daily-life skills, supported by Syafiq & Putri (2022) emphasizing holistic approaches for identity and coping challenges in religious life.

g) Recommendations for Program Development

Several recommendations emerge for developing marital pastoral programs in Lau Baleng. First, comprehensive pre-marital programs should address canonical and practical preparations, consistent with *Amoris Laetitia* (Francis, 2016). Second, continuous accompaniment programs with clearly defined stages for newlyweds, couples with young children, and couples with adolescents should be developed, reflecting developmental approaches in adult education (Knowles, Holton III, & Swanson, 2005). Third, the formation of a counseling team comprising pastors, catechists, and experienced senior couples can provide personalized and intensive support, consistent with Tibo (2021) on interdisciplinary pastoral counseling. Fourth, financial education programs should be implemented to address economic challenges, as Lavner & Bradbury (2012) demonstrate the role of financial management in preventing marital conflict. Fifth, support groups for couples facing specific challenges, such as infertility, children with special needs, or chronic health issues, should be developed, reflecting the community therapeutic approach highlighted in *Gaudium et Spes* (CBCI, 1965).

h) Contribution to Pastoral Theology

This study contributes to the development of pastoral theology in the Indonesian context. Findings on couples' resilience strategies reveal the wisdom and creativity of parishioners in addressing marital challenges, consistent with Groome's (1980a, 1980b, 1999) *Shared Christian Praxis*, which emphasizes lived experience as a source of theological learning. The integration of spirituality and practical action represents a contextual pastoral theology model, offering not only doctrinal guidance but also practical recommendations for everyday life, in line with Sianipar (2019) on *Shared Christian Praxis*. Emphasis on community support highlights the importance of communion ecclesiology, portraying the Church as a supportive, solidaristic community (*Gaudium et Spes*, CBCI, 1965). The study underscores the necessity of a holistic pastoral approach that addresses psychological, social, economic, and spiritual dimensions, reflecting the integral approach advocated in *Amoris Laetitia* (Francis, 2016).

i) Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

The study has several limitations. First, the relatively small sample size and focus on a single geographic area limit the generalizability of findings. Future research with a larger and more diverse sample would provide a more comprehensive understanding, as suggested in qualitative methodology (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002). Second, this study did not deeply explore differences based on marital duration, educational level, or socio-economic status; future research could investigate these factors for a more nuanced

understanding, consistent with the intersectional approach emphasized by Yodanis, Lauer, & Ota (2012). Third, children's perspectives on their parents' marriage were not included; such insights could enrich understanding, as shown by Amato (2010) on the impact of marital stability on child development. Fourth, the effectiveness of existing marital accompaniment models was not evaluated. Evaluative studies could guide the development of more effective programs, reflecting evidence-based practice in contemporary pastoral research. Future studies could also explore technology-based accompaniment, such as online platforms or mobile applications, especially in the post-pandemic context where digital pastoral services have accelerated. Moreover, in-depth research on implementing Shared Christian Praxis in marital accompaniment (Groome, 1999) could significantly contribute to more effective family pastoral methodologies, integrating couples' lived experiences with theological reflection for transformative learning.

#### **D. Conclusion**

The study conducted in Lau Baleng involving 17 Catholic couples (aged 21–61) from various parishes provides a comprehensive insight into the dynamics of Catholic marriage. Informants demonstrated a strong theological understanding, with a uniform positive perception: marriage is viewed as a sacred sacrament, monogamous, indissoluble, and open to life, in accordance with Church teachings. Nevertheless, couples face complex challenges. Economic issues emerged as the most dominant source of stress. Poor communication, characterized by egoism, lack of openness, and limited shared time, represents another significant challenge. Other difficulties include family conflicts, differences in opinion, domestic violence, children's health problems, and infertility. A critical finding is the scarcity of systematic pastoral accompaniment from the Church for couples post-marriage. Only a few informants reported participating in activities such as family visits, retreats, or counseling, and these were largely incidental.

Amid these challenges, couples have developed effective resilience strategies integrating spiritual and practical dimensions. Central to these strategies is drawing closer to God through prayer, complemented by cultivating effective communication, mutual understanding, forgiveness, respect, self-sacrifice for the common good, and practical efforts to spend time together and share responsibilities. Expectations for the Church remain high. Parishioners desire intensive and ongoing accompaniment, particularly during critical periods, including regular visits, family counseling, couples' retreats/retreats, routine formation, practical guidance on communication and financial management, and spiritual healing. They also proposed relevant activities such as shared prayer, quality family time, and open dialogue.

The pastoral implications are significant: (1) the development of systematic and continuous marital accompaniment programs beyond pre-marital preparation, addressing theological, communication, conflict management, and financial aspects; (2) the formation and training of competent pastoral teams, including priests, catechists, and experienced senior couples; (3) the establishment of community support networks (support groups) among couples; and (4) the provision of diverse, holistic, and sustained activities including retreats, counseling, home visits, and sharing groups—designed to

meet the real needs of couples in sustaining the sanctity and happiness of marriage in accordance with Catholic values.

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