ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF CATHOLIC RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY AND LEARNING PRACTICES

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Abstract

This study examines the role of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in reshaping religious authority and learning practices within Catholic education, focusing on the subject of the Church as the People of God. Employing a qualitative research design based on Creswell's approach, the study seeks to explore the lived experiences of teachers and students in engaging with AI as part of religious learning processes. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis at SMA Katolik 2 Kabanjahe, North Sumatra Province, involving two Catholic Religious Education teachers, thirty students, and the school principal. Data analysis followed the stages of data reduction, data display, and interactive conclusion drawing. The findings indicate that AI does not merely function as a pedagogical tool, but actively transforms patterns of religious learning and the mediation of ecclesial authority in the classroom. AI facilitates more contextual theological explanations, supports simulated pastoral dialogues, and provides visual resources that strengthen students' conceptual and reflective understanding of the Church's identity as the People of God. At the same time, the integration of AI reconfigures the role of teachers from primary transmitters of knowledge to mediators of meaning, interpretation, and ecclesial values. Students demonstrate increased learning motivation, deeper faith reflection, and more critical engagement with religious content. However, this transformation also generates challenges, including technological dependency, unequal digital literacy, and the need for continuous ethical and ecclesial guidance to ensure that AI-mediated learning remains aligned with Catholic values and religious authority structures.

Keywords: *Artificial Intelligence, Catholicism, Religious Authority, Learning Practices*

Abstrak

Penelitian ini mengkaji peran Artificial Intelligence (AI) dalam membentuk ulang otoritas keagamaan dan praktik pembelajaran dalam pendidikan Katolik, dengan fokus pada materi Gereja sebagai Umat Allah. Menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif model Creswell, penelitian ini bertujuan untuk memahami secara mendalam pengalaman guru dan siswa dalam berinteraksi dengan AI dalam proses pembelajaran agama. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam, observasi kegiatan pembelajaran, dan analisis dokumen di SMA Katolik 2 Kabanjahe, Provinsi Sumatera Utara, yang melibatkan dua guru Pendidikan Agama Katolik, tiga puluh siswa, dan kepala sekolah. Analisis data dilakukan melalui tahapan reduksi data, penyajian data, dan penarikan kesimpulan secara interaktif. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa AI tidak hanya berfungsi sebagai alat pedagogis, tetapi juga berperan dalam mentransformasi pola pembelajaran keagamaan serta cara otoritas gerejawi dimediasi dalam ruang kelas. AI memungkinkan penyajian penjelasan

teologis yang lebih kontekstual, simulasi dialog pastoral, serta penyediaan sumber visual yang memperkuat pemahaman konseptual dan reflektif siswa tentang identitas Gereja sebagai Umat Allah. Pada saat yang sama, integrasi AI menggeser peran guru dari sekadar penyampai pengetahuan menjadi mediator makna, interpretasi, dan nilai-nilai eklesial. Siswa menunjukkan peningkatan motivasi belajar, pendalaman refleksi iman, serta keterlibatan kritis yang lebih kuat terhadap materi keagamaan. Namun, transformasi ini juga menghadirkan tantangan, seperti ketergantungan teknologi, ketimpangan literasi digital, serta kebutuhan akan pendampingan etis dan eklesial yang berkelanjutan agar penggunaan AI tetap selaras dengan nilai-nilai Katolik dan struktur otoritas keagamaan.

Kata Kunci: *Artificial Intelligence, Katolik, Otoritas Keagamaan, Praktik Pembelajaran*

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A. Introduction

Advances in digital technology in the era of the Industrial Revolution 5.0 have brought significant changes to the world of education (Rahmadani et al., 2024). One of the rapidly developing innovations is Artificial Intelligence (AI), a technology capable of mimicking human thought processes and providing intelligent responses to user needs (Farwati et al., 2023). AI has been utilized to provide adaptive learning, give automatic feedback, produce interactive materials, and assist teachers in managing the learning process more effectively (R. Nurhayati et al., 2024). However, the use of AI in religious education is still limited (Miftahul Huda, 2024), especially Catholic Religious Education, which still requires in-depth study to align with Church values and the goal of nurturing the faith of high school students (P. & O. S. L. T. Tibo, 2022).

Catholic Religious Education has unique characteristics, namely that it not only imparts knowledge, but also shapes students' attitudes, values, spirituality, and faith life (Soda Betu, 2024). One of the important subjects in the high school curriculum is "The Church as the People of God," which covers understanding the identity of the Church, the dignity of baptism, the communion of believers, and participation in the work of salvation. This material requires a communicative, dialogical, and reflective approach so that students are able to understand the Church not only as an institution, but as a community of faith in which they actively participate (Tarigan & Simanjuntak, 2024).

The emergence of AI opens up new opportunities for Catholic religious education to make learning materials more engaging and adaptive. AI can help visualize Church concepts, provide interactive simulations of church community life, present theological explanations in stages, and facilitate discussion or reflection through educational chatbots (Sutarman Laia et al., 2024). However, the application of AI in Catholicism poses challenges that are not straightforward. AI-generated content has the potential to be theologically inaccurate, insensitive to religious values, or even deviate from the teachings of the Church Magisterium if it does not go through a verification process by teachers or competent parties (Lay et al., 2025).

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is a branch of computer science that develops systems or machines capable of performing tasks that normally require human intelligence, such as thinking, understanding language, solving problems, learning from experience, and making decisions (Clarisya Amalia Sholehah, Muhammad Hifdil Islam, 2025). AI has been widely used in education, including schools and religious education. AI can help teachers create lesson plans or learning modules, create practice questions or quizzes, summarize long materials, generate images, illustrations, or interactive media. It can also analyze student abilities because some AI platforms are able to identify student weaknesses, provide recommendations for further study materials, predict grades or the risk of falling behind, and provide automatic feedback on student assignments.

AI can be used for personalized learning because it can tailor material based on students' abilities and learning speeds. This is implemented through a platform that adjusts learning questions based on student performance and a chatbot that explains concepts repeatedly as needed. Furthermore, the benefits of AI in learning can increase teacher efficiency. Teachers no longer spend a lot of time creating questions, materials, or doing administrative work. Learning becomes more engaging because AI can provide visualizations, simulations, creative images, and dialogic explanations. Learning becomes more personalized, with each student receiving a different learning experience according to their needs. Access to information is faster, allowing students to learn anytime without waiting for the teacher (P. Tibo, 2017).

Teachers are responsible for shaping students' personalities, integrating ethical values into the learning process, helping students achieve academic success, building strong character, and creating a future generation that is intelligent and has integrity (Ulfa et al., 2025). Mastery of digital intelligence, particularly in the use of Artificial Intelligence technology, is very important for students to be able to compete in an ever-evolving digital era. By integrating digital literacy and Artificial Intelligence into the high school curriculum, it is hoped that students can develop innovative and adaptive mindsets and use technology effectively in academic environments and daily life (Ita Soegiarto, Sitti Hasnah, Annisa Nuraisyah Annas, Sri Sundari, 2023).

Artificial Intelligence has many benefits to support improvements and changes in the world of education (Boentolo et al., 2024). Some of the benefits of Artificial Intelligence in education include personalized learning, automated evaluation, and enhanced student learning experiences (Anas & Zakir, 2024). Personalized learning is one of the main advantages of Artificial Intelligence. Artificial Intelligence-based learning systems can analyze student data to tailor content and learning methods. Artificial Intelligence also improves efficiency in evaluation and feedback. Artificial Intelligence-based systems can automatically assess student assignments, providing fast and objective results. The use of Artificial Intelligence, such as interactive chatbots and game-based simulations, increases student engagement in the learning process (Anas & Zakir, 2024).

The use of artificial intelligence in the education sector offers significant opportunities, such as improving efficiency in the learning process, providing individualized attention to each student, and helping teachers create a more customized learning experience. However, alongside these advantages, a number of questions have arisen regarding data protection, unfairness in the outputs produced, and the responsibility of users to apply this technology wisely (Suariqi Diantama, 2023). In implementing learning, teachers experience obstacles such as limited learning facilities, teachers' lack of readiness regarding the new curriculum, accessibility of teaching materials technology, insufficient teacher resources, and a lack of reference books. Limited learning facilities are an obstacle for teachers and students in implementing enjoyable learning. Furthermore, teachers' lack of knowledge about the new curriculum is an obstacle to designing active and innovative learning. Some teachers do not understand the teaching methods in the Merdeka Curriculum, so they do not implement the Merdeka Curriculum in the learning process with their students.

The accessibility of teaching materials in the implementation of the technology-based Merdeka Curriculum in the classroom is limited because students do not have sufficient quotas to access the teaching media used by teachers. Furthermore, the lack of reference books hinders the learning process based on the Merdeka Curriculum, namely the problem of book shortages (Dirwan et al., 2023). Teachers face challenges in designing and compiling learning materials that are in line with the specified curriculum. Many teachers also do not understand how to implement the Merdeka Curriculum due to their limited knowledge of it.

In addition, teachers lack experience with the concept of the Independent Learning Curriculum, and limited reference sources make it difficult for them to find guidelines for designing and implementing independent learning. They still use teaching methods such as lectures or assignments, which make the learning process feel monotonous. Furthermore, teachers are also hampered by the limited teaching materials provided by the central government. Another problem faced by teachers is the format of assessments, whether diagnostic, formative, or summative, which are still compiled manually because there is no standard format (Balqis & Ananda, 2024). The obstacles in Catholic Religious Education learning experienced by teachers and students include the difficulty of teachers in utilizing learning applications, the limited resources of teachers to utilize AI technology, the large number of tasks that must be done by teachers, and the limited interaction between teachers and students. AI in Catholic Religious Education can be used to: prepare teaching materials, deepen understanding and exegesis of Sacred Scripture texts, explain doctrine in simple language, create videos or images about Church history, create quizzes on faith or understanding of the Bible, and help teachers simplify theological concepts (e.g., the Church as the People of God) (Widiatna, 2020).

In addition, Catholic teachers' readiness to utilize AI technology still varies. Many teachers do not yet have adequate digital competencies, are unfamiliar with the working principles of AI, or are hesitant to use the technology for fear of doctrinal errors. On the

other hand, uneven school infrastructure and a lack of ethical-pedagogical guidelines regarding the use of AI for faith education add to the complexity of the problem. These conditions mean that the use of AI in Catholic religious education is often not optimal and tends to be individual experimentation without a clear framework. In high school, students are generally digital natives who are accustomed to learning visually, interactively, and quickly. However, their learning styles are not yet fully facilitated by appropriate technology in religious education. This means that the potential of AI-based learning has not been fully utilized, even though this technology can help improve students' understanding, engagement, and reflection on the subject of the Church as the People of God(P. Tibo et al., 2024).

Based on these various issues, it is important to conduct research on the use of AI in Catholic education, particularly in the subject of "The Church as the People of God" in high schools. This research is needed to identify the potential and obstacles of using AI, evaluate its effectiveness on students' understanding and attitude of faith, and formulate an appropriate learning model in line with Catholic educational principles. The results of this research are expected to contribute to the development of Catholic religious education that is relevant to technological developments while remaining faithful to the teachings of the Church and the main objective of nurturing students' faith.

This research is urgently needed not only to prevent instant culture and dependence on AI utilization, but also to ensure that AI utilization requires guidance from teachers so that students only use it as a learning aid rather than the main tool (Muslimin et al., 2025) . The use of AI is expected to provide adaptive contributions to students to motivate them to learn more with interesting and engaging learning materials (Mahardika, 2024). Therefore, the appropriate use of AI with good guidance will produce students who are intelligent and motivated to learn Catholic Religious Education at school.

B. Method

The research method used by the author in this study is qualitative. According to Creswell J. (2014) and Creswell J. W. (2018), qualitative research has the following main characteristics: it focuses on meaning, uses natural settings, relies on the researcher as a key instrument, employs inductive analysis, and produces thick descriptions.

This study uses a qualitative approach with a case study design, as recommended by Creswell to understand phenomena in depth within a specific context. Case studies were chosen to comprehensively explore how AI is used in teaching Church material as God's People, how teachers and students experience it, and the factors that influence it.

In Creswell's theory, researchers are the main instruments that collect data directly, interpret it, and construct meaning based on interactions with informants. The location of this research is SMA Katolik 2 Kabanjahe in North Sumatra Province. In this study, researchers conducted observations, interviews, narrative interpretations, and reflective document analysis. The informants in this study were two Catholic Religious

Education Teachers, 30 students who participated in learning about the Church as the People of God, and one principal/vice principal of curriculum (optional).

Data collection techniques were carried out through in-depth interviews to explore how teachers use AI, students' perceptions, experiences, and reflections, and the obstacles and impacts of AI on understanding faith. Non-participatory observation was used to observe: teacher-student interactions when using AI, teaching methods, student responses, and the use of AI in explaining Church material as the People of God. Documentation was used to collect: lesson plans, learning modules, student assignments, screenshots of AI usage, and learning process notes.

Data analysis was carried out by organizing data through collecting, classifying, and arranging interview, observation, and document data. Reading and memo writing, where researchers read all data to gain initial understanding and make memos (reflective notes). Coding was done by assigning codes to the data to find themes such as: AI usage strategies, student responses, pedagogical benefits, doctrinal accuracy, learning barriers, and the impact on faith understanding. Developing themes and descriptions. Themes were combined into in-depth descriptions of: the learning process, participants' interpretive experiences, and the potential and risks of AI.

Presenting data in a narrative where the results of the analysis are presented through: descriptive narratives, interview excerpts, thematic findings, and researcher interpretations. Here, the researcher interprets the meaning of the data to answer the questions: to what extent does AI support understanding of the Church as the People of God, its impact on faith learning, and how teachers control doctrinal accuracy.

Validity and reliability were obtained through triangulation, namely by using interviews, observations, and documentation. Member checking was carried out by asking teachers/students to verify the accuracy of the researcher's interpretations. Thick description was carried out by presenting rich contextual descriptions so that readers could understand the actual situation. Peer Debriefing was conducted by discussing the results with colleagues or experts in Catholic education. Audit Trail was conducted by keeping records of the analysis process and research decisions.

C. Results and Discussion

1. Research Results

The results of this study were obtained from in-depth interviews with teachers and students, observations of the PAK learning process utilizing AI, and a review of learning documents. The analysis was conducted using Creswell's qualitative steps, which included data grouping, coding, and theme development. From this entire process, several main results were found, as follows.

a. AI Helps Clarify the Concept of the Church as the People of God

Research shows that students experience an increase in their understanding of the concept of the Church as the People of God after using AI as a learning tool. AI provides layered explanations, simplified language, and contextual examples so that theological

ideas such as communio, the identity of believers, the role of the Church in the world, and the relationship between Church members become easier to understand. Teachers stated that AI helps bridge the gap between complex theological teachings and students' level of understanding.

b. AI Increases Student Engagement and Motivation

Research has found that students show greater enthusiasm during the learning process when AI is used as a medium for dialogue, exploration of questions of faith, and simulation of pastoral situations. Students feel more free to ask questions without fear of being wrong, and admit to being more interested in exploring the topic of the Church as the People of God through activities involving AI, such as creating reflections on faith, analyzing case studies of church life, and searching for additional information. This shows that AI helps create more interactive, learner-centered learning.

c. Teachers Utilize AI as an Effective Pedagogical Tool

Religious Education teachers use AI to support lesson planning and implementation. AI is used to compile teaching modules, design student worksheets, create reflection questions, design creative activities, and prepare visual or illustrative materials about church life. Teachers also utilize AI to provide alternative explanations when students have difficulty understanding certain concepts. In addition, AI helps teachers provide quick feedback on student reflection assignments. The use of AI enables teachers to deliver more varied and adaptive learning experiences tailored to student needs.

d. AI Promotes More Personalized and Reflective Learning

Research findings show that students utilize AI to deepen their faith reflection process, for example, in writing faith journals, formulating experiences as part of the Church, or understanding their role in church life. AI helps students compose sentences, provides questions to spark reflection, and helps connect their life experiences with Church teachings. Thus, AI not only enhances cognitive aspects but also supports the affective and spiritual dimensions of PAK learning.

e. The Use of AI Raises Ethical Challenges and Digital Literacy Requirements

Research reveals several obstacles, such as students' dependence on AI in completing assignments and the potential for the emergence of information that is theologically incorrect. Teachers state that AI does not always provide answers that are in line with Church teachings, so verification is still necessary. Verification as a means of monitoring the use of AI must be carried out by PAK teachers as those responsible for ensuring the accuracy of the material. In addition, some students use AI to produce assignments instantly without deep thinking. This shows the importance of guidance, strengthening digital literacy, and implementing ethical rules for the use of AI in learning.

f. AI Does Not Replace the Role of Teachers in Faith Education

From the entire research process, it appears that AI functions as a tool, not a substitute for teachers. Teachers continue to play a major role in directing theological content, providing spiritual guidance, and ensuring that the learning process remains in

line with Church values. Teachers involved in the research assessed that AI expands their capacity, but relational aspects, faith experiences, and character building still require a human role that cannot be replaced by technology.

2. Research Discussion

This study links field findings with pedagogical theory, previous research results, and Church teachings on education. Overall, the study shows that AI plays a significant role as a pedagogical tool in deepening students' understanding of the Church's identity as the People of God and in improving the quality of PAK learning processes.

a. AI as a Support for Abstract Theological Understanding

The concept of the Church as the People of God is a fundamental teaching in the Second Vatican Council document Lumen Gentium (LG 9–17). However, pedagogically, this concept is abstract and requires multi-level explanations, analogies, and contextual examples. Research findings show that AI helps students understand this concept through multi-level elaboration and multimodal explanations.

This finding is in line with the view (Holmes, W., Bialik, M., & Fadel, 2019) that AI is capable of providing adaptive explanations that strengthen conceptual understanding. AI also enables cognitive scaffolding as described in Vygotsky's constructivist theory, which emphasizes the role of more capable others in helping learners achieve new understanding (Vygotsky, 1978). In this context, AI acts as a "cognitive companion" that helps explain difficult theological concepts without replacing the authority of the Church's magisterium. Thus, the use of AI has proven effective in bridging the gap between the Church's theological teachings and the level of understanding of learners.

b. AI Increases Learning Motivation and Religious Engagement

The results of the study show that students are more motivated when they can engage in dialogue with AI about pastoral scenarios, reflections on faith, and examples of church life. The use of this technology makes students feel more involved and active in learning.

These findings are consistent with a study (Zawacki-Richter, O., Marín, V., Bond, M., & Gouverneur, 2019), which identified that AI in education increases student engagement through personalized and interactive learning. In the context of religion, this experience supports a faith-based pedagogical approach that emphasizes personal involvement in the learning process (Groome, 2029).

The Church's teachings emphasize education that is participatory and dialogical, as affirmed in Gravissimum Educationis (GE 3) (KWI, 2016). Thus, the use of AI is in line with the Church's vision of education that involves the whole person and the concrete experiences of learners.

c. AI as a Pedagogical Tool for PAK Teachers

Teachers utilize AI in lesson planning, material preparation, enrichment, and assessment. Research literature supports these findings. According to AI can assist

teachers as planning partners by providing recommendations for activities, exercises, and evaluations. In PAK learning, teachers stated that AI accelerated the preparation of lesson plans, created a variety of reflective tasks, and enriched learning resources about the Church as communio (LG 4) (Pandego, 2020). This is in line with research (Holmes, W., Bialik, M., & Fadel, 2021) that AI does not replace teachers, but rather expands teachers' capacity in value-based and reflective learning. Thus, AI strengthens the role of teachers as facilitators and companions in faith education.

d. AI Deepens Reflection on Faith and Church Awareness

Research shows that students use AI to help write faith journals, make reflections, and simulate life experiences as part of the Church. This is interesting because AI not only functions cognitively but also facilitates affective and spiritual processes. Within the framework of faith pedagogy, reflection is an important process for integrating life experiences with Church teachings (Groome, 2019). AI serves as a medium that allows students to express their church experiences creatively and personally.

This finding reinforces the idea that technology is not incompatible with spirituality, but can be a tool for building faith awareness if used wisely. Pope Francis, in his message for World Communications Day 2024, also emphasized that technology should be used to deepen human relationships, not replace them—a principle that is evident in this learning practice (Francis, 2024).

D. Conclusion

This study shows that the use of Artificial Intelligence in Catholic Religious Education on the subject of the Church as the People of God contributes significantly to improving the quality of the teaching and learning process. AI is able to help students understand abstract theological concepts through adaptive explanations, concrete examples, and multimodal approaches so that their understanding of the identity of the Church as a community of believers becomes more complete and contextual. The use of AI also encourages higher learning engagement because students feel they have a safe space for dialogue to ask questions, reflect, and explore their church experiences in a more personal way.

For teachers, AI expands pedagogical capacity in designing creative and relevant learning, both in planning, material preparation, differentiation, and evaluation. AI does not replace the role of teachers as educators of faith, but rather becomes a pedagogical partner that supports the process of nurturing students' faith. In addition, AI also helps deepen the reflective dimension of students through the preparation of faith journals, the interpretation of experiences, and guided spiritual dialogue, so that the learning process is not only cognitive but also touches on affective and spiritual aspects.

However, AI integration requires guidance, digital literacy, and theological verification to ensure that the use of technology does not lead to dependence, misinformation, or a decline in academic integrity. Teachers continue to play a key role in ensuring that the use of AI is in line with Church teachings and educational ethics.

Overall, this study concludes that AI can be an effective, relevant, and aligned tool with the Church's vision of dialogical, personal, and holistic education. With proper guidance, AI not only enriches PAK learning methods but also helps students experience the Church's identity as the People of God in a deeper and more meaningful way.

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