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Taken, blessed, broken, and shared: lived experiences of parish catechists teaching religion in public schools

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Abstract. Catechists play a significant role in the church's evangelization. Despite the numerous problems they experienced, they remained faithful to their vocation. Thus, this phenomenological study intends to explore the lived experiences of the parish catechists teaching religion in public schools. Using a purposive sampling method, the data were gathered from six conversation partners coming from the north, south, and central of the diocese through an unstructured in-depth interview. There was only one overarching question and probing questions were asked to cull out significant information. The data were analyzed using recursive textual analysis adopting the framework of Lichtman's 3C's. The findings of the study reveal that in teaching religion in public schools, catechists found meaning in their vocation, encountered numerous challenges in their teaching ministry, utilized different strategies in overcoming the challenges, and experienced joy in teaching religion. Generally, they are happy and committed in their teaching ministry despite the challenges they encountered. With these results, full support is necessary to address their needs and to ensure the quality of their teaching performance.

Keywords. Catechists in public schools, descriptive phenomenology, qualitative, Diocese of Bacolod, teaching religion

1.0 Introduction

The Second Vatican Council highlights the role of catechists as collaborators of bishops, priests, deacons, and consecrated laymen and women in the Church's evangelization. Their vocation as catechists is rooted in the sacrament of baptism and strengthened in the sacrament of confirmation [1], called by God to serve Him by proclaiming the Good News to the people [2]. Teaching the faith leads other people to Jesus Christ [3] and "to put them not only in touch, but in communion with Him". "Their work is often lowly and hidden but it is carried out with ardent and generous zeal" [4]. Likewise, Pope Francis [5] significantly acknowledged the importance of catechists in the Church. To emphasize this, a *motu proprio* entitled "*Antiquum Ministerium*" was issued to institute the Ministry of Catechists, recognizing their great work and contribution to teaching the faith and emphasizing their role in the pastoral work of the Church since very few numbers of clerics proclaim the Christian faith, yet a vast number of children and students who are needed to be catechized.

The total number of catechists in Asia increased by 1,755 [6]. In the light of Pope Francis' [5] Apostolic letter "*Antiquum Ministerium*," many countries in Asia were inspired by

His institution of the catechists as lay ministers. In Malaysia, hundreds of lay catechists officially renewed their pastoral commitments to serve the Church [7]. In Thailand, catechists organize summer catechism to help children to deepen their faith. The life of catechists is not easy, especially in non-Christian countries. They experienced many challenges. In Vietnam and Myanmar, the life of catechists is threatened and prohibited. Amidst violence and difficulties, catechists bring forward missionary work [8,9]. In Indonesia, some catechists are killed [10], lack of financial support for the catechists, and the danger of going to the remote villages to teach like encountering wild animals [9]. However, despite all these realities and challenges, they are still committed and continue to spread the catholic faith with courage and zeal in the ministry and for the Lord [8,11,9].

The scenario is quite different here in the Philippines. According to the National Catechetical Study, a joint research project of the University of Santo Tomas and the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines Episcopal Commission on Catechesis, there are 40,000 to 50,000 catechists in the Philippines. Most catechists are women and have no formal catechetical formation, but they have ongoing catechetical formations. Statistics show that 70 % of catechists teach religion classes in public schools, especially elementary pupils [12]. As per Department of Education Order 49, s. 2009, catechists can hold religion classes in public schools for 80 hours per week within school hours [13].

On the other hand, the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines (PCP II) claimed that "not all teachers of Religion are sufficiently trained in theology and religious education. The ongoing formation of catechists is necessary for their mission [14]. They work with a sense of volunteerism and a sense of mission. They lack financial support yet are happy with their apostolate [12]. Bishop Robert Mallari, chairman of the Episcopal Commission on Catechesis and Catholic Education, said that we need to pause and listen to catechists to see and address their situation [15].

In the diocese of Bacolod, approximately 700 parish catechists are teaching Religion in the public schools (Personal conversation with the coordinator of the catechetical ministry, July 19, 2022), especially among the elementary pupils. Research shows that the majority are women with an average age of 54 years old [12]. They attend catechetical formations and training as part of the requirements before they teach (Personal conversation with the coordinator of the catechetical ministry, July 20, 2022). Even though they are not well compensated, they are happy in their apostolate. Their deep relationship with Jesus and sense of mission motivated them to become catechists [12].

Several studies have been conducted about the state of catechetical ministry and catholic education [12,14]. However, there is a dearth of studies on the life and challenges of catechists who are teaching religion in the public schools in the Philippines. Thus, the gap in the literature. Moreover, having formed a catechist and presently working in the same field, the researcher saw how crucial the catechist's duty was in instilling the children's moral ideals and educating them about their faith. Hence, this phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of the parish catechists in teaching Religion in the public schools in the Diocese of Bacolod, Philippines. Thus, this phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of the parish catechists in teaching Religion in public schools in the Diocese of Bacolod, Philippines, during the school year 2022-2023.

2.0 Philosophical Assumptions

The following philosophical assumptions were laid out to bracket personal ideologies and expectations away from the findings of this study: Ontological, epistemological,

axiological, and methodological. Ontological assumption relates to the nature of the study's reality and its characteristics [16]. As a researcher, I believe that catechists play a great role in transmitting the Christian faith. In this fast-changing world, young ones need religious instructions and witnesses of faith to nourish their faith, especially in public schools. Yes, being catechists is not easy. Like academic teachers, they too experienced challenges in teaching. However, despite all these, catechists are faithful to their mission and committed to continue serving the Lord against all adversities. These realities interested me to explore the lived experiences of catechists in teaching religion to the public schools.

Epistemological assumption refers to how the researcher knows what she knows. The researcher becomes an insider to get close to the conversation partners being studied [16]. Following an iterative process, I conducted series of interviews with the conversation partners to collect in-depth and accurate data. I focused on their experiences as catechists and not my experience of the phenomenon. Thus, I practiced mind-bracketing in the analysis of the data.

Axiological assumption is about the role of values in research. The researcher reports her values and biases and the value-laden nature of information gathered from the field [16]. As a religious education teacher and with my catechetical formation in Mother of Life Catechetical Center in Novaliches, Quezon City. I believe in the important role of catechists in the Catholic Church, especially in public schools where religious instruction is not part of the curriculum. As teachers of faith, they too need to be heard and given support to become effective evangelizers. Methodological assumption is about the methods used in the process of the research [16]. I employed inductive logic to investigate the subject in context and use an emergent design in methodological assumption. Before establishing broad generalizations, I worked with specifics (details), thoroughly explained the study's setting, and revised questions depending on the field experience. Furthermore, writing in the study was done in a more literary manner. This study used methods such as interviewing, observing, and examining texts and strictly adhere to Lichtman's [17] method of data analysis to obtain a detailed knowledge of the topic.

3.0 Methods

The study utilized the descriptive phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences of the parish catechists in teaching religion in the public schools in the Diocese of Bacolod, Negros Occidental, Philippines. Phenomenology aims to describe and comprehend the essence of individuals' lived experiences when they encounter phenomena [17]. Thus, using this research design, the researcher was able to comprehensively access and explain the parish catechists' thoughts, feelings, and essence of their experiences in the phenomenon and not on the meaning that the researcher brings to the study.

The participants or conversation partners were the parish catechists teaching religion in public schools who qualified on the grounds of the inclusion criteria to maintain consistency. They were determined using purposeful sampling. parish catechists of the Diocese of Bacolod teaching religion in public schools. The inclusion criteria were as follows: with at least five years of experience as a catechist in teaching religion in public schools, affiliated in the parish, man or woman and at least 40 years old and above, single or married, received a training certificate of four summer programs of Catechetical Institute from the diocese. The conversation partners were chosen from the north, south, and center of the diocese. The criteria ensured that the conversation partners would provide the researcher with rich insider's perspectives on the lived experiences of parish catechists teaching religion in public schools.

The selection process of conversation partners was performed with the aid of gatekeepers. In this study, the first gatekeeper is the bishop of the Diocese of Bacolod who allowed the researcher to conduct the study in the diocese. The second gatekeeper is the office of the Commission on Catechesis, which assisted in carefully selecting the conversation partners who fit the inclusion criteria.

This study utilized an unstructured in-depth interview to gather data. Unstructured in-depth interviews involve preliminary and probing questions by the interviewer (researcher) who intends to encourage the interviewee (participant) to talk freely and comprehensively so that the interviewee will disclose their feelings, intentions, interpretations or meanings, sub-contexts, views about a topic, scenario or situation, or idea defined by the former [17]. It does not recommend a specific set of questions; thus, the conversation partners had the opportunity to tell their stories regarding their experiences in their practice of ethical bracketing in facilitating counseling services on their terms.

Regarding trustworthiness or rigors, these aspects refer to confidence in the data, method, and interpretation in qualitative inquiry. It ensures that the findings of the study are credible, transferable, dependable, and confirmable [18]. Credibility refers to the truth-value of the findings, that is, correct and accurate. To address this, the researcher employed member checking by asking the conversation partners to review the collected data and give their feedback about the researcher's interpretation. The process also allowed the conversation partners to verify their statements and fill in the gaps in the interview. Transferability refers to the applicability of the results to other contexts, circumstances, or settings. To achieve this, the researcher employed the purposive sampling technique to ensure that conversation partners share the same characteristics and relate to the research questions. Also, thick descriptions were collected from the conversation partners to describe their behaviors, experiences, and context substantially and meaningfully.

Dependability refers to the degree of consistency and reliability of the findings, which can be replicated by other researchers and yield consistent results. For the inquiry, the researcher documented the research process by keeping all recorded data, such as transcripts and field notes, to collect enough information. The data analysis procedure was strictly adhered to establish the completeness and accuracy of the findings. Lastly, confirmability is the degree of neutrality of the findings and is not influenced by the assumptions and biases of the researcher. To address the issue, the researcher subjected the data to further validation through the audit trail performed by the external auditor. The process provided the details of the steps of the data analysis and justify the decisions made by the researcher to accurately establish the conversation partners' responses. Observations, comments, and suggestions from the audit trail was made to finalize the themes and sub-themes.

In analyzing the data, this paper employed thematic analysis using Lichtman's [17] 3C's – coding, categorizing, and conceptualizing to explore the lived experiences or the life meanings of the parish catechists in teaching Religion in the public schools in the Diocese of Bacolod. In the coding phase, the interview transcripts were carefully read one at a time while creating the initial codes (coding). Then the transcripts were reread, and different codes were added. The nonverbal aspects of the conversation partners' interactions were also noted, e.g., facial expressions, body language, voice pitch, and nuances like sadness and laughter. After, the preliminary list of the initial codes was revisited by rereading the transcripts. The researcher also checked for redundancy in some initial codes to remove or rename.

After the codes have been modified, an initial list of categories and central ideas were developed (categorizing). At this point, the researcher continued with the iterative process. The

initial list was changed when the researcher recognized that some categories were less significant than others. This process was done after additional rereading. After rereading and modifying the initial list, the categories and subcategories were revisited, redundancies were removed, and determined essential elements.

After revisiting and modifying the categories and subcategories, key concepts were identified, reflecting the meaning of the data collected (conceptualizing). As the data was read and reread, some concepts appeared more prosperous and compelling than others. The researcher clustered the conversation partners' significant statements into themes and sub-themes. The final themes were selected for discussion with their relevance and significance in the study. Lastly, the researcher addressed the general principles of respect for persons, justice, and beneficence to fully guarantee the ethical soundness of the study in line with the guidelines established by the Philippine Health Research Ethics Board (PHREB). Specifically, it addressed issues regarding the privacy of the participants and the confidentiality of the data gathered.

4.0 Results and Discussion **Thematic Insights**

After interviewing the six conversation partners and transcribing their verbatim, the researcher followed the Three Cs model of Data Analysis popularized by Lichtman [17] in identifying relevant information from individuals' data. Composite descriptions that derived the essence of the phenomenon were developed. The descriptions contextualized “what” they experienced and “how” they experienced the phenomenon. Similar insights were organized into four (4) themes and eighteen (18) sub-themes as follows:

Table 1. *General Clusters of relevant Meaning*

Cluster Grouping	General Clusters of Meaning	Central Ideas/Themes	Metaphor
Group 1	I. Formation of Faith	Finding Meaning in Teaching Religion	Taken
	II. Teaching as a vocation		
	III. Growth in Faith and Love for God		
Group 2	IV. Experiencing Abundance of God's Love and Providence	Joys in Teaching Religion	Blessed
	V. Becoming Leaven of Transformation		
	VI. Sharing God's Word		
	VII. Leading Souls to God		
Group 3	VIII. Inadequate Time in Teaching	Challenges Encountered by Catechists	Broken
	IX. Lack of Moral and Financial Support		
	X. Inattentive and Unruly Learners		
	XI. Problems with Technology and Instructional Materials		
	XII. Inappropriate Schedule of Religion Classes		
	XIII. Insufficient number of catechists		
	XIV. Non-Catholic school administrators and teachers		

Group 4	XV. Dialogue and Establishing Rapport XVI. Maximizing Time and Resources XVII. Loving and Understanding the Learners XVIII. Using Creative Teaching Strategies	Strategies in Overcoming the Challenges	Shared
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Theme 1: Finding Meaning in Teaching Religion in Public Schools (TAKEN)

The conversation partners shared their insights as they find meaning in teaching religion. Likewise, they realized how important their role is as far as evangelization in the church is concerned. Similar statements were organized into three subthemes: Formation of Faith, Teaching as a vocation, Growth in faith and love for God.

Formation of Faith

One of the reasons why the conversation partners find meaning in teaching religion is that they realized the significance of the faith formation to the children. For them, knowing God is the foundation of Christian values. Thus, the conversation partners shared their insights how faith formation is important to the children. They expressed:

If the family does not know our faith, it is challenging to raise children...Every Christian is a catechist; if one is open and knows how to look at the situation, one can tell yourself that there is a need to guide people back to the church and God (Isabel, personal communication, December 12, 2022).

The students are naughty, so it is the only way to minimize their bad attitudes and so that their faith will grow (Luisa, personal communication, September 23, 2022).

It would be best to educate the young because they lack understanding, knowledge, and wisdom about the faith... The catechist is the steward/caretaker of the people of God, especially in evangelization...(Caloy, personal communication, October 14, 2022).

We will teach them so that they will understand the purpose of their existence and who they are in the world, and how important and unique they are as God's creation (Teresa, personal communication, December 8, 2022).

That is why we start with the children so they will grow, be prepared, and be enlightened with their faith that they will apply in their respective homes...(Lourdes, personal communication, October 14, 2022).

I said, I will share my experiences with God with the children, how I love my children, how I raised them until they become professionals- the first step is introducing God to them because if we do not know God, we can do bad things because we do not know His commandments, you will do whatever you want (Carmen, personal communication, December 16,2022).

Teaching as a vocation

The conversation partners consider teaching religion as a vocation, a calling from God. They committed voluntarily to this ministry, they learned to love it, and they are happy with what they are doing. They shared the following realizations:

You love your work of being a catechist because you cannot consider it as a job. After all, it is a vocation; it is your vocation. If it is not your vocation, you will not care (Isabel, personal communication, September 22, 2022).

I have my shortcomings, but when you teach in the church, sir, it is truly amazing because the Lord grants you the grace to continue. I have two vocations, mother and wife and catechist (Carmen, personal communication, December 16, 2022).

It is okay, even if it is small, if there is an allowance, here it is more on volunteerism. For us, our allowance is just for snacks (Teresa, personal communication, December 8, 2022,).

In my eleven years of teaching in the school, it is nice because it is fulfilling to be a catechist. Although you do not expect for salary to give your service to the children is fulfilling (Luisa, personal communication, September 23, 2022).

Since it is your work, that is the task given to you; once you dedicate yourself as a catechist, you must persevere. No turning back. You need to be strong; you need to have patience and concentration (Caloy, personal communication, December 21, 2022).

Growth in faith and love for God

The experiences of the conversation partners made them realized, that they persevere in the catechetical ministry because of their strong faith and love for God. They narrated:

I stayed long because of my faith and love for God. From the human perspective, I cannot persevere this long. What will I do there, sir? People are asking me; how much is your salary? I do not have a salary. Then why do you continue to do so? Because of my love for God and the Catholic Church, they, too, can get to know God and will know how to love (Carmen, personal communication, December 16, 2022).

It is, of course, I come from Him. I am His, not mine. My trust is in Him. If you do not trust Him, you do not also trust your life. As long as I live, I will offer my life to Him (Teresa, personal communication, December 8, 2022).

Catechists play a vital role in the faith formation of the young. The conversation partners realized that teaching the faith is also forming the Christian values of the learners. In our world today, where the number of clergy available to proclaim the Gospel to a vast and growing population and to fulfill duties is limited, catechists play a significant role [1]. They are primarily expected to excel in the pastoral task of passing on the faith, guiding individuals through various phases, starting with the initial proclamation of the Gospel message (kerygma),

progressing to instructing them about their new life in Christ, preparing them for the sacraments of Christian initiation, and finally, supporting ongoing formation that empowers each person to articulate and share the hope they hold within them [5]. In addition, their task is to teach not their own viewpoints or sentiments, but rather the message of Christ- His love and revelation to the world [14].

Moreover, the conversation partners believed that being a catechist is a vocation. They see the value of their work and find fulfillment in what they do. Pope Francis [19] defines vocation as a calling from God that involves the call to life, to cultivate friendship with him, and to strive for holiness. In the vocation of a catechist, aside from Baptism and Confirmation, there lies a specific call from the Holy Spirit, a unique gift acknowledged by the church, which is formally expressed through the bishop's authorization [20]. Having a call from God and when accepted in faith, empower the catechists to share the faith and lead others into the Christian life [2].

Furthermore, what made the conversation partners persevered in their ministry is because of their strong faith and love for God. They are committed to continue their mission for the church and for God. The Holy Father Pope Francis [5] stated that, it is necessary for those who are called and chosen in the ministry of catechesis to possess strong faith and personal growth, actively engage in the Christian community, possess a welcoming attitude and generosity, and foster a life of harmonious fellowship. Research shows, that the primary motivation of the catechists is their faith and deep commitment to spreading the teachings of the Catholic faith among the Filipino catechized, not by the desire for financial compensation in exchange for their service to the catholic church [14].

Theme 2: Joys in Teaching Religion in Public Schools (BLESSED)

The conversation partners were able to see the rainbows after the rain, that despite the hardships they encountered, they find joy in everything they do. Similar statements were organized into four subthemes: Experiencing abundance of God's love and providence, becoming leaven of transformation, sharing God's word, and leading souls to God.

Experiencing abundance of God's love and providence

In giving themselves to the church and to God and being faithful to their works, in return the conversation partners received bounteous blessings from God than the challenges they experienced. They realized that God sustained them and did not abandon them. They said:

...we do not expect anything, but the reward from God is immeasurable because His grace is abundant. That is why even if you do not receive a salary, the grace of God comes. So, it has been a wonderful feeling for eleven years, and until now, I continued (Luisa, personal communication, September 23, 2022).

I have seen that God is good; His presence is undeniable, and I have not been neglected (Lourdes, personal communication, October 14, 2022).

Of course, it is the grace of the Lord that He bestows upon us, and He knows that I am sincere in my work because it is His mission, and the mission of serving continues. I teach them about our lives and the grace of God that is shared with us (Teresa, personal communication, December 8, 2022).

However, it is great when you feel that there are people who appreciate your efforts...It feels wonderful as if you cannot express your joy...(Isabel, personal communication, September 22, 2023).

...but through the mercy of God, He helps us...(Caloy, personal communication, October 14, 2022).

Becoming leaven of transformation

To see and harvest the fruit of their labor is the greatest joy of the conversation partners. Having students before in their religion class who became professionals and active serving the church, made them happy and fulfilled. These are the narratives given by the conversation partners:

It is nice that we have seen some of my former elementary students now serving as lectors, collectors, and altar servers, which really inspired me...Moreover, it is fulfilling, it feels good... (Luisa, personal communication, September 23, 2022).

That is why if some have been positively influenced by what I have taught, if there are even one or two whose lives I have led in the right direction and whose faith has become more assertive, it does not have to be many, even just one or two. If they become closer to God, not just themselves but their families as well, I am happy with that... (Lourdes, personal communication, Oct. 14, 2022).

I have planted a seed in them, something that grew from what I have taught them. Now there are nurses and engineers among them... (Teresa, personal communication, December 8, 2022).

Why am I happy? Because I have seen the results of being a catechist and the impact it has on life because I had pupils who now serve as catechists, and some have entered the priesthood as altar servers. Meaning there is fruit in my labor/hardships. It feels proud because there is fruit (Caloy, personal communication, October 14, 2022).

...for over 30 years, some of my students have become professionals working in malls. I still get asked if I am still serving in the church. (laughs) There are even some who have become deacons. Oh, they were my students before (Carmen, personal communication, October 14, 2022).

Sharing God's word

The conversation partners find joy in proclaiming the word of God to the learners and in serving the church, that no matter how tiring their life sometimes is, the joy they felt is immeasurable. They expressed their sentiments:

...even if you feel exhausted after a good day's work and realize you did not receive any salary or wonder why you are still happy, I was genuinely amazed. Even though you may feel tired at home, when you teach and guide the children

for the sake of Christ, you do not get tired (Carmen, personal communication, October 14, 2022).

...but to give your service to the children makes you fulfilled...because you share with them the Word of God... (Luisa, personal communication, September 23, 2022).

I am delighted, and nothing can surpass my happiness or take away my joy... I am just happy, that is all, that I can serve the church (Teresa, personal communication, January 28, 2023).

Leading Souls to God

To guide young souls closer to God and to introduce Jesus to them made the conversation partners filled with joy profoundly. They narrated:

That is when you lead the young ones back to God and to know Him deeper. That is the most rewarding feeling and the joy of bringing souls (Isabel, personal communication, September 22, 2022).

As humans, you will undoubtedly feel tired, but after experiencing it, you will also feel fulfillment and happiness in what you do. Especially when you see children receiving their first communion, the feeling of having guided those children is truly overwhelming (Luisa, personal communication, January 28, 2023).

The joy that all the conversation partners experienced in teaching religion is greater than the problems they encountered. Since they committed themselves in the catechetical ministry, they experienced God's providence and constant love. Pope Benedict XVI [28] said that we can experience a joyful emotion that comes from knowing that we are loved when we encounter the outward expressions of God's love. He added, that God loves man so much that, by taking on human form, he accompanies him into death, bringing justice and love together. Moreover, we need to believe in His genuine love for us, to understand that He is actively present, intervenes in mysterious ways, never forsakes us, and can turn challenging situations into positive outcomes through His boundless power and limitless creativity [5].

Moreover, becoming leaven of transformation is the greatest happiness and fulfillment of most catechists. They are more inspired to see their learners who were positively influenced by their good examples and teachings. Catechists and religious educators should strive for a holistic approach, engaging with students to not only have them memorize doctrines and rules, but also to help them recognize the significance and practical application of these sacred truths in their everyday life [14]. To teach is one of man's most remarkable and artistic activity and it has outstanding moral depth, for the teacher writes on the very core of the essence of a person [21]. People nowadays are more inclined to pay attention to those who can share personal experiences rather than those who solely teaches, and when they listen to educators, it's because they can also serve as credible witnesses [22].

Furthermore, proclaiming the Good News and leading the learners to God give joy to the conversation partners. They are happy doing their ministry in the service of the church and for God. It's important to remember that the primary focus of evangelization is spreading the

Gospel to individuals who doesn't know Jesus Christ or have consistently declined to accept Him [23]. Likewise, preaching, which involves the oral evangelization of a message, is necessary [22]. a catechist or a religious educator is a commendable responsibility as they impart the principles of faith to young individuals not solely through theoretical teachings but also by exemplifying faith in their own lives and guide their learners towards a path of prayer and devotion to God [14].

Theme 3: Challenges Encountered by Catechists in Teaching Religion in Public Schools (BROKEN)

The conversation partners shared their numerous difficulties encountered in doing their ministry and these affect them greatly. Similar statements were organized into 7 subthemes: Inadequate time in teaching, Lack of support, inattentive and unruly learners, problems with instructional materials, Inappropriate schedule of religion classes, Insufficient number of catechists, and non-Catholic school administrators and teachers.

Inadequate time in teaching

Due to the limited time given, the conversation partners find it very hard to discuss well and finish the topic in one meeting considering the fact, that they only have 30 minutes in each meeting, and they meet only once a week. They shared:

It is only 30 minutes, but if you still need to finish and enjoy teaching, more than 30 minutes is needed. You cannot say anything because it is the only time given (Isabel, personal communication, September 22, 2022).

With the 30 minutes you have, you need to use it well. It is only 30 minutes; if you waste it and there are some distractions, 30 minutes will be lessened...(Luisa, personal communication, September 23, 2022).

In my 30 minutes, I cannot finish a lesson because it is too short. In the 30 minutes I teach, I teach them how to think critically. I am explaining, but I cannot do them all in 30 minutes because I also spend time advertising, looking for ways that will deeply inculcate in their minds (Teresa, personal communication, December 8, 2022).

The time given to us is always GMRC, which is 20 minutes, and if extended, it is only 30 minutes (Lourdes, personal communication, October 14, 2022).

It is just 20 minutes; with that 20 minute, you still have to discipline them. It takes work! (Caloy, personal communication, October 14, 2022).

More than thirty minutes are needed. Sometimes I would extend because you cannot discuss them well in their limited time (Carmen, personal communication, December 16, 2022).

Lack of moral and financial support

Unfortunately, the conversation partners experienced the lack of support from their parish priest which greatly affect their personality and performance in doing catechesis. Moreover,

they lack financial support to sustain their programs and activities. They expressed the following sentiments:

Sometimes the priests do not even see it, and sometimes they do not even see your hard work in the parish... Maybe you will be happier if your parish priest provides full moral support (Isabel, personal communication, September 22, 2022).

Yes, we had a previous experience where he did not see our efforts. We do not mind being unnoticed, but we need their help with our programs... They should be grateful that catechists are assisting them. Some priests have a negative view of catechists as a burden to them because there are expenses, and they are probably not willing to take risks or spend. They do not have a love for catechists, but it is okay. We do not mind. That is our previous experience, they did not help us, and it is okay. Anyway, it is not for them. It is for the children (Luisa, personal communication, January 28, 2023).

Sometimes it is difficult on our part to say that there is no support from the priest... It isn't easy, especially during confessions, parents' recollections, and other activities. We need their presence and help. They are not available... When they are needed most, they are not available (Lourdes, personal communication, October 14, 2022).

Ah, financial, and they do not understand the programs of the catechists, but we continue anyway... We do not have a salary, only a small allowance, that is all... (Luisa, personal communication, September 23, 2022).

...that is why many are called, but only a few respond, because catechists do not receive a salary, just an allowance, but if you have a family, you cannot survive with that (Caloy, personal communication, October 14, 2022).

We do not have anything; we rely solely on the transportation allowance... Moreover, I feel bad if I ask to be paid... The term is not salary but allowance. I said to myself it is good, but it is not good... However, of course, you need to sustain yourself (Isabel, personal communication, September 22, 2022).

Inattentive and unruly learners

Like classroom teachers, the catechists encounter the same problem inside the classroom especially in dealing the behavior of the pupils such as lack of attention, lack of interest in the subject matter, and lack of respect. These misbehaviors of the pupils made them distracted especially during discussions. They narrated:

There are very naughty ones; they stand up and transfer to another desk, distracting their classmates. I even have one child who stands up and walks around ... It affects the concentration of other children. Sometimes they love to

irritate you by repeating what you say (Isabel, personal communication, December 12, 2022).

The behavior of the children, when you speak, they do not listen, they are noisy! (Luisa, personal communication, January 28, 2023).

I find it difficult because as you start, you find ways to capture their attention and make them follow you... While I have my class, some are jumping, crawling.... (Teresa, personal communication, December 8, 2022).

I even experienced throwing an eraser ... Yes, sure, I said, 'You should sit down because we are starting.' Oh my, it is like they are teasing me. Do you know what they are doing? They are just running around; they are throwing things at each other. Happily, the pupil was not hit by an eraser (Caloy, personal communication, October 14, 2022).

"One time, they were very noisy. I explained the sacraments to the 5th graders, reviewing what they felt when they received the body and blood of Christ. Sometimes some talked back, some fought with each other, and some made noise. I even walked out, sir. I said, 'I will just leave!'" (Carmen, personal communication, October 14, 2022).

Problems with technology and instructional materials

With the evolution of technologies and modern gadgets, the conversation partners find them very useful in teaching. However, they are not knowledgeable and skilled to use these resources. For some, they are not capable of acquiring it due to limited financial resource. Thus, they shared their aspirations:

"I wish I could learn about new technologies, how to operate laptops, and how to use projectors...Because when you teach children like to have visual aids...(Isabel, personal communication , September 22, 2022).

"But we do not know. We have not been taught. We learn on our own because we need to print our visuals. Good thing is, we will do it one by one. We will just ask the others to teach us." (Teresa, personal communication, January 28, 2023).

Isn't it that we are now in the world of social media, sir? We can have our laptop if possible, but the parish cannot provide it...Because today's generation love using gadgets. They are easy to deal with this stuff...(Luisa, personal communication, September 23, 2022).

What we found most challenging was our lack of visual aids because we did not have enough resources. Where could we get them if we provided them when the parish did not give us any allowance? (Isabel, personal communication, September 22, 2022).

Inappropriate schedule of religion classes

The time schedule greatly influences the interest of the learners and the effectiveness of the learning process. With the time schedule given, the conversation partners shared their difficulty in teaching and in getting the attention of the learners. They shared:

Some pupils can no longer attend because the schedule coincides with their lunch break and the afternoon dismissal at 5 o'clock. Is there anyone left? Of course, no, they go home (Lourdes, personal communication, October 14, 2022).

Unfortunately, the pupils' religion class falls on their lunch break and dismissal period; during this time, they are exhausted already, their mind is no longer fresh, and they seem uninterested. However, we cannot do anything about it because that is the schedule that the DepEd has given us (Caloy, personal communication, October 14, 2022).

...the time 1:30-2:00 in the afternoon is indeed sleepy/heavy-eyed (Carmen, personal communication, October 14, 2022).

It is difficult with the time given to us because sometimes it is dismissal time at noon and in the afternoon (Isabel, personal communication, September 22, 2022).

Insufficient number of catechists

The number of catechists in each parish creates an impact to the life of each participant. It contributes to the effectiveness of their ministry. What makes them challenging is the lack of working force since only very few commits in the ministry. They said:

It was challenging in our parish because we were only five catechists when we were teaching in the school. Out of the five, only three are younger and very able. Some are old ones (Isabel, personal communication, September 22, 2022).

Before, there were many of us, but now we are only a few. We used to be seven, but some are not actively participating anymore because some are getting older and some have health reasons (Luisa, personal communication, September 23, 2022).

It is challenging because, of course, your time is limited. Unlike if you are numerous, things become light and easy. If you are only four and there are six schools, you must manage your time wisely and prioritize what needs to be done during our limited time in each school on that day. It would help if you gave importance to it (Caloy, personal communication, October 14, 2022).

Non-Catholic school administrators and teachers

The religion of the school administrators and teachers sometimes affect the entry of the conversation partners to their respective schools since they are the gatekeepers in order that our conversation partners can teach. With their experiences with the administrators and teachers who are not Catholic, they narrated:

... it is challenging when the teachers have a different religion. You enter their class, but the feeling is different because of the difference in religion... (Luisa, personal communication, September 23, 2022).

One adjustment I found difficult was dealing with the staff or teachers in the school who should have supported us, especially the non-Catholic teachers. There is a tendency for them to refrain from permitting or limiting the time for my teaching...I have experienced not being acknowledged by the principal for one year because she did not allow religion classes in the school. She only allowed the religion she practiced and allocated slots only for her religion (Lourdes, personal communication, October 14, 2022).

Having a limited time in conducting religion classes is the common problem of the conversation partners. Likewise, the insufficient number of catechists in the catechetical ministry was a big challenge to them. In the Philippines, although the Department of Education Order No.120, s.1999 permits religious instruction in public schools, the practical implementation of this provision is hindered by various challenges, such as inadequate time allocation and the need for catechists to negotiate for even a mere ninety-minute slot in the school. In addition, they added that the Philippines' Catholic population is quite large and is only going to get bigger, so there needs to be a concentrated effort made to find and train more qualified catechists. Moreover, the challenge of spreading the message of Jesus Christ to all nations seems so vast when considering the Church's limited human capacity for this endeavor [24].

Moreover, the lack of moral and financial support from the parish influenced the conversation partners' performance in their ministry. They are more inspired and motivated if they have the full support from the parish. Being the catechist of catechists, the priest is responsible for nurturing and prioritizing the training of catechists, demonstrating a high level of dedication to this duty, and providing ongoing support in their spiritual growth [2]. With the continuous growing Catholic community in the Philippines requires a focused commitment in the ministry of catechesis and one of these is to provide additional financial resources for the development of catechist education, the acquisition of visual tools and programs, and the production of culturally adapted catechetical materials. In addition, it would be favorable if the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith could allocate financial resources for the proper education and assistance of catechists [1].

Furthermore, the misbehavior of the learners especially being inattentive and unruly during class discussions distract the concentration of the conversation partners. This challenged them greatly to look for teaching strategies on how to deal such situations. Researchers in the United Kingdom and Australia define classroom misbehaviors as actions that disturb the organization of the classroom and create difficulties for teachers such as creating nonverbal distractions, disobedience, speaking out of turn, being unproductive or slow, obstructing others, engaging in physical aggression, being untidy, leaving one's seat, and using verbal abuse [25]. As we stand at the beginning of the third millennium, the field of education encounters challenges brought about by changing socio-political and cultural circumstances and primarily among these challenges is the deterioration of moral standards or values, which, especially in advanced societies, manifests as subjectivism, moral relativism, and nihilism, and is sometimes

even glorified in the media [26]. Certainly, classroom management plays a crucial role in enhancing the learning and teaching experience, benefiting both students and educators.

In addition, the conversation partners believed in the importance of the instructional materials and the modern technologies and gadgets as powerful tools in teaching. Thus, they expressed their aspirations to undergo trainings and workshops, so that they will become knowledgeable and skilled in using these tools for their lessons. Every diocese need to ensure the availability of books, audiovisual resources, and other educational materials required for catechetical training and it would be beneficial to encourage the sharing of ideas, information, and teaching resources among centers, dioceses, and neighboring countries [20]. Catechists ought to undergo appropriate training in biblical, theological, pastoral, and pedagogical aspects to effectively convey the teachings of the faith and to be qualified educators of the faith, they should first experience catechesis [5]. Besides, not all instructors of religion possess adequate training in theology and religious education, and thus, providing continuous education for catechists and religious educators as a means of guiding and supporting them in carrying out their mission is indispensable.

Lastly, for the conversation partners, they find challenging when the school administrators and teachers are non-Catholic. At times, they were refused to enter the school and conduct religion classes due to their religious denomination and this has been a problem for some of them. The need to promote inclusivity in teaching regardless of race, color, and religious background is a current challenge in teaching the faith [14]. However, the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples [20], urged the catechists to possess a strong yearning for Christian unity, be willing to actively participate in conversations with Christians from different denominations, and should wholeheartedly dedicate themselves to ecumenical endeavors adhering to their specific roles and following the guidance provided by the Episcopal Conference and the local Bishop.

Theme 4: Strategies in Overcoming the Challenges in Teaching Religion in Public Schools (SHARED)

Under this theme, the conversation partners shared their strategies in overcoming the challenges in their ministry. Similar statements were organized into four subthemes: Dialogue and establishing rapport, maximizing time and resources, using creative teaching strategies, and loving and understanding the learners.

Dialogue and establishing rapport

Amidst the difficulties faced by the conversation partners, they were able to cope by making friends and dialogue with the administrators and teachers. They narrated the following strategies:

Having the challenging schedule, we settled with the teachers to conduct religion classes before their remedial classes, which fall from 1:30-2:00 PM. Happily, they agreed, and since then, we have followed the new schedule every 1:00-1:30 in the afternoon (Isabel, personal communication, Sept.22, 2022).

First, I consider the principal and always show her respect and be convinced of the importance of my presence. I present things well and know how to listen. Sometimes, it is like that (Lourdes, personal communication, October 14, 2022).

On my part, I already told them since the beginning because our problem is the non-Catholics. If you are non-catholic and willing to listen, please stay...(Luisa, personal communication, January 28, 2023).

I make friends first with the teachers. I am very nice to them so that I can stay and teach longer. They like it because somehow they can take a rest (Teresa, personal communication, December 8, 2022).

Typically, if there is a conflict, it has to be discussed, and dialogue is needed one on one. Why did you do it? Why did you say those words to me? We remain in our mission, yet we need a better relationship with each other it is useless since we are brothers and sisters in Christ (Carmen, personal communication, October 14, 2022).

Maximizing time and resources

With the limited resources the conversation partners had, they were able to find ways just to continue doing their mission. Due to their persistence and flexibility, they survived. They shared:

We divide ourselves. One is in the other school, and the other is in the other school too...And then you should have your technique in teaching. It would be best if you were fast and ready with your teaching paraphernalia not to waste time...(Caloy, personal communication, October 14, 2022).

We divide ourselves. One catechist for each school with two grade sections to teach. So that is our task... (Caloy, personal communication, December 21, 2022).

We are only five. What we do is that we take one schedule in the morning and another one in the afternoon (Isabel, personal communication, September 22, 2022).

When we were seven, we divided ourselves into different sections. Since the three of us are younger than the others, we were given more loads/sections due to their age and health reasons...We have our funds, sir; like the baptismal candles, it is our fundraising to generate income, and from there, we get our source. Another one, our brothers and sisters who are well-off in the ministry shoulder their expenses... (Luisa, personal communication, January 28, 2023).

Loving and understanding the learners

Despite the behavior of the learners, the conversation partners were able to find ways on how to deal with this: that is to love and understand the learners. They said:

I talk to the pupils. I make sure that I have a personal touch with them by memorizing their names; at times, I let the child sit and ask what the problem is, and they share their family problem; I give advice, too; this is what I like...(Luisa, personal communication, September 23, 2022).

I handle it in a way that I show my love to them. I do not get angry and never punish physically. I do not even utter bad words because I control myself. That is why other teachers would always wonder that every time I entered the school, these pupils would embrace and kiss me...(Carmen, personal communication, October 14, 2022).

That is why sometimes, when one keeps repeating what I say, he is good. Do you want to become a teacher? Come here with me. We cannot get angry because what we teach in catechism is different; if we do so, it may negatively impact them (Isabel, personal communication, December 12, 2022).

Using creative teaching strategies

Being creative in teaching will help more in the learning process of a child. This will also encourage participation and attentiveness among the learners. The conversation partners shared their different creative teaching strategies to capture the attention of their pupils. They said:

It should not only about prayers; there should be games and dance; I learned all these so that they will like me and be entertained because it is what they like...Even in making the sign of the cross, I sing it to capture their attention so that they can sing...Because I find them challenging to get their attention, these are the activities that I do. Sometimes, I let them draw, write, go outside the classroom, and observe the surroundings...(Teresa, personal communication, December 8, 2022).

I use storytelling and action song in my lessons to get their attention. You should act like a child, not just discuss it there (Carmen, personal communication, December 16, 2022).

One of the strategies, that all the conversation partners used with the students and even with the teachers was dialogue and establishing good relationship. They found out that communication and friendly attitude were very effective in understanding the personality of the person and in working harmoniously. Even when things appear challenging or not well understood, it's always important to maintain communication [20]. Dialogues with followers of non-Christian religions with a spirit of openness, emphasizing the importance of truth and love, even when faced with challenges and obstacles [22]. Pope Francis said that catechists should embody specific qualities such as approachability, a willingness to engage in dialogue, patience, warmth, and a welcoming attitude.

Moreover, as teachers of faith, the conversation partners had to motivate and encourage their learners to participate more during class discussions. They used creative teaching strategies to capture their attention. Each catechism or religious education class should instill in all students a longing to experience God's presence in all circumstances, even during challenging and conflicting times, akin to how Jesus used diverse approaches like parables and miracles as pathways to convey the message of the Kingdom of God instead of directly delving into the core of His teachings [14]. Teaching involves establishing a setting in which individuals can engage with a particular topic while also fostering connections between themselves and others as well as with their own selves [27]. Catechesis should undergo ongoing revitalization

through the expansion of its definition, the adaptation of its techniques, the quest for appropriate terminology, and the use of innovative ways to convey its message [4].

Moreover, some of the conversation partners believed that to deal the misbehavior of the learners, catechists should be loving and understanding. For them, this is the most effective strategy in teaching to get the sympathy and attention of the learners. Pope Francis [23] said, that to love others is our spiritual force that leads us closer to God. He added that as adults, we often struggle in listening patiently to the needs and worries of our youth, to understand their situations and problems, and to communicate with them in their language. Moreover, Pope Benedict XVI [28] said, that understanding the essence of the human being and who they are is essential for teaching.

Synthesis

The Essence of Experience: Taken, Blessed, Broken, and Shared: Experiences of Parish Catechists in Teaching Religion in Public Schools

“At the time he was betrayed and entered willingly into his passion, he took bread and, giving thanks, broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying: take this, all of you, and eat of it: for this is my body which will be given up for you. in a similar way, when supper was ended, he took the chalice and, once more giving thanks, he gave it to his disciples, saying: take this, all of you, and drink from it: for this is the chalice of my blood, the blood of the new and eternal covenant, which will be poured out for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins. do this in memory of me (General Instruction to Roman Missal, Eucharistic Prayer II, 2011).

This prayer is being recited by the priest during consecration in the celebration of the Holy Eucharist. This is in remembrance of what Jesus said and did during His Last Supper with His Apostles on the night before He died, as narrated in the four books of the New Testament (Matthew 26:17–29; Mark 14:12–25; Luke 22:7–38; and I Corinthians 11:23–25).

In the context of this study, these saving words and actions of Jesus—took, blessed, broke, and shared—are similarly associated with the lives and experiences of the conversation partners in the catechetical ministry. They too, with their “yes” to God as their response to His call were taken to work in His vineyard, particularly in proclaiming the good news to the learners. For them, becoming catechists is a vocation, not a job, for they realized that it was God who called them into this challenging ministry.

The conversation partners were blessed because, despite the challenges they encountered, they experienced joy in their teaching ministry. They always feel God’s providence and guidance especially during difficult times. For them, God was with them in their journey as catechists and to transform the lives of the learners, to share God’s word, and to lead them to God made them happy and fulfilled. Likewise, their greatest joy and fulfillment are to see their learners successful in their lives and continue serving the church. These gave them inspiration and made them even more committed to continuing their mission for God.

They too experienced being broken in the catechetical ministry, such as having inadequate time to teach, a lack of moral and financial support from the parish, inattentive and unruly learners, problems with instructional materials, an inappropriate schedule of religion classes, an insufficient number of catechists, and dealing with non-Catholic school administrators and

teachers. They realized that to work in God’s vineyard means facing courageously the challenges they will encounter.

However, they believed that despite their weaknesses as persons, they were shared and sent by God to touch and transform the lives of the young ones. With their strengths and weaknesses, skills and talents, and uniqueness as persons, they were chosen to make a difference in the world. By using teaching strategies like establishing rapport and dialogue with the administrators, teachers, and students, maximizing time and resources, using creative teaching strategies, and by loving the learners, they were able to survive in this ministry. For them, these were helpful and effective. Moreover, finding ways to overcome challenges is significant for them to continue their apostolate. All these, for their love to the church and to God.

Figure 1 shows the essence of the lived experiences of parish catechists teaching religion in public schools. The essence of a parish catechist teaching religion in public schools is visualized as a Blessed Host symbolizing Jesus Christ. There are four intertwined blessed hosts that signify the various experiences of the conversation partners. They considered their teaching vocation as taken and called by God, blessed, and sustained by His love. They experienced being broken by encountering numerous challenges; however, they remained strong because they believed that they were sent by God to proclaim His word to the world. They are happy, fulfilled, and still willing to give themselves to God in the service of evangelization.

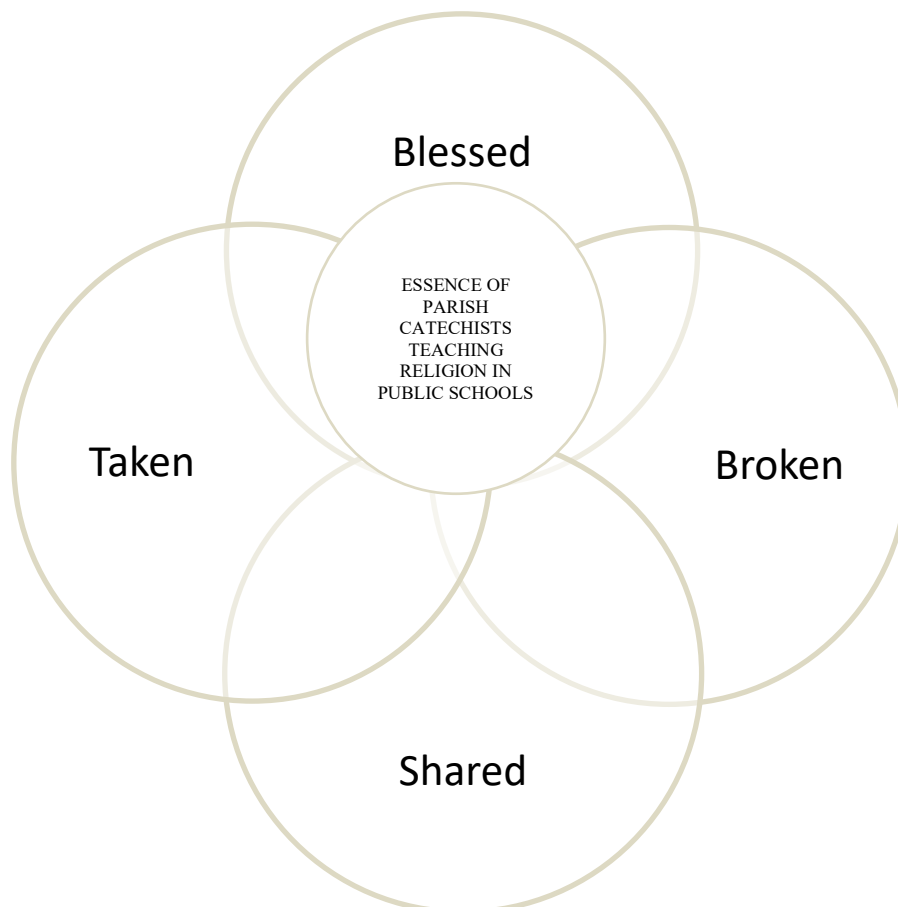


Figure 1. *The essence of the lived experiences of parish catechists teaching religion in public schools*

5.0 Summary and General Statements

The lived experiences of parish catechists teaching religion in public schools are thematically described into four themes: finding meaning in teaching religion, challenges encountered by catechists in teaching religion, strategies in overcoming the challenges, and joys in teaching religion. Essentially, these catechists revealed their significant role in the church, especially in the field of evangelization. Thus, whatever challenges they encountered they remained faithful to their ministry. The lived experiences of catechists teaching religion in public schools are challenging, yet inspiring and fulfilling. The conversation partners experienced various challenges in their ministry, but despite all, they found ways to overcome by utilizing strategies in teaching and remained zealous in proclaiming God's word out of their love and strong faith to God. For them, becoming catechists is a response to God's call to evangelize. They realized the importance of teaching the faith to the young learners in strengthening their faith and in shaping their values as Christians. They found meaning in what they do and with all their experiences, they felt the love of God, and this gave them profound joy and inspiration in continuing their mission. Moreover, to see the impact of their teachings in the lives of their learners and to lead them closer to God made them fulfilled.

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