



Improving the Quality of Children's Faith Formation through Catechesis for First Communion Preparation in the Parish with a Holistic Approach

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to evaluate and improve the quality of children's faith formation through catechesis preparation for First Communion in the Parish. The research method is descriptive quantitative, with data collected using surveys through Google Forms. The study population consists of parents or guardians of children preparing for First Communion, with a sample of 23 respondents. Data analysis uses descriptive statistics. The findings indicate that catechesis activities and children's experiences preparing for First Communion significantly impact the quality of children's faith formation. Most respondents reported positive experiences and perceived improvements in their children's understanding and practice of the Catholic faith. However, factors inhibiting optimal faith formation were also identified, particularly the need for increased parental involvement. The study recommends encouraging parental participation, providing necessary resources and guidance for active engagement in children's religious education. To enhance children's faith formation, collaboration between parents, churches, and catechists is recommended, along with establishing effective communication channels between these stakeholders.

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengevaluasi dan meningkatkan kualitas pembinaan iman anak melalui persiapan katekese Komuni Pertama di Paroki. Metode penelitian yang digunakan adalah penelitian kuantitatif deskriptif dengan teknik pengumpulan data menggunakan survei melalui Google Forms. Sampel penelitian terdiri dari orang tua atau wali anak-anak yang mempersiapkan Komuni Pertama di paroki, dengan sampel 23 responden. Data yang terkumpul dianalisis menggunakan metode statistik deskriptif, meliputi perhitungan frekuensi, persentase, dan rata-rata. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa kegiatan katekese dan pengalaman anak-anak mempersiapkan Komuni Pertama memiliki dampak yang signifikan terhadap kualitas pembentukan iman anak-anak. Mayoritas responden melaporkan pengalaman positif dan merasakan peningkatan dalam pemahaman dan praktik iman Katolik anak-anak mereka. Namun, penelitian ini juga mengidentifikasi faktor-faktor penghambat tertentu yang perlu ditangani. Salah satu faktor utama adalah perlunya peningkatan keterlibatan orang tua dalam pembentukan iman anak-anak mereka. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa orang tua memainkan peran penting dalam mendukung dan memperkuat kegiatan katekese di paroki. Oleh karena itu, upaya harus dilakukan untuk mendorong partisipasi orang tua dan memberi mereka sumber daya dan bimbingan yang diperlukan untuk secara aktif terlibat dalam pendidikan agama anak-anak mereka. Berdasarkan temuan ini, rekomendasi dibuat untuk meningkatkan kualitas pembentukan iman anak-anak melalui kolaborasi antara orang tua, gereja, dan katekis. Sangat penting untuk membangun saluran komunikasi yang efektif antara para pemangku kepentingan ini untuk menumbuhkan lingkungan yang mendukung dan kohesif bagi pembentukan iman anak-anak.

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Introduction

Catechesis, or Faith formation, is a lifelong process that aims to shape individuals by developing their potential. Catechesis or faith education has an important role in shaping the character and spirituality of children. Facilitating access to early childhood education plays an important role in shaping the character, mindset, and competence of Indonesia's future workforce (Moh. Isom, Evi Sopandi, 2021). Education has a recognized and proven role in improving the human welfare index (Kebing, Benedikta & Riyanto, 2022). Education is recognized and proven as the best means to shape and build the human person because education contributes significantly to improving the welfare index (Sihombing, 2021).

Catechesis is very important for children because it substantially impacts the values of life in this world and the hereafter. Therefore, active participation of various social groups in community life is very important (Suhardin et al., 2021). However, many children still do not receive faith education services under what should be regulated in government laws and policies (Hayadin, 2018). Some parishes in the context of this study, such as the Parish of Mary of the Assumption Diocese of Malang, have implemented catechesis or faith formation programs for children. One is the catechesis program or faith formation to prepare for first communion. It needed to evaluate the successes and shortcomings of these programs. Do catechesis or faith formation programs in preparation for this first communion achieve their purpose in shaping children's faith, and what factors influence their success or failure? What is the perception and satisfaction of parents with the program?

Numerous studies have provided strong evidence that educating and passing on the faith to children is the primary responsibility of parents based on the principles in *Ecclesia Domestica* (Octavian, 2014). Parents are instrumental in educating their children in various aspects of life, especially regarding faith and morals. They play an important role in shaping their children's faith development (Avenant et al., 2021). The role of parents has a significant influence on shaping the faith and confidence of their children, especially in the early days of life up to the age of seven. However, the number of children with a less solid foundation of faith is increasing. Most Catholic children have difficulty understanding and practicing their religious beliefs (Smith, 2019). It was also found that many Catholic children face challenges in understanding and practicing their faith (Abo-Zena and Midgette, 2019).

Similar studies have also shown that parents often do not pay enough attention to their children's spiritual lives. Christian parents today face difficult and complex challenges in fulfilling their children's family and catechesis responsibilities (Raharso, 2018). Catechesis in the family can be successful if all family members carry out their roles and responsibilities as individuals involved in catechesis (Arianto, 2020). They do not set an example through prayer and practice the Catholic Faith daily (Sitepu, 2020). This situation raises concerns about the quality of religious education and the preparation of children to understand and live their faith daily. To address this alarming problem, the Indonesian Church in several parishes focuses on improving the quality of children's faith education. Some previous studies, such as those conducted by Edy Jumrio (2021), Kurniadi et al. (2022), Liwun (2021), and Sogen et al. (2021), have identified and documented substantial efforts made by several parishes to improve children's faith education. The study shows that these parishes implement a variety of programs and initiatives designed to address the challenges faced in teaching the faith to children. Including the Java Region, the Catechesis Commission has also published a tiered catechesis module (Java Region Catechetical Commission Team, 2018).

The Parish of Mary was lifted to Heaven in Malang (Paroki Maria Diangkat ke Surga Malang) constructs a holistic first communion preparation faith program to enhance children's faith formation by actively involving them. In this program, a holistic approach is used as a comprehensive educational approach and harmonizes the development of all individual aspects, including physical, intellectual, emotional, social, and spiritual (Ma'arif & Rusydi, 2020). The holistic approach seeks to develop the individual, paying attention to the balance and interconnectedness between different aspects of life. The goal is to produce individuals who are balanced, empowered, and able to function optimally in various life contexts. In a holistic approach, emphasis is placed not only on the achievement of cognitive aspects alone but also on the development of social, emotional, creative, ethical, and spiritual skills (Nugroho, 2017). This approach emphasizes the importance of paying attention to individual needs and potential and recognizes that personal development is not limited to cognitive domains alone.

A holistic approach to children's faith education involves families working together to provide consistent and ongoing education (Ulfah, 2019). Active involvement and collaboration between parents and the parish church are crucial to creating a supportive environment for children's spiritual development. Parents and catechists are particularly important in preparing children for their first communion, helping them grasp the sacrament's significance in their lives. It underscores the shared responsibility of shaping children's faith among families, parish churches, and catechists. A holistic approach aims to facilitate optimal development in various life aspects, foster an understanding of the intricate relationship between individuals and their environment, and equip them with the skills to navigate life's challenges effectively.

This study aims to evaluate and improve the quality of children's faith formation through preparation for receiving First Communion at the Parish of the Assumption of Mary Diocese of Malang. In addition, it seeks to identify factors that can improve the quality of children's faith education. By assessing current catechesis practices that still tend to be instructional and teaching, this study seeks to offer valuable insights to improve children's faith formation. It aims to provide actionable recommendations that parishes and stakeholders can implement. Ultimately, this research aims to contribute to developing more effective and relevant faith education practices that strengthen children's faith and spiritual growth as they prepare for First Communion in the Parish. Evaluation of the implementation of the First Communion preparation children's faith education program is necessary to ensure its effectiveness and relevance in helping children understand, internalize, and practice their Catholic faith. Identifying factors contributing to improving the quality of children's faith education can help parishes and stakeholders develop better practices in imparting religious teachings.

The study assumed that a holistic approach in first communion preparation catechesis would significantly improve the quality of children's faith compared to traditional or instructional approaches. The hypothesis is supported by the belief that a holistic approach will pay attention not only to cognitive aspects but also to the development of children's social, emotional, creativity, ethical, and spiritual skills, which in turn will result in individuals who are more balanced, empowered, and able to function optimally in a variety of life contexts. In addition, the secondary assumes that active parental involvement, support from the parish community, and preparation of first communion tailored to the specific needs of children will be important factors in the success of this holistic approach. Thus, this study aims to investigate the effectiveness of a holistic approach in improving children's understanding and practice of faith and the factors influencing its implementation in a parish context.

Catechesis is an important aspect of a child's faith development. Parishes as places of worship and religious education significantly shape the character and faith of children. Faith education in the Catholic Church is known as "catechesis," which comes from the Greek word *κατήχησις* (oral instruction). Later, the word was used by Christians as a special term to preach the gospel (Rukiyanto, 2017). The catechesis of preparation for first communion is one of the efforts to improve the quality of faith education of children in the parish.

Catechesis for preparing First Communion for children is very important because it is one of the efforts to instill a foundation of faith in parish-based children. Although conducted on a parish basis, parents play an important role in preparing for their children's first communion (Araujo et al., 2022; Tjahaja & Dadi, 2022). First Communion is an event primarily concerned with religious significance. The celebration of First Communion, generally held once a year in every parish, is a common event involving all parishioners (Delay, 2021). Receiving first communion becomes a momentum in the child's faith formation journey. This event became a memory that would accompany them from the days following the First Communion ceremony. It will remain inherent throughout the new phase of their lives that begins at this vital moment (Alfieri, 2022).

Momentum of First communion is when a person receives the sacrament of the Eucharist for the first time. When a person receives communion, the experience of union with God through His self-giving occurs. This process is perfected through Christ being present or bestowed upon the individual (Martasudjita, 2013). The Eucharist, or Holy Communion, is believed and proven to be a source of strength and inspiration that encourages and enlivens the daily lives of Christians. The celebration of the Eucharist is also seen as the direction and goal of every activity in the daily life of the faithful (Ardijanto, 2020). Through the Eucharistic meal, the Church's union with Christ makes possible a change in Christ's character, values, and teachings (Astuty, 2022). The Eucharist is the culmination and core of the entire life of faith because it contains the whole mystery of God's salvation, which is believed and celebrated continuously by the Church (Raharjo & Ngantung, 2020). This profound meaning is reflected in offering gifts, demonstrating our commitment to offering ourselves to Christ. In a beautiful gesture of reciprocity, Christ incorporates this act of providing into His offering to the Father, as we commemorate in the prayer of thanksgiving (Benini, 2024).

Methods

The research method used in this study is the quantitative method. The purpose of this method is to collect data that can be measured numerically and analyze it statistically to get an objective picture of the quality of children's faith education through the preparation of the First Communion catechesis in the Paroki Maria Diangkat ke Surga Keuskupan in Malang city. The study respondents comprised 23 parents or guardians of children preparing for First Communion in the parish. The selection of respondents for the study was carried out carefully. Respondents were selected based on criteria relevant to the purpose of the study, namely the parents of the participants who received the first communion candidate in 2023. Focus on parents' experiences with children who will attend first communion that year, so the number of respondents is limited to this specific group. Although the number of respondents was limited to 23 parents, this sample was considered to provide valuable insights according to the purpose of the study.

Data was collected through a survey using the Google Form application distributed via WhatsApp to parent groups of First Communion candidates in 2023. Google Forms

was chosen for its ease of use, wide accessibility, and ability to collect data in an easy-to-analyze format automatically. In addition, Google Forms has been proven to produce consistent and trustworthy data in various studies. This survey collects parents' views and assessments of the quality of faith education provided in the first communion preparation program. The survey questions cover multiple aspects, such as catechesis materials, teaching methods, parental involvement, and the program's benefits for children's faith development. The collected data is then analyzed using descriptive statistical methods. Frequency calculations determine how often certain answers appear in a survey. The percentage indicates the proportion of a particular answer out of the total respondents. In addition, averages are calculated to give an idea of the average value of respondents' assessments of various aspects of the first communion preparation program. The results of this data analysis are interpreted to answer the objectives and questions of the study. The significant findings from the analysis are discussed in depth and linked to the existing relevant literature. It provides a deeper understanding of the quality of children's faith formation in the context of the first communion preparation program in the Parish of Our Lady of the Assumption Diocese of Malang.

Results and Discussion

Result

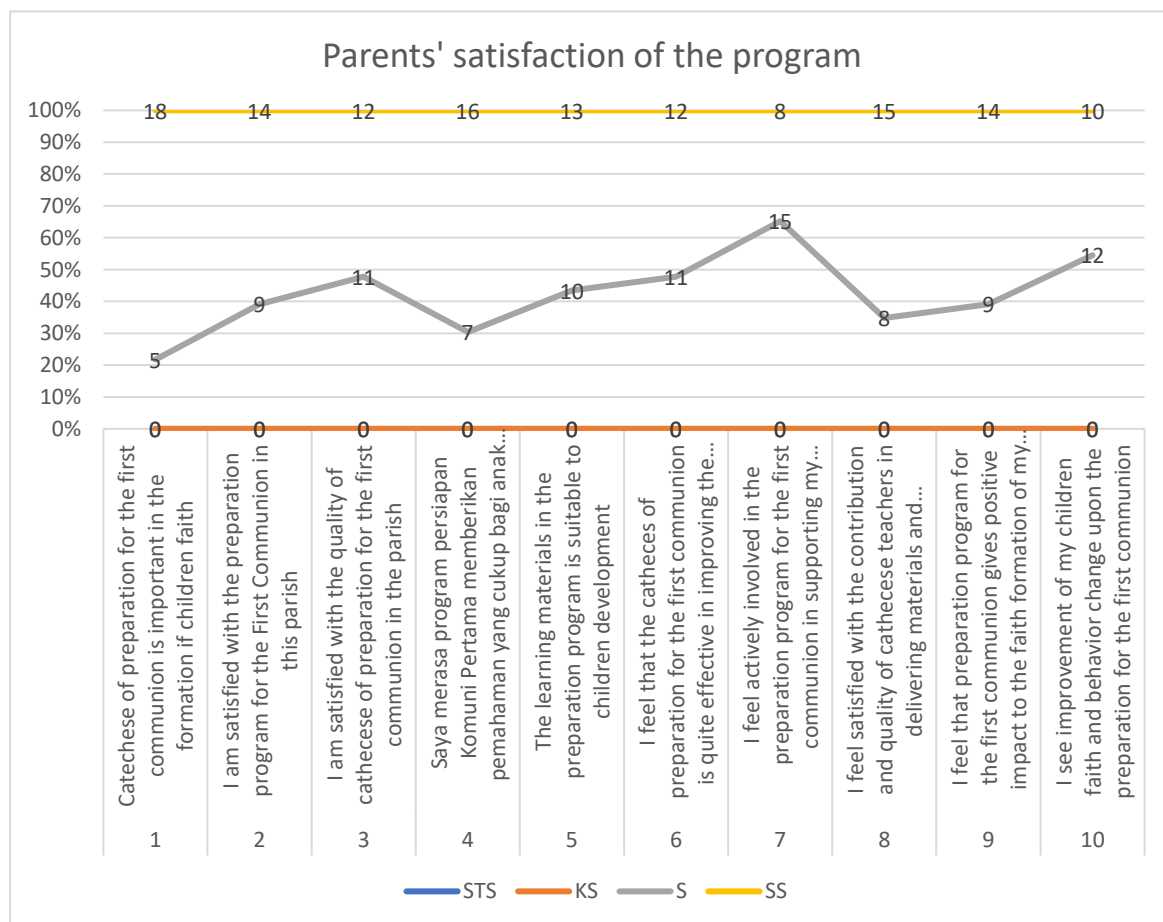


Figure 1. Parental Satisfaction with the Implementation of the First Communion Preparation Program

Based on figure 1, the results of surveys to parents, catechesis preparation for first communion is very important in improving the quality of children's faith education. A

total of 18 or 78% of respondents agreed that catechesis to prepare for first communion is very important in improving the quality of children's faith education. In addition, 61% or 14 respondents expressed satisfaction with the First Communion preparation program held in the parish.

As many as 12 or 52% of respondents expressed satisfaction with the quality of catechesis to prepare for the first communion held in the parish. These results suggest that the quality of catechesis in preparation for first communion should continue to be improved to provide more significant benefits to children.

From the survey results, 16 or 70% of respondents felt that the First Communion preparation program gave their children an adequate understanding of the teachings of the Catholic Church. In addition, 13 or 57% of respondents stated that the material taught in the First Communion preparation program was appropriate for the child's developmental stage.

The effectiveness of catechesis in preparing for first communion was crucial for this study. 12 or 52% of respondents felt that catechesis to prepare for first communion effectively increased children's understanding of the Catholic Faith. These results suggest that First Communion preparation programs must continue to be improved to benefit children more significantly.

Parental involvement in the First Communion preparation program was also the focus of this study. As many as 18 or 78% of respondents felt they had been actively involved in a First Communion preparation program supporting their child's faith education. It shows that parental involvement significantly improves the quality of children's faith education.

The role and quality of catechist teachers are also concerns that are no less important in this study. As many as 14 or 61% of respondents were satisfied with the role and quality of catechist teachers in delivering material and directing children in the First Communion preparation program. The results showed that the role and quality of catechists need to be continuously improved to provide more significant benefits for children.

From the survey results, 12 or 52% of respondents felt that the First Communion preparation program positively impacted faith development. In addition, 16 or 70% of respondents stated that they noticed faith development and behavior changes in their children after preparation for First Communion. For example, a child who attends the First Communion preparation program begins to pray more diligently, enjoys helping others, and goes to Church more diligently after receiving first communion. It shows that participation in religious practices such as First Communion can positively impact the development of children's faith and character.

Discussion

This research aligns with Weaver's (2021) research, which shows that preparation for First Communion can positively impact children's faith development. Therefore, efforts need to be made to improve the First Communion preparation program's quality to provide better benefits for children in developing their Catholic Faith.

A strongly felt contributing factor was the cooperation of all parties, parish priests, catechists or trainers, parents, ward leaders, and all parishioners in their way, as stated by Littleton. (2018). The Church believes that Christ is manifestly present in the form of consecrated bread and wine, based on the teachings of Jesus. The Church preserves and bequeaths this faith to the faithful through her Magisterium. In every Eucharistic

celebration, this faith is celebrated, and Christ is manifestly present in the form of consecrated bread and wine.

However, this lack of knowledge and understanding of faith often keeps some believers unaware of Christ's true presence. Therefore, the faithful need to be aware that Christ is present in the likeness of consecrated Bread and Wine so that they can live their participation in the liturgical celebration more deeply. The concept of the Church as the 'body of Christ' expressed in several passages of the Bible, such as 1 Corinthians 12, Romans 12:1-8, Colossians 1:18, and Ephesians 4:1-16, strengthens this cooperation by emphasizing interconnectedness and interdependence between church members, such as the relationship between different parts of the human body. Jesus welcomes a child (Matthew 18:2), indicating that children also belong to faith families that explore the child's active participation as part of the ongoing life of the faith community (Holmes, 2021).

The data results illustrate that most (98%) respondents were satisfied with the First Communion preparation program held in the parish. Respondents considered it important to improve the quality of children's faith formation and saw a positive impact on their children's faith and behavior development. These data show that the program significantly influences parents' views on their children's faith development. As stated by Gillespie (2018), for devout Catholics, believing in the Presence of Christ in the Blessed Sacrament is a motivation to move forward in attending the Divine Presence. In this context, no matter how small, each movement can be considered as participation in the pilgrim's journey and destination towards a religious shrine.

The effectiveness of catechesis, parental involvement, the role and quality of catechists/trainers, and the positive impact on faith development are important aspects that must be considered in a first communion preparation program. As affirmed by Dziejewicki (2022), the more parents have a close personal relationship with God and feel His presence and love in daily life, the clearer it becomes to them that introducing children to God is the greatest gift that can be given to them. It is the best policy for their life here and in eternal life. In introducing children to God, they are directed to a close, loving, warm, and tender relationship with God. Supporting factors, such as the cooperation of all parties, are also considered in improving the quality of program implementation. All these efforts aim to provide more significant benefits for children in strengthening their Catholic Faith (Araujo et al., 2022).

First and foremost, forming faith in children is a responsibility that every parent has as an educator. It is consistent with O'Collins' assertion that when parents and catechists have a vivid imagination, they can go beyond conceptually expressing what Catholics believe, worship, and behave (O'Collins 2021). They can also be more successful in their prophetic role in teaching and guiding the teaching Church community.

In preparing children for First Communion, paying attention to the ideas expressed in the document *Catechesi Tradendae* (CT, 68) regarding the role of catechesis in the family is necessary. Families should be more active in faith formation by creating a home environment encouraging learning and discussion about faith. The responsibility of the Christian family is to participate actively and responsibly in the mission of the Church through their unique and authentic presence and contribution as a loving community serving the Church and society (Tjahaja & Dadi, 2022).

Through various approaches, the parish strives to create an educational environment that supports and strengthens children to grow into individuals who are militant in the Catholic faith and ready to face future spiritual challenges. In addition, some parishes also

organize extra activities, such as retreats, small group meetings, and social services, aimed at strengthening children's faith and integrating religious values into their daily lives (Aryanto & Lelono, 2021; Habur, 2018; Kurniati et al., 2020; Paska et al., 2016; Priyanto., 2017; Wilhemus, 2018).

From the outset, the Church employed Contemporary Catechesis for faith education (Kallon, 2022). The implementation of catechesis has long been deemed crucial within the Church, as Jesus instructed His Apostles before ascending to teach all nations His doctrine (Budiono et al., 2022). A parish serves as a hub for faithful interaction and learning about their faith, as confirmed by Church Law defining it as "a special community of Christians" under the authority of the parish priest (Canon 515. 1). Parish catechesis facilitates formation for all faithful, aiding their understanding of Church doctrine and fostering active Christian witness (Suwito, 2021).

Catechesis assumes that the person being taught is interested in triggering their early conversion, readiness, and tendency to dig deeper into their faith, ultimately resulting in concrete actions in their daily lives (Sultana, 2020). Catechesis has traditionally been associated with a community of faith, where the practice of belief occurs within that community's context. A catechesis is a form or stage of evangelization efforts to educate the faith addressed to children, youth, and adults. This catechesis includes teaching the doctrine of the Christian Faith thoroughly and regularly, with an integrated and structured approach (Raharso, 2018). The First Communion Preparation Catechesis is a program to help parents educate and develop their children's faith.

Catechesis for First Communion significantly influences children's faith development (Weaver, 2021), necessitating special preparation for receiving it in the Catholic Church in Poland (Lipiec, 2022). Parishioner involvement enhances the quality of children's faith education, aiding in developing their religious identity and positive youth development through religiosity and spirituality (Vaclavik et al., 2020). Engagement in Catholic social activities fosters bonds among children, parents, and the parish community, creating an environment supportive of spiritual growth and providing real-life examples of strong Catholic faith.

The First Communion catechesis is crucial for children to grasp the Eucharist's significance, teaching them about Jesus' supper and the sacrament's nourishing and comforting aspects. It also introduces them to personal prayer, sacramental observance, Penance's meaning, and deeper Eucharistic understanding. Direct experience allows children to sense Christ's presence and deepen their faith. However, some Catholics' awareness of this presence may not align with official Church doctrine teaching (Raharjo & Ngantung, 2020; Zatwardnicki, 2021).

Parish catechesis emphasizes introducing children to the Eucharist, teaching prayer, Mass participation, and confession before First Communion. It adheres to Catholic Church requirements, ensuring children possess adequate knowledge of Christ's mystery before partaking in Holy Communion. Catechesis is integral to this approach, fostering faith growth through progressive experiences and enhancing children's faith knowledge (Alfieri, 2022; Littleton, 2018).

Conclusion

The preparation and reception of First Communion have profound impacts on children's behavior and spiritual development. First Communion plays a crucial role in shaping children's religious identity by strengthening their bond with God and the

Catholic Church and instilling a commitment to living a life of faith and service. Participation in religious practices such as First Communion can guide young believers toward better spiritual growth and moral development. The impact of First Communion extend beyond the individual to their families and communities. As children grow in understanding and practicing their faith through First Communion, they become role models, inspiring others to deepen their relationship with God. The communal aspect of faith formation through First Communion strengthens bonds within the Catholic community and promotes a sense of unity and shared values among believers. Its impact shapes the spiritual lives of children and influences the wider Catholic community for many years.

Reflecting on the importance of receiving First Communion, individuals often consider its lasting impact on their lives. This experience builds an ongoing relationship with God, nurtured through active involvement in spiritual practices. As individuals continue to deepen their faith, they navigate life's challenges with strength and grace, knowing God is always with them. This journey of spiritual growth may be challenging, but it is rewarding because it brings the fruits of faithfulness and devotion into their lives and around them.

As individuals continue to walk in faith and trust God's plan, they find inner peace that transcends human understanding. This peace allows them to face each day with confidence and hope, knowing that God works all things for their good. In a deep and lasting relationship with the Creator, they experience the joy and freedom found only through solid faith and an inseparable bond with God.

Despite the insights gained from this study, it has limitations. The small sample size and focus on one parish limit the generalizability of the findings. The results are based on the subjective perceptions and opinions of parents, which may not accurately reflect the experiences of all families. Therefore, further research is needed to provide a more comprehensive understanding.

This study contributes to developing more effective and relevant practices of catechesis or faith education to strengthen the faith and spiritual growth of children in preparation for First Communion in the Parish of the Assumption of Mary Diocese of Malang.

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