

Human-Centered Pastoral Governance in the Digital Era: Learning from Sacramental Administration in an Indonesian Catholic Parish

¹Simon P. Wenehenubun, ²Yohanes Langgar Billy, ³Ferry Doringin

^{1,2,3}Universitas Multimedia Nusantara, Banten, Indonesia

Abstract. Catholic dioceses across the globe generally face a core governance contradiction: balancing administrative accountability and empathetic pastoral care. Sacrament management is not only a core pillar that maintains the Church's organizational order, but also shapes believers' perceptions of the Church's pastoral mission. This study takes a Catholic diocese in Indonesia as its research subject, adopts an interpretivist qualitative case study method, and recruits interviewees covering clergy, catechists, parish council members, parents, and active parishioners. It collects data through a combination of semi-structured interviews and documentary analysis, to explore the diocese's stakeholders' perceptions of pastoral decisions related to sacrament management, as well as the organizational factors that can strengthen community trust. The study finds that stakeholders' acceptance of pastoral decisions relies far more on five types of relational practices—including compassionate communication, participatory discernment, contextual administrative flexibility, relational accompaniment, and restorative community dialogue—than on administrative outcomes. These practices can foster institutional trust, and turn administrative processes into opportunities for organizational learning. This study originally proposes a people-centered pastoral governance framework with five core dimensions, restructures the governance attributes of sacrament management, and provides a transferable framework for cultivating leadership and community trust for all types of faith-based organizations.

Keywords: pastoral governance, sacramental administration, pastoral care, communication, community dialogue

1. INTRODUCTION

Religious faith-based organizations currently face a widespread core governance challenge: they must implement administrative accountability to safeguard transparency, consistency, and organizational coordination, while retaining their core pastoral attributes centered on empathy and community service. Contemporary governance evaluation standards no longer only

measure procedural compliance; they also assess core capabilities such as trust cultivation [1], [2]

This paper proposes that sacramental administration is the core pastoral governance model of Catholic parishes. It not only has procedural administrative attributes including catechetical preparation, record registration and archiving, and liturgy scheduling, but also serves as the key intersection between ecclesiastical systems and believers' spiritual journeys. Its administrative decisions are never purely technical processes; the method of communicating these decisions shapes community trust just as much as the decisions themselves [3], [4], [5]

This study originated from a case in an anonymous Catholic diocese in Indonesia concerning the administration of the sacrament of confirmation. What began solely as an administrative decision conflict impacting the sacrament preparation process later developed into three distinct organizational problems: communication, participation, and pastoral accompaniment. This study rejects framing the case as a sample of institutional dispute, and it does not judge the rationality of any individual's decisions. Instead, it analyzes the sensemaking of pastoral governance among five groups of diocesan stakeholders, positioning the case as an interpretive case for organizational learning.

In recent years, research on pastoral leadership, canon law, and the collegial governance of episcopal conferences within Catholic studies has expanded significantly. There is a severe lack of empirical research, focused on Southeast Asian Catholic communities, that frames sacramental administration as a people-centered governance process. Existing studies only discuss sacramental ministry from theological and canon law perspectives, overlooking multiple core dimensions. Reposition of sacramental administration is a form of governance embedded in complex social relationships [6], [7].

This study adopts an interpretivist qualitative case study approach, with Catholic parishes in Indonesia as its research setting. Through interviews and documentary analysis, the study explores the perceptions of multiple internal stakeholders regarding pastoral decision-making related to sacrament management, examines the impacts of four core elements—communication, empathy, participation, and dialogue, and puts forward a people-centered pastoral governance framework that integrates five core dimensions. This framework reframes sacrament management as an organizational learning process, supplements three strands of interdisciplinary literature, and also provides a transferable practical framework for diverse church contexts.

2. METHOD

This study adopts an interpretivist qualitative case study approach, uses an anonymized Catholic diocese in Indonesia as its research setting, focuses on stakeholders involved in sacrament management, and explores their experiences and perceptions of pastoral governance. Drawing on the methodological conclusions of [8], interpretivism fits this study's goal of uncovering participants' sense-making. Following the standards, this study does not pursue statistical generalization, and only achieves analytical generalization that can be transferred to similar faith organizations [9].

This study adopted purposive sampling to capture diverse perspectives on sacrament management. A total of 25 participants from five groups, including clergy, catechists, parish council members, parents, and active parishioners, were recruited for the research. Thematic sufficiency was set as the criterion for terminating data collection. All personal and institutional identities were anonymized, and the study strictly complied with established research ethics norms.

This study collected data using two methods: semi-structured interviews and literature analysis. The interview was carried out around four core topics including decision-making in pastoral regions. Documents such as parish administrative guidelines were incorporated to supplement contextual background and support triangulation. Only formal official documents and participants' narratives were included in the analysis; private digital communications were excluded, so as to maintain methodological consistency and reduce ethical risks.

For the qualitative data analysis of this study, we adopted the six-phase reflexive thematic [5], [10]. We first repeatedly reviewed interview transcripts and existing literature to familiarize ourselves with the data, generated initial codes, and outlined broad patterns of the experiences of pastoral region governance organizations. We refined core themes that focus on the impacts of communication, empathy, participation, and dialogue on community trust and perceptions of decision-making in pastoral regions. Throughout the entire analysis process, we compiled reflexive memos to ensure the rigor of our analytical work.

To enhance the credibility of its conclusions, this study strictly adheres to the trustworthiness criteria for qualitative research proposed by Lincoln & Guba in 1985. It secures credibility via triangulation of interview data and documentary sources, and member checking; maintains a complete audit trail to support the relevant trustworthiness attributes; and provides a detailed description of the parish context to enable readers to assess the transferability of its conclusions to similar pastoral ministry settings.

This study is a sensitive religion-related research project focused on pastoral regions and the researchers followed the ethical procedures. All names of individuals, parishes, and dioceses have been replaced with pseudonyms, and all identifiable information has been removed from all types of research materials. The core aim of this study is to explore the organizational learning processes that underpin people-centered governance of pastoral regions, and this research does not evaluate the decisions of any single pastoral region leader or institution.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study finds that all participants view sacrament management as a relational process that conveys the church's pastoral identity, rather than a mere administrative procedure. While participants acknowledge the order-sustaining function of administrative rules, the core quality of pastoral governance is reflected in dimensions such as communication, and the study will subsequently develop four interrelated analytical themes.

3.1. Compassionate Communication as the Foundation of Pastoral Governance

This study finds that, across all surveyed groups, communication is the core factor shaping herders' perceptions of governance. Sufficient communication earns ready acceptance of governance efforts, while most misunderstandings arise from inadequate communication rather than the decisions themselves [11], [12].

The findings of this study support the core claims of the classic collaborative governance, which positions transparent communication as central to legitimacy and trust. In the context of faith-based organizations, communication additionally fulfills the functions of pastoral care and institutional accountability, and these observations are also corroborated by church leadership research [1]

The qualitative interviewees of this study proposed that, contrary to the traditional perception which classifies communication as an auxiliary administrative activity, compassionate communication is the core mechanism that endows organizational processes with meaning and wins recognition in pastoral settings.

3.2 Empathy and Relational Accompaniment Strengthen Community Trust

The second core theme extracted from this study holds that empathy is critically important within the sacrament preparation process, and that distinguishing between administrative implementation and pastoral accompaniment, as well as attending to individuals' circumstances and family experiences, can improve acceptance of the relevant decisions.

The core findings of this study support that public governance must balance procedural consistency and responsiveness to human needs. They also align with the governance logic of church pastoral care that prioritizes accompaniment. Drawing on these frameworks, this study deduces that the research participants define empathy as an organizational capacity that sustains the ties between individuals and their parish in pastoral contexts, rather than a mere form of administrative flexibility [13].

This study finds that relational companionship can reduce feelings of exclusion among religious believers, rebuild their church identity, and directly drive improvements in trust within church communities.

3.3 Participatory Dialogue Enhances Decision Acceptance

Participants in this qualitative study of diocesan pastoral decision-making universally requested that clergy, catechists, parish council members, parents, and active parishioners be included in the communication and decision-making processes. While they respect the diocese's formal authority, they only hold greater confidence in decisions when the process includes dialogue, consultation, and mutual understanding [2].

The respondents of this study had no expectation that administrative decisions could satisfy all stakeholders individually. Their core demand was that a transparent process, which respects and incorporates input from diverse perspectives, be established prior to the public announcement of any decision. Our inference is that the significant positive effect of procedural

participation on organizational acceptance operates independently of specific administrative outcomes.

3.4 Human-Centered Pastoral Governance as Organizational Learning

By synthesizing all survey data, this study finds that the core contribution of this parish management case does not lie in administrative events, but in the organizational learning it stimulated. All interviewees confirmed that this process drove improvements in communication, collaboration, and pastoral care competencies [14].

Building upon these findings, this study proposes the Human-Centered Pastoral Governance Framework consisting of five mutually reinforcing dimensions:

- a. Compassionate Communication, ensuring that organisational decisions are communicated with clarity and pastoral sensitivity;
- b. Participatory Discernment, encouraging meaningful stakeholder involvement throughout decision-making processes;
- c. Contextual Administrative Flexibility, allowing procedures to be implemented while remaining attentive to pastoral realities;
- d. Relational Accompaniment, strengthening trust through continuous pastoral presence and support;
- e. Restorative Community Dialogue, facilitating reconciliation, organisational learning, and long-term community cohesion.

4. CONCLUSION

This study proposes that the Church's sacramental administration does not merely fulfill a single administrative function, but constitutes a people-centered governance process. This study conducted research at an anonymous Indonesian Catholic parish in Indonesia, and finds that the public's acceptance of pastoral decision-making is shaped by five interrelated dimensions: compassionate communication, participatory discernment, contextual administrative flexibility, relational accompaniment, and restorative community dialogue. Finally, this study puts forward an original Human-Centered Pastoral Governance Factors, which covers five interrelated dimensions of effective pastoral governance.

This study moves beyond the limitations of parish-specific contexts, redefining sacrament administration as a form of governance for faith-based organizations, and strengthens institutional trust by prioritizing relationships rather than only relying on operational procedures. Though this research draws solely on a single case, its analytical framework can be applied to studies of pastoral leadership and governance for all types of religious organizations. Upholding a people-centered approach is the only way to sustain community trust and organizational legitimacy [7], [15].

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