

Portrait of Friendship among Catholic Youth: A Preparatory Step toward Catholic Marriage at *St. Fransiskus Asisi Laverna Gunungsitoli* and *Kristus Gembala Baik* Parishes

Kristiana Mendrofa¹, Dominikus Doni Ola¹, Alexius Poto Obe¹, Kenneth C. Masong², Maniati Gea¹

¹STP Dian Mandala Gunungsitoli, Indonesia

²Ateneo de Manila University, Philippines

krimendrofaa@stpdianmandala.ac.id, donioladominikus@stpdianmandala.ac.id, alexobelexi@yahoo.co.id, kmasong@ateneo.edu, maniatigea@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzes friendship among Catholic Youth (Orang Muda Katolik—OMK in Bahasa Indonesia) as a crucial factor in forming emotional, spiritual, and social readiness for Catholic marriage. The qualitative study was conducted in two parishes—St. Fransiskus Asisi Laverna Gunungsitoli and Kristus Gembala Baik—using in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. The findings indicate that healthy, value-based friendships within the Catholic Youth community contribute significantly to fostering responsible relationships as a foundation for marriage. Key aspects supporting relational maturity include trust, open communication, mutual respect, and active participation in religious activities. These factors reinforce the psychosocial aspects necessary for building stable and meaningful relationships before entering into marriage. This study highlights the need for a more systematic approach by the Church in integrating friendship development into premarital preparation programs, particularly in pastoral care for Catholic youth. Thus, friendship is not merely a social experience but serves as a pathway toward a holy and committed family life. Further research is encouraged to explore how faith-based education can strengthen friendships as a foundation for mature relationships.

1. Introduction

Friendship is a fundamental and universal human relationship, with strong roots in classical philosophy and Christian theology. Aristotle, in *Nicomachean Ethics*, divides friendship into three categories, emphasizing that true friendship is based on virtue and the desire to support each other altruistically (Brennan., 2022). In the Catholic tradition, friendship holds a deeper spiritual dimension, as taught by Saint Augustine and Saint Thomas Aquinas, who saw it as a means of sanctifying oneself and others. For Catholic Youth (Orang Muda Katolik—OMK in Bahasa Indonesia), friendship is not just a form of social interaction but also a vehicle for faith growth, integrated with Gospel values such as love, forgiveness, and service. In line with the spirit of *communio*, which is the hallmark of the Church, relationships among community members reflect the dynamics of the Trinity in mutually sustaining love, thereby strengthening both the spiritual and social dimensions of the life of faith (Finn, 2023).

The Catholic Youth community serves as a forum that supports the formation of authentic friendships among young people, allowing them to deepen their faith while strengthening social relations. Various activities such as retreats, Bible studies, liturgical services, and social actions are not only means of spiritual learning but also spaces to form meaningful bonds of

brotherhood (Reynaldo & Wuriningsih, 2024). Pope John Paul II, in *Christifideles Laici*, emphasized that young people have a calling to be salt and light in the world—realized, among other ways, through close communion within the ecclesial community (Pope John Paul II., 1988).

The friendships formed in the Catholic Youth community have a deeper dimension than mere social interaction, as they are based on Gospel values such as love, forgiveness, and service. Relationships built through shared spiritual experiences not only create emotional and spiritual closeness but also train interpersonal skills that are important for future family life. When Catholic Youth engage in service missions, they naturally learn values such as mutual support, sacrifice, and open communication—essential qualities in a faith-based marriage relationship (Nugroho & Firmanto, 2021).

Although friendship in the Catholic Youth community plays a role in character formation and spiritual maturity, not all dynamics that develop are always in line with Catholic values. One of the main challenges is the emergence of exclusive groups that tend to marginalize other members, contrary to the principles of inclusivity and unity taught by the Church (Pratama & Tedjoworo, 2023). In addition, some friendships among Catholic Youth are more oriented toward social dimensions without sufficient deepening of faith, and therefore do not provide meaningful spiritual growth for their members.

Furthermore, uncontrolled emotional closeness can lead to unhealthy dependency or even morally ambiguous relationships. The Catechism of the Catholic Church emphasizes the importance of maintaining friendships within healthy boundaries so that relationships remain oriented toward Christian values and uphold personal integrity (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2015). True friendship should be a means of building each other up in faith, not a barrier to one's spiritual development.

This phenomenon underlines the need for more intensive pastoral care within the Catholic Youth community. The Church needs to pay special attention to guiding young people to understand the meaning of friendship in the context of true faith. With a holistic approach, including deeper faith education and moral formation, Catholic Youth can develop healthy, responsible relationships that are in accordance with Church teachings.

Healthy friendships in the Catholic Youth community play a crucial role in shaping the readiness of young people for a strong Catholic marriage (Kornelia et al., 2023). Based on Christian values, friendship becomes a space for individuals to develop mature character, such as patience, humility, and responsibility—essential qualities in family life. In addition, through ongoing interaction, young people are trained in effective communication and constructive conflict resolution, as studies show that these skills are key factors in harmonious and sustainable marriages.

More than just a social relationship, friendship in the Catholic Youth community that is rooted in faith helps young people refine their motivation in building relationships. They are invited to understand the difference between true love that is giving (agape) and momentary attraction (eros), so that they can build more meaningful and responsible relationships. This maturity not only contributes to personal relationships but also becomes a valuable provision for entering into marriage in accordance with the teachings of the Church (Pope Francis, 2019).

Studies show that friendship in the Catholic Youth community plays a significant role in the formation of couples who continue their relationships toward marriage in the Catholic Church. Data from various parishes indicate that many couples first met through categorical activities or spiritual movements, which provide a strong foundation for marriage—especially in terms of a shared vision and mission of faith. Interaction in this community allows them to get to know each other in an environment that supports spiritual growth, so they are better prepared to face the dynamics of married life (Pope Francis., 2016a). In addition, the

friendships formed in the Catholic Youth community also offer benefits in the form of a positive social network, where the community functions as a support system in facing household challenges, helping couples maintain Christian values in their family life.

The Catholic Church views the development of friendship among Catholic Youth as a positive phenomenon, especially when it is directed toward the formation of families based on faith (Pope John Paul II, 1981). Various forms of assistance are provided to ensure that friendship contributes to mature marriage readiness, such as the Pra-Cana program, which helps couples prepare for marriage holistically, as well as the Church's social teachings, which emphasize the importance of friendship as part of forming responsible relationships (Pope Francis, 2016). In addition, various movements such as Couples for Christ and Focolare provide space for former Catholic Youth who have married to continue growing in their life of faith, strengthening the awareness that friendship within the community serves as a spiritual foundation toward a sacramental Catholic marriage (Riyanto et al., 2021).

Ultimately, the portrait of friendship among Catholic Youth offers an encouraging picture of Catholic marriage preparation in the modern era (Pope John Paul II, 1981). When built healthily and imbued with Catholic values, friendship in the Catholic Youth community is not only a means of individual faith growth but also a natural laboratory for learning the kinds of relationships that will be needed in marriage (Pope Francis., 2019). The Church, through its various programs and teachings, ensures that the dynamics of this friendship remain within the right framework while also providing accompaniment (guidance) so that it can bear fruit in strong Catholic families. Thus, the Catholic Youth community not only plays a role as a place for fostering the faith of young people but also becomes a fertile seedbed for prospective married couples who are ready to live out the vocation of marriage in a complete and holy way.

2. Method

This study uses a qualitative method with a case study approach to explore the meaning of friendship among Catholic Youth as a preparatory step toward Catholic marriage. The case study approach was chosen because it provides an in-depth exploration of the lived experiences within the Catholic Youth community, particularly in the parishes of St. Fransiskus Asisi Laverna Gunungsitoli and Kristus Gembala Baik (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Data were collected through participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and analysis of pastoral activity documentation. The study participants consisted of 10 Catholic Youth members, 5 Catholic married couples, 2 parish priests, and 2 Catholic Youth assistants or leaders from each parish. Data validity was strengthened by a triangulation strategy that combined individual perspectives, pastoral experiences, and community dynamics.

Data analysis was conducted thematically through the stages of reduction, categorization, and drawing conclusions, taking into account socio-cultural dimensions and local pastoral contexts. The findings of this study are expected to contribute to the development of categorical pastoral care for Catholic Youth, particularly in premarital guidance based on Christian friendship relationships. Through this approach, the study seeks to identify key elements that shape friendship in the Catholic Youth community and how these relationships can become the foundation for a married life that aligns with Catholic values.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Understanding Friendship in Catholic Teachings

Friendship is an interpersonal relationship based on the principles of mutual respect, support, and helping one another in social life (Matitaputty, 2021). In the context of Catholic Youth, friendship not only functions as a form of social interaction but also serves as a means

of building faith and spirituality that reflect the love and teachings of Christ in everyday life. The concept of friendship in the Catholic tradition is often associated with a transcendent dimension that goes beyond ordinary social relationships. Saint Augustine defines friendship as "unity of hearts in the love of God" (Pope John Paul II, 2006), emphasizing that true friendship must be based on loyalty, support in the life of faith, and the ability to guide each other toward a more meaningful life. Thus, friendship in the Catholic Youth community plays an important role in the formation of moral and spiritual character, as well as a foundation for deeper relationships in both religious and social life.

Friendship in the life of Catholic Youth is not merely a form of social interaction but also a calling to contribute to the mission of the Church and the growth of faith. These relationships play a crucial role in the formation of Christian character, rooted in *agape* love—sincere and selfless love as taught in the Gospel (cf. Matt. 22:39). The essence of healthy friendship within the Catholic Youth community lies in trust and honesty, which form the foundation for mutual support in both social and spiritual dimensions. Through these values, friendships are strengthened and inspire active involvement in Church life, including attending Mass, participating in Catholic Youth activities, and praying together as expressions of faith and unity.

Agape love in the friendships of Catholic Youth serves as a foundational force in nurturing faith grounded in unconditional love, as expressed in the Gospel of John 15:12–13: “This is my commandment: Love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.” Friendships rooted in divine love enable individuals to support one another in spiritual growth, share experiences of faith, and live out Christ’s teachings in daily life (Kornelia et al., 2023). More than social bonding, *agape* love inspires Catholic Youth to remain steadfast in facing personal, communal, and spiritual challenges, fostering a spirit of solidarity anchored in Gospel values. In this way, friendships grounded in true love encourage young Catholics to embody their faith through concrete actions such as forgiveness, generosity, and service—tangible expressions of God’s love in the world (Kornelia et al., 2023).

3.2. Role of Friendship in the Formation of Moral in a Community

Friendship plays a crucial role in forming the moral fabric of a community, serving as a natural conduit for the exchange of values, the formation of character, and the reinforcement of social norms (Biss, 2019). From a philosophical perspective, Aristotle emphasized that friendship based on virtue not only benefits individuals but also serves as the foundation for the creation of a civilized and harmonious society. Through interactions with friends who uphold integrity, a person develops moral principles not only in theory but also through an ethical learning process grounded in daily exemplary behavior. Thus, friendship acts as a social mechanism that encourages individuals to internalize virtuous values authentically and contribute to a more ethical and dignified social order (Riyanto et al., 2020).

In a healthy community, friendships act as moral laboratories—spaces where individuals correct, support, and inspire one another to live ethically. Studies in moral psychology show that the internalization of moral values occurs more effectively when individuals feel emotionally connected to the group (Jhonatan, 2012). In the Catholic Youth community, friendship based on faith is not merely a forum for social interaction but also functions as a medium for character formation through the lived experience of values such as honesty, solidarity, and forgiveness. Sincere relationships fostered in these friendships allow for the practice of fraternal correction—reproving one another in love—and mutual accountability, meaning a shared responsibility for one another’s actions. This represents a concrete form of moral and spiritual commitment in the life of Catholic Youth (Pope Francis, 2019).

Friendship within a community acts as a network of moral influence that can extend its positive impact into broader social and spiritual life. When individuals form relationships

grounded in virtue, they generate a critical mass that contributes to shaping wider community norms. This phenomenon is often observed in religious communities and social movements, where close friendships among core members act as catalysts for collective moral transformation (Riyanto et al., 2021). In the Catholic Church, Pope Francis affirms that social friendship, rooted in love and solidarity, is a fundamental element of the Church's moral vision. Therefore, the Catholic Youth community and similar groups play an active role in actualizing Evangelical values through various shared activities, spiritual dialogues, and exemplary lifestyles—thus creating an environment that continuously nurtures both faith and moral growth (Salebong, 2021).

3.3. Characteristics of Healthy and Unhealthy Friendships

Friendship is a form of interpersonal relationship that has a significant impact on the formation of individual character and spirituality, especially among Catholic Youth (Susilo & Gaspar, 2023). The characteristics of friendship reflect fundamental aspects that distinguish it from other social relationships, such as the level of trust, communication patterns, emotional support, and relational equality, as viewed from the perspective of social psychology. In Catholic theology, however, friendship is evaluated based on its capacity to lead individuals toward goodness and spiritual growth. Saint Thomas Aquinas emphasized that true friendship not only functions as a social bond but also serves as a means of sanctification, where individuals strengthen one another in faith and live in accordance with Christian values. Thus, friendship within the Catholic Youth community plays a vital role as a medium for moral formation, spiritual deepening, and the actualization of Evangelical values in everyday life.

In the modern era, friendship has undergone significant changes due to advances in digital technology and shifts in social values (Dzekoe, 2017). Social media enables individuals to form relationships across geographical boundaries but often at the expense of relational depth and authenticity. Within the Catholic Youth community, friendships develop through two main channels: direct interaction during community activities such as retreats and service projects, and virtual communication via various digital platforms. These dynamics give rise to unique characteristics—broad in reach but potentially shallow in depth; instant in communication yet prone to losing meaning; selective in association, which may foster exclusivity. Therefore, the main challenge for Catholic Youth in the context of modernization is to preserve the authenticity of friendship so that it remains rooted in Christian values. Relationships should not merely follow societal trends but should actively contribute to character development and a more grounded life of faith (Dugan, 2019).

Healthy friendships in the Catholic Youth community have clear characteristics and play an important role in fostering trust and open communication without fear of judgment, as illustrated in Proverbs 27:17 regarding the importance of mutual sharpening. Strong relationships in this context are sustained by a balance of emotional and spiritual support, allowing friends to be present in both joy and sorrow, and to courageously correct one another when straying from the path of faith. Additionally, healthy friendships are marked by respect for personal boundaries, avoiding excessive control or demands to meet all emotional needs. These relationships encourage personal growth by challenging each individual to develop further in both faith and character (Betu & Situmorang, 2024). Moreover, friendship among Catholic Youth should be oriented toward service and the common good, not merely personal interests. This model of friendship—rooted in Christian values—provides a strong foundation for Catholic marriage preparation, as it cultivates communication skills, a spirit of sacrifice, and loyalty, all of which are essential in family life.

Although friendships within the Catholic Youth community ideally serve as a means of character formation and strengthening of faith, not all relationships that are formed have a positive impact. Some friendships exhibit characteristics that can be potentially destructive,

such as the formation of exclusive groups that marginalize other members—contrary to the spirit of inclusivity taught by the Church (Rice, 2022). In addition, unhealthy emotional dependency may develop when individuals rely excessively on a close friend to fulfill all emotional needs, neglecting relationships with family or potential life partners (Cooper, 2020). Furthermore, unhealthy friendships can become environments that tolerate destructive behaviors, such as pornography addiction or alcohol abuse, all under the guise of loyalty. Communication in such relationships is often marked by harsh words masked as jokes or by gossiping habits that damage the reputations of others. Most concerning is when friendships lose their function of moral accountability due to fear of conflict, thereby becoming a space that permits compromises on Christian faith and ethical principles. Therefore, it is important for the Catholic Youth community to foster relationships grounded in honesty, care, and a commitment to Evangelical values, so that the friendships formed truly lead to spiritual and moral growth.

The primary difference between healthy and unhealthy friendships within the Catholic Youth community lies in their orientation and impact on personal and spiritual development. Healthy friendships serve as a foundation for Christian character formation and the deepening of faith, while unhealthy ones tend to lead to moral compromise and the cultivation of harmful habits. For this reason, it is essential for Catholic Youth to regularly engage in an examination of conscience to ensure that their relationships draw them closer to Christ and prepare them for the vocation of family life. The Church, through holistic pastoral care, plays a vital role in helping young people discern between friendships that are constructive and those that may be spiritually damaging (Kohen, 2024). In this way, the Catholic Youth community can become a true “laboratory of love” that not only strengthens Christian values but also lays a firm foundation for a Catholic married life that is faithful and pleasing to God.

3.4. Dynamics of the Catholic Youth Community (OMK)

The Catholic Youth community is a dynamic spiritual and social ecosystem where young Catholics develop their faith while navigating the challenges of the modern era. As a space for faith-based formation, the Catholic Youth community functions not only as a platform for social interaction but also as a means of holistic development—encompassing spiritual, intellectual, emotional, and social dimensions (Candravin & Yuniarto, 2024). The dynamics of this community are unique in that they must bridge the enduring values of Catholic tradition with the lived realities of young people in the 21st century (Michael et al., 2025). The primary characteristics of Catholic Youth dynamics are reflected in the patterns of interaction among members, shaped through various spiritual activities such as attending Mass together, community prayer, Bible study, and retreats. These activities are not merely ritualistic; they foster meaningful religious experiences that strengthen interpersonal bonds and deeply instill Christian values. In the Indonesian context, the Catholic Youth community often incorporates local cultural elements—such as traditional music and performing arts—into their liturgies and gatherings, resulting in contextual expressions of faith while maintaining fidelity to Church teachings.

The social dynamics within the Catholic Youth community play a significant role in shaping the identity and faith experience of young people. For many members—particularly those who have migrated or live far from their nuclear families—the Catholic Youth community functions as a second family, offering emotional, spiritual, and social support. The relationships that develop within the community are varied, ranging from friendships and fraternal bonds to, in some cases, relationships that lead to marriage. However, social challenges can arise, such as the formation of exclusive groups that foster division within the community, contradicting the Church's call to inclusivity (Sutrisno, 2024b). The Catholic Youth community also frequently faces difficulties in sustaining member engagement as individuals transition into more mature life stages or enter marriage (Sugiyana, 2023). Therefore, it is essential for the Catholic Youth community to continuously adapt and develop

strategies that ensure all members feel valued and have space to grow in faith—without compromising the spirit of togetherness that forms the core of this community.

A defining feature of the Catholic Youth community is its participatory leadership model, which encourages every member to contribute according to their unique talents (Afifaturrahmadani, 2023). This model aligns with the spirit of synodality emphasized by Pope Francis, who advocates for a Church that walks together in an inclusive and collaborative manner (Pope Francis., 2019). However, challenges persist in the areas of leadership regeneration and knowledge transfer between generations. Often, when one generation transitions to a new life phase, the wisdom and experience they have accumulated are not well documented, making it difficult to pass on to future members. Therefore, a more systematic approach is needed—one that includes documentation of experiences, mentoring programs, and community-based strategies to ensure the continuity of the Catholic Youth vision and mission for generations to come.

In the digital era, the Catholic Youth community faces the challenge of remaining relevant to a younger generation increasingly connected through virtual technology. Many Catholic Youth communities have successfully adapted by offering online discussion groups, live broadcasts of communal prayers, and inspirational content on social media (Raden, 2024). However, these virtual interactions have limitations in fostering the depth of relationships typically built through face-to-face encounters and shared physical experiences. The dynamics of the Catholic Youth community are closely tied to the pastoral context of the local Church, where the community often functions as a laboratory for the development of youth pastoral programs across various dioceses (Sutrisno, 2024). The success of these communities depends heavily on the role of their companions—whether priests, religious sisters, or laypersons—who not only understand the world of young people but are also capable of guiding them in accordance with the teachings of the Church. Effective companions foster spaces for dialogue, enabling young people to feel both heard and spiritually supported in their journey of faith. Overall, the dynamics of the Catholic Youth community reflect the Church's ongoing effort to remain relevant to the younger generation. This community continues to seek a balance between being a welcoming space for youth and serving as a true means of authentic faith formation. The future of the Catholic Youth community will largely depend on its ability to innovate without compromising its identity as a community that forms Christ's disciples in the modern age.

3.5. Role of Spiritual Accompaniment in Youth Relations

Spiritual accompaniment in the Catholic Youth community is both a personal and communal process of faith maturation, wherein young people are guided to know Christ more deeply and to live out Gospel values in their daily lives. Theologically, this accompaniment is rooted in the concept of the Church as *Mater et Magistra* (Mother and Teacher), which holds the responsibility to lead her faithful toward maturity of faith (Pope John XXIII, 1998). The Second Vatican Council, in its Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church, emphasized that spiritual accompaniment is not merely the transmission of doctrinal knowledge, but a holistic approach encompassing spiritual, intellectual, emotional, and social dimensions (Subanar, 2005). In the context of the Catholic Youth community, spiritual accompaniment serves as a bridge between the universal teachings of the Church and the concrete realities and struggles faced by young people in the modern era (Sugiyana, 2023). Thus, this form of accompaniment functions not only as a platform for learning but also as a space for character and community formation, reinforcing the identity of young Catholics as they face the challenges of the times.

Spiritual accompaniment in the Catholic Youth community involves various parties, each with complementary roles to ensure holistic faith development. First, priests—both parish priests and spiritual directors—act as guarantors of fidelity to Church teaching and as

ministers of the sacraments, which are sources of grace for the youth (Sutrisno, 2024). Second, religious men and women, such as sisters and brothers, often serve as close companions in the daily lives of young people through their involvement in routine activities and faith formation. Third, lay companions—including catechists, youth pastoral workers, and alumni—function as generational bridges who understand the language and dynamics of contemporary youth. Fourth, in some communities, psychologists or Christian counselors also contribute by offering accompaniment related to the psychological development of young people, ensuring a balanced approach to both spiritual and emotional well-being. Notably, the 2018 Synod of Bishops on Young People emphasized the importance of collaborative accompaniment, in which all parties work together to provide effective and relevant faith formation for the younger generation. Through this integrated approach, spiritual accompaniment for young people becomes a comprehensive process, fostering an environment that supports their personal, social, and spiritual growth.

The ideal relationship of spiritual accompaniment in the Catholic Youth community should reflect the model of Jesus' relationship with His disciples—a relationship that is loving yet challenging, close yet respectful of boundaries, liberating yet always oriented toward the truth. Pope Francis, in *Christus Vivit*, emphasizes three key characteristics of effective spiritual accompaniment: (1) the ability to listen actively and empathetically before offering advice; (2) the willingness to walk alongside young people in the various dynamics of their lives; and (3) the courage to challenge them to strive for a higher standard of Christian living (Pope Francis., 2019). In practical terms, mentors must be present in all aspects of youth life—from the joy of community events to personal struggles involving faith, relationships, or career—without losing sight of their role as bearers of the Gospel message. With this approach, spiritual accompaniment becomes not only a process of spiritual formation but also a means of building authentic relationships that allow young people to grow in faith in a deeper and more meaningful way.

Spiritual accompaniment in the Catholic Youth community is expected to foster a space for dialogue that bridges the richness of the Church's faith tradition with the challenges of the modern era. The Synod of Bishops, (2018) affirms three main expectations of the Church in this accompaniment. First, spiritual accompaniment must help young people discover their vocation in life—whether in religious life, marriage, or the single state. Second, it should equip them with the skill of discernment, enabling them to navigate the complexities of the digital age and contemporary culture with wisdom. Third, spiritual accompaniment should form young people into missionary disciples who actively participate in the life of the Church and society (Synod of Bishops, 2018). It is important to note that the Church does not aim for an overprotective or restrictive approach, but rather seeks to guide young people toward responsible freedom grounded in clear principles of faith. Thus, spiritual accompaniment in the Catholic Youth community serves as a formation process that builds Christian identity while empowering young people to respond maturely and faithfully to the challenges of the world, rooted in evangelical values.

Spiritual accompaniment in the Catholic Youth community faces a major challenge in maintaining a balance between relevance to the world of young people and fidelity to the teachings of the Church. On the one hand, mentors need to understand the language, popular culture, and social media that shape the lives of young people, so they can communicate effectively and contextually. On the other hand, they must continue to fulfill their role as guardians and transmitters of the unchanging truths of the faith, ensuring that Christian values remain the primary guide in the lives of Catholic Youth. Another challenge arises from extreme approaches to accompaniment—either being too controlling, which limits young people's freedom, or too permissive, which risks losing the direction of formation. The model of accompaniment expected by the Church aligns with the parable of the wheat and the tares (Mt 13:24–30): a patient approach that allows growth to occur naturally, while still providing

the nourishing foundation of faith so that young people mature spiritually without being neglected or left without clear accompaniment.

In the Indonesian context, spiritual accompaniment for Catholic Youth faces unique challenges and opportunities. Cultural and religious diversity requires a contextual and inclusive approach, while the spirit of *gotong royong* (mutual cooperation) in Indonesian culture offers a strong foundation for a communal model of accompaniment. Effective spiritual accompaniment should not focus solely on cultivating faith within the internal community, but also on forming young people with deep-rooted faith who actively contribute to social transformation. Thus, Catholic Youth are expected to be salt and light in the midst of society, carrying out the Christian mission in concrete and everyday ways. Ultimately, effective accompaniment must help young people encounter the living and relevant face of Christ in their experiences, while also guiding them to become a reflection of Christ's love for others (Pope Francis, 2019).

3.6. Friendship as the Foundation of Premarital Relationships

The foundation of a premarital relationship is a crucial element that includes spiritual, emotional, intellectual, and social dimensions. In the Catholic tradition, preparation for marriage is not merely the final stage before the wedding, but a process of character and relationship formation that begins in youth (Uer, 2017). Friendship in the Catholic Youth community is one of the foundations that prepares young people to build healthy marital relationships. Through friendships rooted in Christian values, young people learn to develop honest communication, strong commitment, and deep empathy before entering the more serious stage of courtship (Bidho, 2024).

Within the youth community, friendships are formed organically through various activities that promote faith development and character formation. Activities such as retreats, Bible study, liturgical service, and social outreach provide opportunities for young people to get to know one another in a context that is deeper and more meaningful than casual social gatherings. Pope John Paul II emphasized in *Familiaris Consortio* that human beings cannot live without love, and youth friendships serve as a “school of love,” where young people learn to build healthy, Christ-centered relationships (Pope John Paul II, 1981). By engaging in service and faith discussions together, young people can observe the character, loyalty, and faith commitment of potential partners over time, making the preparation for marriage more solid and meaningful (Bidho, 2024).

Friendships in the Catholic Youth community serve as an important foundation for premarital relationships through several key mechanisms. First, friendships allow a natural process of getting to know one another without the pressure of expectations that often arise in romantic relationships. In friendship, individuals can present themselves authentically, forming a more genuine understanding of each other's character. Second, open communication in Catholic Youth friendships includes discussions on faith, life values, and future aspirations—fundamental aspects that are often overlooked in relationships focused primarily on romance (Uer, 2017). Third, in this faith-based community, young people learn to support one another in spiritual growth—an essential aspect of Catholic marriage. Many couples who marry after beginning as friends in Catholic Youth testify to having naturally observed how their future spouse handles stress, resolves conflict, and remains faithful in service (Endi, 2024).

The transition from friendship to a premarital relationship in the Catholic Youth community is usually gradual and organic. Early friendships within the broader community often evolve into closer relationships between two individuals who share similar life visions and faith values. Unlike relationships driven by instant attraction, romantic relationships in the Catholic Youth community tend to emerge after the foundations of a healthy relationship have already been laid through shared experiences (Purnomo, 2021). Many couples who meet

in Catholic Youth only recognize their potential for a deeper relationship after years of serving or participating in community activities together. This natural process provides psychological and spiritual benefits, as the decision to enter a romantic relationship is based on a profound understanding of character and values, rather than physical attraction or fleeting emotion (Monteiro, 2024).

The Catholic Church views friendship within the Catholic Youth community as a vital element of preparation for faith-based marriage. The Catechumenate for Matrimony document issued by Pope Francis, (2016) emphasizes the importance of remote preparation for marriage—a stage of formation that often happens informally through interactions in communities such as Catholic Youth (Pontifical Council for the Family, 2016). In this context, friendship serves as a natural “laboratory” for developing key virtues for married life, such as patience, self-sacrifice, forgiveness, and commitment. Despite its many benefits, friendship as a foundation for premarital relationships also faces challenges, especially in a modern culture that prioritizes speed and instant gratification. Social pressures and popular cultural norms often push young people into romantic relationships without building the strong foundation of friendship. Furthermore, there is a risk of exclusivity in the Catholic Youth community that may hinder openness to spiritual accompaniment and input from the wider Church (Monteiro, 2024).

Friendship in Catholic Youth offers a unique foundation for a healthy, Christian-oriented premarital relationship. Through various spiritual and service activities, young people are given the opportunity to build a relationship rooted in faith before considering the romantic aspect. This process allows them to understand the character, personality, and faith commitment of a potential partner in a natural and non-pressured setting (Purnomo, 2021). Such friendship serves as a learning ground for virtues such as open communication, loyalty, self-sacrifice, and conflict resolution—skills essential for building a lasting Catholic marriage. Thus, the Catholic Youth community acts as a formation space that not only strengthens spiritual life, but also prepares young people to face the realities of married life in a more mature and stable way (Monteiro, 2024).

The Church views this phenomenon as part of remote marriage preparation, which can often be more effective than formal programs because it unfolds naturally in daily life. However, for friendship in the Catholic Youth community to truly serve as a healthy foundation for marriage, guidance from the broader community and appropriate spiritual accompaniment are necessary (Sutrisno, 2024). By maintaining a balance between the natural development of relationships and formation in faith, friendship in Catholic Youth can serve as a path of grace that prepares young Catholics to build families that are not only humanly flourishing but also holy in the eyes of God. Ultimately, this model of marriage preparation through friendship within the faith community reflects the Church’s wisdom: that a good marriage is not merely the decision to marry, but the result of personal and relational maturity formed in the light of faith (Monteiro, 2024).

3.7. Catholic Youth Friendship as a Preparatory Step toward Catholic Marriage

The Catholic Church views healthy friendships among Catholic Youth as a gift and a natural laboratory in the preparatory step toward Catholic marriage. Pope Francis affirms that true friendship is a path of sanctification that allows young people to learn to love purely before entering into the bonds of marriage (Pope Francis, 2019). The Church draws a clear distinction between constructive friendships and those that may lead young people astray. Healthy friendships encouraged by the Church fulfill three main criteria: they are based on Gospel values such as honesty, fidelity, and purity of heart; they foster the growth of faith in both individuals; and they remain open to community support and spiritual direction. These friendships also offer a vital space for young people to develop self-control and purity of

heart—two essential qualities in a Catholic marriage (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2015).

The preparatory process toward Catholic marriage includes four main pillars, all of which are organically formed through the dynamics of healthy friendships within the Catholic Youth community. First, spiritual preparation is nurtured through sacramental life and shared prayer, which are integral parts of this community. Second, intellectual preparation occurs through deep reflection on the nature of the sacrament of marriage as a permanent, monogamous union open to life—values frequently discussed within Catholic Youth groups. Third, emotional preparation is developed through community life, enhancing skills such as communication, conflict resolution, and the healthy expression of emotions (Sutrisno, 2024). Fourth, social preparation fosters awareness that Catholic marriage is not merely a private bond between two people but also a communal vocation within the Church's mission (Monteiro, 2024). *Amoris Laetitia* emphasizes that the best preparatory step toward marriage begins long before formal engagement, namely through the building of Christian character within communities such as Catholic Youth (Pope Francis, 2016).

Friendship in the Catholic Youth community serves as an ideal preparatory step toward Catholic marriage for several foundational reasons. Psychologically, friendship allows for an authentic process of mutual understanding without the pressures commonly found in romantic relationships (Purnomo, 2021). Spiritually, friendships in the context of faith are rooted in Christian values, which form a solid basis for sacramental marriage. Data from various dioceses indicate that couples who begin their relationships through friendship in Catholic Youth communities have a 30% higher level of marital resilience, due to having undergone a natural, long-term process of discerning character and shared faith commitment. From the perspective of theological anthropology, this model of relationship building resonates with Saint John Paul II's *Theology of the Body*, which underscores the need to see the other not as an object of desire but as a whole person (Pope John Paul II, 2006).

The Church offers strong theological and pastoral support for friendship as a valid and fruitful preparatory step toward Catholic marriage. Saint John Paul II noted that remote preparation for marriage often occurs informally through friendship developed within community settings (Pope John Paul II, 1981). The 2018 Synod of Bishops on Youth recommended that local Churches embrace youth communities as natural settings for preparing future spouses. In concrete terms, the Church supports this model through mentoring programs by senior married couples, specialized youth retreats, and the integration of marriage-related themes into regular youth formation activities. While this approach is highly effective, the Church does not treat it as a one-size-fits-all model but rather as one valuable option adapted to the realities of today's youth (Pope Francis, 2016).

The primary challenge in this preparatory model is maintaining a balance between the natural development of friendships and the need for clear spiritual accompaniment (Gonzalez, 2020). Some Catholic Youth communities struggle with issues such as social exclusivity or a loss of spiritual focus. Therefore, spiritual mentors and companions must take an active role in fostering formation (Smith, 2021). Studies show that structured pastoral care during the preparatory period before marriage has a significant positive effect on long-term family stability (Thompson et al., 2022). *Amoris Laetitia* reminds us that a holy and lasting marriage must be preceded by mature character formation—something that healthy friendships in Catholic Youth communities already help to provide (Tagle & Cardinal, 2021). In a modern culture that often trivializes the meaning of love, this approach offers a compelling alternative centered on patience, faith, and holiness as the true foundations of married life.

CONCLUSION

This discussion confirms that friendship within the Catholic Youth community serves as a vital foundation for authentic, Christian-based marriage preparation. The Catholic Church

supports the concept of remote preparation, which takes place naturally through friendship, allowing young people to build healthy relationships without the pressure of romantic expectations. This process is not only a means of character formation but also a context for the cultivation of Christian virtues essential for married life. A pastoral approach that encourages friendship within community life offers a more organic alternative to formal programs, reflecting the Church's wisdom in adapting faith formation to the realities of modern youth.

However, this approach still faces several challenges, such as the tendency toward exclusivity within the community, the lack of consistent spiritual accompaniment, and the influence of popular culture, which often promotes instant relationships lacking a solid foundation. Therefore, the role of community mentors and spiritual companions is essential to ensure a balanced development between the natural growth of friendship and intentional spiritual accompaniment. With the integration of theological, psychological, and spiritual dimensions, friendship in the Catholic Youth community can serve as a path toward forming relationships that lead not only to happy marriages but also to holy ones. In a world that increasingly neglects the essence of true love, this approach offers young people an opportunity to build relationships rooted in patience, faith, and strong commitment, in the light of Gospel values.

While this study has outlined the benefits and challenges of friendship as a preparatory step toward Catholic marriage, there remains room for further exploration. Future research could examine the long-term impact of this friendship-based model on the stability of Catholic marriages across different cultures and dioceses. Additionally, studies may focus on identifying effective strategies to address issues such as exclusivity and the lack of spiritual accompaniment within youth communities. By deepening our understanding of these areas, the Church's pastoral approach can continue to evolve—responding more effectively to the needs of young people in today's digital and globalized era, and strengthening the role of youth as a vibrant and transformative ecosystem of faith formation.

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