

Digitalization and Spiritual Transformation: A Phenomenological Study of Young Catholic Priest in Diocese of Palangka Raya

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ABSTRACT

This research explores the phenomenological experiences of young Catholic priests in the Diocese of Palangkaraya in constructing their spirituality amid digital transformation and the cultural expectations of the Dayak community. Using a mixed-methods sequential explanatory design with Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) involving 10 priests aged 30-40 years with 1-10 years of ordination, the research reveals four main themes: the duality of digital experience in spirituality, negotiation of tension between tradition and modernity, reconstruction of priestly identity, and spiritual adaptation strategies. Quantitative analysis shows significant correlations between digital competence ($r=0.68$, $p<0.01$) and cultural intelligence ($r=0.72$, $p<0.01$) with digital pastoral adaptation. Qualitative findings reveal that young priests experience "cultural-digital dissonance" between demands for physical presence in Dayak rituals and digital efficiency, as well as "erosion of silence" due to continuous connectivity. In response, they develop a "tri-hybrid spirituality" that integrates Catholic tradition, Dayak wisdom, and digital technology through strategies of scheduled digital limitations, theological reinterpretation, and ritual hybridization. This research contributes to understanding spiritual transformation in the digital era within indigenous contexts and offers practical implications for reformulating priestly formation and developing inculturation models that integrate digital dimensions without neglecting local wisdom.

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1. Introduction

The digital revolution 4.0 has radically transformed the way humans interact, communicate, and experience the spiritual dimension. In the document "Church in the Digital Age" (2019), the Vatican affirmed that digital transformation is not merely a technological change, but a paradigm shift that affects all dimensions of church life, including the spirituality of priests. Campbell and Evolvi (2020) reported a significant increase in the use of digital platforms for spiritual ministry during 2018-2020, with faster acceleration post-pandemic.

The Vatican Digital Transformation Study (2023) reported that almost all dioceses worldwide have adopted various forms of digital ministry, but only a small portion have an integrated strategy to balance digital ministry with traditional spirituality. A comprehensive study involving 2,456 priests from 45 countries found a significant negative correlation between the intensity of digital media use and time spent on contemplative prayer.

The Palangkaraya Diocese represents the unique complexity of the encounter between digital modernity and local wisdom. Data from the Ministry of Communication and Information Technology (2023) shows that Central Kalimantan has a fairly high internet penetration rate, but with very uneven distribution. Based on data from the Palangkaraya Diocese (2023), of the 30 parishes spread across an area of 153,564 km², most are located in areas with limited internet access, while the majority of the faithful still practice traditional Dayak rituals that are integrated with Catholic practices.

The unique characteristics of the Dayak Ngaju community provide a complex dimension in digital ministry. Singaribun (2021) identified the concept of "Belom Bahadat" (living according to customs) which emphasizes the balance between physical and spiritual, material and immaterial. This tradition is reflected in rituals such as Tiwah and Mamapas Lewu which require the physical presence of spiritual leaders.

Based on this background, this research seeks to answer the question: How do young Catholic priests in the Palangkaraya Diocese construct and experience their spirituality in the context of digital transformation, given their unique position as digital natives serving communities with strong Dayak traditional roots?

2. Method

Research Design

This research employs a mixed-methods sequential explanatory design that combines quantitative and qualitative approaches to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the digital spirituality phenomenon among young priests. This design was chosen due to the complexity of the research theme that requires objective measurement through standardized instruments and in-depth exploration through phenomenological interviews.

Phase I (Quantitative): Survey using structured instruments to measure four main constructs.

Phase II (Qualitative): In-depth semi-structured interviews with an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach.

Research Participants

Inclusion Criteria:

- Catholic priests aged 30-40 years
- 1-10 years of ordination
- Actively serving in the Diocese of Palangka Raya
- Using digital technology in pastoral ministry for at least 1 year
- Willing to participate in both research phases

Sampling:

- Phase I: Total sampling of all priests meeting criteria (N=20)
- Phase II: Purposive sampling from Phase I respondents based on variation in scores on main constructs (n=10)

Research Instruments

A. Quantitative Instruments

1. Digital Competence Scale (X1) - 5 items Measures technical ability in using digital technology for pastoral ministry. Adapted from the Digital Competence Framework for Educators (DigCompEdu). Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.89$.
2. Cultural Intelligence Scale (X2) - 5 items Measures understanding and ability to adapt to Dayak culture in digital ministry contexts. Adapted from the Cultural Intelligence Scale (CQS) with Dayak cultural contextualization. Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.85$.
3. Digital Pastoral Adaptation Scale (Z) - 5 items Measures ability to integrate digital technology in pastoral practice. Specifically developed for this research based on digital ministry literature. Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.82$.
4. Priestly Spiritual Well-being Scale (Y) - 5 items Measures spiritual well-being in modern priesthood contexts. Adapted from the Spiritual Well-Being Scale (SWBS) with focus on priestly spirituality. Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.87$.

B. Qualitative Instruments

Semi-Structured Interview Guide with Main Themes:

1. Personal experience in using digital technology for spirituality
2. Challenges in balancing Dayak traditions with digital modernity
3. Adaptation strategies developed
4. Theological reflections on digital presence in pastoral ministry

Data Collection Procedures

Phase I: Quantitative Survey Questionnaire administration through digital platforms and paper to 20 priests meeting criteria. Response rate reached 100% with support from the Diocese of Palangka Raya.

Phase II: Qualitative Interviews In-depth interviews with 10 selected priests, each consisting of 2-3 sessions lasting 60-90 minutes. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Data Analysis

Quantitative Analysis

1. Descriptive analysis for each construct
2. Shapiro-Wilk normality test
3. Pearson correlation analysis between constructs
4. Multiple regression to identify predictors of spiritual well-being

Qualitative Analysis (IPA Framework)

1. Verbatim transcription with emotional notation
2. Individual case analysis: reading, initial noting, developing emergent themes
3. Cross-case pattern analysis: clustering themes and creating thematic structure
4. Integration with quantitative data through joint display

Validity and Trustworthiness

Quantitative Validity: Confirmatory Factor Analysis, content validity through expert judgment (CVI > 0.80) **Qualitative Trustworthiness:** Member checking, data triangulation, peer debriefing, audit trail

Ethical Considerations

The research received approval from the Bishop of Palangka Raya Diocese and followed informed consent protocols. All data were anonymized and stored according to research data protection standards.

3. Results and Discussion

Quantitative Analysis

Participant Characteristics

Participants consisted of 20 priests with mean age 34.2 years (SD=3.1) and mean ordination period 4.8 years (SD=2.7). All participants had experience using digital technology in pastoral ministry for 1-7 years.

Descriptive Statistics of Main Constructs

Construct	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Digital Competence (X1)	4.12	0.68	3.20	5.00
Cultural Intelligence (X2)	4.35	0.52	3.40	5.00
Digital Pastoral Adaptation (Z)	3.89	0.71	2.80	5.00
Priestly Spiritual Well-being (Y)	4.01	0.63	3.00	5.00

Correlation Analysis

Variable	X1	X2	Z	Y
Digital Competence (X1)	1			
Cultural Intelligence (X2)	0.54**	1		
Digital Pastoral Adaptation (Z)	0.68**	0.72**	1	
Priestly Spiritual Well-being (Y)	0.43*	0.61**	0.59**	1

*p < 0.05, **p < 0.01

Regression Analysis

Multiple regression analysis showed that Cultural Intelligence ($\beta = 0.45$, $p < 0.01$) and Digital Pastoral Adaptation ($\beta = 0.38$, $p < 0.05$) were significant predictors of Priestly Spiritual Well-being ($R^2 = 0.52$, $F(3,16) = 5.78$, $p < 0.01$).

Qualitative Analysis

IPA analysis identified four main themes:

1) *Duality of Digital Experience in Spirituality*

Phenomenological analysis revealed duality experienced by young priests in their relationship with digital technology. The majority of participants (8 of 10) reported significant increases in pastoral administration efficiency and evangelization reach through digital platforms.

"Social media allows me to reach parishioners across 15 stations spread within a 200 km radius. Without WhatsApp and Facebook, it would be nearly impossible to provide continuous spiritual accompaniment, especially during the rainy season when road access is cut off." (Participant 3)

However, almost all participants (9 of 10) also reported experiencing "erosion of silence" reduced time and quality of contemplation due to continuous digital connectivity.

"The smartphone is both blessing and curse. It allows me to be present for parishioners whenever they need me, but it also steals those moments of silence I desperately need to spiritually recharge." (Participant 7)

2) *Negotiating Tension Between Tradition and Modernity*

All participants reported experiencing "cultural-digital dissonance" - tension between Dayak values emphasizing physical presence in rituals and the efficiency of virtual presence enabled by technology.

"For Dayak people, the physical presence of a priest in ritual is not mere formality, but an integral part of the ritual's spiritual effectiveness. The concept of 'belom bahadat' requires balance between physical and spiritual worlds that is difficult to negotiate through Zoom or YouTube." (Participant 2)

Data shows that young priests spend an average of 15-20 hours per week traveling to remote communities, despite available digital options. However, in communities served by the same priest for more than 3 years, cultural negotiation was observed that allowed integration of digital elements in traditional rituals.

3) *Reconstruction of Priestly Identity in the Digital Era*

The majority of participants (8 of 10) reported expansion of their conception of priestly role from traditional sacramental-liturgical frameworks to include the dimension of "digital shepherd" - shepherding in virtual space.

"In seminary, we were formed with traditional contemplative-pastoral priesthood models. Now I find myself managing parish Facebook pages, answering theological questions in WhatsApp groups until midnight, and recording homilies for YouTube. I often wonder: is this really being a priest as intended in my ordination?" (Participant 1)

Priests who successfully integrated digital roles into their theology of priesthood showed higher levels of ministry satisfaction compared to those who treated the digital dimension as a separate "addition" to their core priestly identity.

4) *Adaptation and Spiritual Integration Strategies*

Analysis identified five main adaptation strategies:

a) Scheduled Digital Limitations (Digital Scheduling) 8 of 10 participants developed strict digital time limitation systems, with regular "digital fasting" periods.

"Every Thursday is my 'digital sabbath' day - smartphone turned off, laptop closed. This isn't just technical rest, but spiritual practice that allows me to experience contemplative silence." (Participant 4)

b) Theological Reinterpretation (Theological Reframing) 6 of 10 participants conducted theological reinterpretation of digital activities, integrating them into traditional understanding of priesthood.

"I developed a 'theology of digital presence' that sees online interaction not as substitution but as extension of pastoral presence. Christ is present in the Eucharist, but also in words of comfort I send through WhatsApp to sick parishioners."
(Participant 9)

c) Ritual Hybridization All participants developed hybrid forms of ritual that integrated digital elements with Dayak traditions, such as virtual blessing of ritual objects later used in physical ceremonies.

d) Reflective Community 7 of 10 participants formed informal support groups with other young priests for shared reflection on digital challenges.

e) Contemplative Technology 5 of 10 participants actively used spiritual and meditation apps to strengthen their traditional prayer practices.

Discussion

Trihybrid Spirituality as Adaptive Response

The findings of this research fundamentally revise O'Brien's (2020) concept of "spiritual hybridity" by introducing an indigenous cultural dimension that has been neglected in digital spirituality literature. Unlike conventional hybridity models that are dualistic in nature, opposing sacred versus digital or traditional versus modern, the experience of young priests in Palangka Raya reveals a tripartite complexity that requires simultaneous renegotiation of priestly identity, theological framework, and commitment to Dayak cultural traditions. This process is not a linear adaptation but a dialectical transformation that produces an entirely new spiritual synthesis while remaining rooted in all three constitutive traditions.

Quantitative data provides strong empirical validation for the hypothesis that cultural sensitivity is a critical determinant in successful digital adaptation. The exceptional correlation between cultural intelligence and digital pastoral adaptation ($r=0.72$, $p<0.01$) demonstrates that deep understanding of the Dayak worldview is not merely an additional asset but a fundamental prerequisite for authentic and effective technology implementation. This finding challenges the techno-centric paradigm that assumes technology as a universal solution, instead affirming that religious digitalization only succeeds when grounded in sophisticated cultural understanding. Priests with low cultural intelligence experienced significant fragmentation and communal resistance, confirming that cultural competence is a key mediator in digital transformation.

The concept of "tri-hybrid spirituality" emerging from qualitative analysis represents the most significant theoretical contribution of this research. This model integrates Catholic priestly spirituality (sacramentality, liturgy, theology), Dayak wisdom (Belom Bahadat, cosmic spirituality, traditional rituals), and digital dimensions (virtual presence, networked community, cyber-theology) in an organic and mutually-enriching synthesis. Unlike additive models that merely add digital elements to existing spirituality, tri-hybrid spirituality involves fundamental reconfiguration of all three dimensions, resulting in a qualitatively distinct spiritual form. This model has profound implications for theories of religious transformation in the digital age, showing that the future of spirituality lies not in global homogenization but in creative and transformative contextual hybridization.

Digital Spiritual Tension in Socio-Cultural Perspectives

The phenomenon of "digital spiritual tension" identified in the context of the Palangkaraya Diocese displays characteristics that are qualitatively different from findings of previous studies, which generally conceptualize this tension within an individual-psychological framework. While research by Huang et al. (2024) and Campbell & Evolvi (2020) mapped digital spiritual tension as

internal conflict between contemplation versus connectivity, this research's findings reveal socio-cultural dimensions that are far more complex and structural. The tension here is not merely a personal struggle of priests between smartphones and spirituality, but a multilayered negotiation between Dayak cosmological worldview, deeply embedded communal expectations, and technological imperatives that often conflict with indigenous values. This complexity necessitates a fundamental reconceptualization of digital spiritual tension as a socio-cultural, not merely individual-spiritual phenomenon.

The concept of *Belom Bahadat* functions as an interpretive framework that creates ontological resistance to the dematerialization of spirituality inherent in digital technology. *Belom Bahadat* is not merely a life philosophy but a cosmological principle that affirms the fundamental interdependence between physical and spiritual worlds, material and immaterial, presence and absence. In the Dayak worldview, the physical presence of spiritual leaders in rituals is not a liturgical preference but an ontological prerequisite for spiritual effectiveness, as the body is understood as an essential medium for transmitting spiritual power. Virtual presence, however technologically sophisticated, cannot substitute the embodied presence required for maintaining cosmic balance. Resistance to digitalization, therefore, is not technophobia but an effort to preserve spiritual integrity understood to be threatened by disembodied digital interaction.

Quantitative data provides compelling empirical evidence that cultural intelligence functions as a critical moderating variable in managing digital spiritual tension. Priests with high cultural intelligence ($M=4.6$, $SD=0.3$) showed significant positive correlation with spiritual well-being ($r=0.61$, $p<0.01$), indicating that deep understanding of cultural nuances enables more sophisticated navigation of digital-spiritual tensions. This finding demonstrates that cultural competence is not merely a social skill but an essential spiritual competence for maintaining psychological and spiritual equilibrium in the context of digital transformation. Conversely, priests with low cultural intelligence experienced higher levels of internal conflict, community resistance, and spiritual fragmentation, confirming that cultural sensitivity is a key determinant in successful digital adaptation in multicultural-indigenous settings.

Theological Reconstruction of Priesthood in Digital Era

The process of priestly identity reconstruction experienced by young priests presents a fundamental ontological dilemma concerning the redefinition of the essence of sacramental presence in the context of digital dematerialization. The critical question that emerged is not merely how to use technology for pastoral efficiency, but whether virtual presence can maintain substantial equivalence with physical presence in the context of sacramental efficacy. This dilemma reflects a more profound tension between traditional sacramentology that emphasizes material embodiment and digital theology that explores disembodied spiritual encounter. Priests face the challenge of reconceptualizing incarnational theology in an era that increasingly challenges boundaries between material and virtual, presence and absence, body and spirit.

The concept of "priestly identity fragmentation" emerging from phenomenological analysis reveals the multiplicity of clerical roles that must be performed simultaneously in the digital landscape. This fragmentation does not refer to personality disintegration but to the proliferation of distinct yet interconnected ministerial identities: digital shepherd in social media ecosystems, cyber-theologian in online theological discourse, virtual celebrant in livestreamed liturgies, and pastoral counselor in digital communication platforms. Each role demands different competencies and unique contextual sensitivity, creating what can be termed "ministerial code-switching" that is cognitively and emotionally demanding. The main challenge lies in achieving coherent integration of these multiple identities without

losing core priestly identity or experiencing role confusion that can impact psychological wellbeing and pastoral effectiveness.

Regression data confirms that digital pastoral adaptation is a significant predictor of spiritual well-being ($\beta = 0.38$, $p < 0.05$), demonstrating that successful theological integration of digital technology, not merely technical proficiency, is a key factor in maintaining spiritual equilibrium. This finding indicates that priests who successfully develop robust theological frameworks for understanding digital ministry show enhanced spiritual resilience and job satisfaction. Conversely, those who approach digital technology as an external tool without theological grounding experience higher levels of spiritual fragmentation and role conflict. This data underscores the importance of theological literacy in digital contexts as a core competency for contemporary priesthood, not a peripheral skill that can be ignored in formational curricula.

Trihybrid Spiritual Model

Based on quantitative and qualitative analysis, this research proposes a theoretical model of "Tri-hybrid Spirituality" consisting of:

Three Core Dimensions:

1. Catholic Traditional Dimension:

- Liturgical practices
- Sacramental practices
- Contemplative practices

2. Dayak Cultural Dimension:

- Belom Bahadat concept
- Traditional rituals
- Nature spirituality

3. Digital Dimension:

- Digital platforms
- Virtual presence
- Contemplative technology

This model demonstrates that the integration of these three dimensions requires complex and contextual adaptation strategies, not merely technology adoption.

Practical Implications

Reformulation of Priestly Formation Curriculum

Research results indicate urgency for reformulating priestly formation curriculum by integrating:

- **Digital-Pastoral Literacy:** Technical competence in digital platforms for pastoral ministry
- **Digital Media Theology:** Theological reflection on digitalization implications for sacramental presence
- **Digital Spiritual Ecology:** Spiritual disciplines maintaining digital-contemplative balance

Mentoring Young Priest in Digital Transition

Structured mentoring programs including:

- **Structured Reflective Communities:** Young priest support groups with experienced mentors
- **Digital-Contemplative Retreats:** Retreat models combining contemplative disciplines with digital reflection
- **Pastoral-Digital Supervision:** Regular accompaniment for pastoral-digital practice reflection

Development of Digital-Cultural Inculturation Models

Systematic integration models between cultural traditions, Catholic faith practices, and digital technology through:

- **Ritual Analysis:** Identification of essential versus secondary elements in traditional rituals
- **Limited Experimentation:** Digital integration trials with theological and cultural evaluation
- **Guideline Codification:** Development of pastoral guidelines that are flexible yet clear

Limitations and Future Research Directions

Research Limitations

1. **Sample Size:** Limited to one diocese, restricting generalization
2. **Cross-sectional Design:** Cannot capture temporal changes
3. **Cultural Specificity:** Findings specific to Dayak-Catholic context
4. **Self-report Bias:** Possibility of social desirability bias

Future Research Directions

1. **Longitudinal Studies:** Following development of priests' digital spirituality over longer periods
2. **Comparative Studies:** Comparing spiritual adaptation across various cultural contexts
3. **Communal Reception Research:** Exploring parishioners' perspectives on digital ministry
4. **Instrument Development:** Validating trihybrid spirituality scales in broader contexts

4. Conclusion

This research reveals the complexity of spiritual transformation in the digital age within a specific cultural context. The main finding of identifying "tri-hybrid spirituality" demonstrates the possibility of nuanced integration between Catholic tradition, Dayak wisdom, and digital technology. Quantitative data confirms the importance of cultural intelligence in digital pastoral adaptation, while qualitative analysis reveals creative adaptation strategies developed by young priests. The concept of "digital presence theology" that is beginning to be formulated offers an important theoretical contribution to theological discourse in the digital age.

Practically, this research underscores the urgency of reformulating priestly formation and developing pastoral models that are responsive to digital reality without neglecting the richness of tradition and local wisdom. The emerging integrative approach can serve as a foundation for pastoral models that develop constructive synthesis between tradition and modernity.

Finally, this research affirms that spiritual transformation in the digital age does not occur in a cultural vacuum, but always within specific socio-cultural contexts that shape and are shaped by the transformation process itself. The future of spirituality in the digital age is not global homogenization, but contextual hybridization that respects local uniqueness while remaining connected to the global community.

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