



# The Role of Inter-faith Understanding in Catechetical Ministry: Lessons from Silsilah's Madaris-Gurus and Catechists Formation Program

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## Abstract

*This paper explores the lessons learned by Roman Catholic Catechists through interactions with Islamic Faith Teachers (Madaris-Gurus) in Silsilah's Madaris-Gurus and Catechists Formation Program in Zamboanga City, Basilan, and Jolo. It addresses a gap in literature regarding the perceived effects of these interactions on catechetical practices in this ecclesiastical area of Mindanao. Using a descriptive qualitative design, supported by documentary review and textual analysis, the study focuses on the experiences of catechists who participated from 2008 to 2019. Data sources include program proceedings, reflection papers, and semi-structured interviews with two catechists from each area. The findings highlight how interfaith engagement enriches catechetical ministry, fosters understanding, and adapts pastoral practices to religiously diverse environments.*

**Keywords:** Catechetical Ministry, Interfaith understanding, Silsilah Dialogue Movement, Formation Program, Roman Catholic

## INTRODUCTION

In an increasingly multicultural and religiously diverse society, the role of catechesis in fostering interfaith dialogue has become more crucial than ever. This study explores the lessons learned by Roman Catholic Catechists from their interactions with Islamic Faith Teachers (Madaris-Gurus) through the Silsilah Dialogue Movement's (SDM) Madaris-Gurus and Catechists Formation Program. Established in 1984, SDM aims to promote understanding and harmony among various religious groups in Mindanao, where historical tensions often stem from cultural and religious differences. Since its inception, the Madaris-Gurus and Catechists Formation Program has facilitated meaningful collaboration between Madaris-Gurus—educators in Arabic and Islamic faith—and Roman Catholic Catechists. Initially designed for male Islamic educators and mixed-gender Catechists from 2008 to 2012, the program later expanded to include female Muslim participants following the Department of Education's Islamic Values Formation initiative, known as Arabic Language and Islamic Values Education (ALIVE), which was launched in 2013-2014.

The program addresses pressing challenges, such as violence and radicalism among Muslim youth, by reinforcing the commitment of Madaris-Gurus to dialogue and peace. Simultaneously, it enhances the formation of Catechists in alignment with the Church's mission to engage in dialogue within the unique religious and cultural contexts of Zamboanga City, Basilan, and Jolo. This present research aims to fill a notable gap in the literature regarding the practical impact of interfaith interactions among Roman Catholic Catechists and Islamic Faith and Values educators on catechetical practices in these ecclesiastical contexts. The specific objective is to explore the changes in catechetical content, teaching strategies, and pastoral approaches resulting from these interfaith engagements. This research further aims to offer valuable insights into the perceived effects of interfaith understanding on catechetical ministry in these communities. The findings will contribute to the academic discourse on interfaith dialogue and have significant implications for local practices and community relations.

### ***Previous Research on Silsilah's Initiatives***

Silsilah Dialogue Movement is the pioneering movement on the island of Mindanao with a primary mission to promote dialogue as a path to peace and harmony in society. Fr. Sebastiano D'Ambra, PIME, began to gather Muslim and Christian friends in the city and slowly established the movement now known as the Silsilah Dialogue Movement. Starting with a small circle of Muslim and Christian friends, he formally founded the movement on May 9, 1984, his birthday (D'Ambra, 2008).

Sattar's 2010 study, which utilized observations and focus group discussions, revealed that interfaith initiatives like the SDM had a significantly positive impact by fostering grassroots-level dialogue crucial for lasting peace. This form of dialogue focused on reaching poor and struggling communities that required attention. SDM responded with long-term formation programs aimed at promoting interfaith understanding and improving the community's capacity to address socio-economic challenges (Sattar, 2010).

Copuz (2021) examined SDM from a postcolonial-interreligious perspective. His dissertation utilized postcolonial theological frameworks and Andrew Orton's

seven key questions for interfaith dialogue to analyze SDM's operations. His findings indicated that SDM adopts an inclusive-pluralist theological stance in advocating for harmony and the co-existence of multiple religions without erasing differences. Corpuz found out that this approach helps enrich participants' religious heritage through interfaith encounters and promote a Culture of Dialogue (COD) encompassing dialogue with God, self, others, and creation (Corpuz, 2021).

Despite these valuable insights, a significant gap remains in the literature regarding specific programs of the Silsilah Dialogue Movement, particularly the Madaris-Gurus and Catechists Formation Program. This lack of focused research underscores the need for a deeper understanding of how such programs contribute to the Catholic Church's mission in Mindanao. Specifically, it calls for an examination of their impact on catechetical practices and interfaith dialogue in the region.

### ***The Concept of Interfaith Understanding in Religious Education***

Highlighted in most of the recent scholarly discussions surrounding interfaith understanding in religious education is its transformative potential in fostering peace-building and mutual respect among communities that are religiously diverse. Kruja (2022) explores the role of interfaith education within Albania's religious institutions, highlighting how collaboration between Islamic, Catholic, and Orthodox communities has contributed to peace-building and co-existence. Kruja asserts that religious education, when framed within an interfaith context, transcends doctrinal boundaries to address broader societal concerns, including human rights, social justice, and civic harmony. Similarly, Peacock (2023) emphasizes the necessity of sustained, meaningful contact between different faith groups in interfaith education. Her research critiques superficial approaches to dialogue and advocates for a model that centers on personal encounters and lived experiences. According to Peacock, authentic interfaith understanding emerges from continuous interactions that challenge and reshape theological and pedagogical assumptions.

Further examining the dynamics of interfaith education in the context of Islamic religious education, the analysis presented in Nafisah et al.'s study (2024) reveals that historical, cultural, and geopolitical factors contribute significantly to interfaith tensions. Echoing earlier insights from Singh (2019) and Syed and Ali (2021), the authors assert that religious education plays a pivotal role in addressing these underlying issues by promoting inclusive narratives and fostering empathy.

To better understand the connection between interfaith dialogue and religious education and contextualize it further, one might ask: How does interfaith dialogue influence catechetical practices in areas with significant religious and cultural diversity?

### ***Interfaith Dialogue in Catechetical Practices***

At the outset, it is essential to distinguish and understand the relationship between Catholic Religious Education (CRE) and Catechesis. Sultana (2020) provides a nuanced exploration of how these two distinct fields complement each other within the broader framework of faith education. Catechesis typically occurs within a faith community, emphasizing personal adherence to Christ and spiritual formation. CRE, on the other hand, as practiced in educational institutions, emphasizes academic rigor, critical thinking, and cultural awareness, serving primarily an educational role rather than a formative one. Sultana contrasts this distinction by examining various

contexts, such as Poland, where CRE closely aligns with catechetical practices, and England and Wales, where CRE is treated more as a broader religious studies curriculum. He argues that maintaining a clear distinction between the two allows each to serve its unique purpose more effectively, preventing indoctrination while preserving the academic integrity of CRE.

Applying this distinction to the context of Mindanao, Philippines, where this study is situated, one observes an interesting interplay between CRE and Catechesis in Catholic schools. While CRE should, in theory, focus on academic instruction about Christianity and foster critical thinking, what is often offered to students, particularly at the primary and secondary levels, is closer to Catechesis. These programs go beyond intellectual instruction, deepening personal faith and encouraging commitment to Christ. This blend of roles in educational settings reflects the unique socio-religious landscape of Mindanao, where faith formation and academic instruction are intertwined to address students' spiritual and intellectual needs, especially in a region with diverse religious traditions. Quimson (2021) examines the essential role of catechists in teaching students from diverse religious backgrounds in the context of Grade 12 classroom at the University of Santo Tomas. His study reveals that catechists are pivotal in making religious education relevant and engaging, particularly in a multicultural classroom environment. Through the program called "Fundamentals of Faith" (FunFaith) course, catechists successfully facilitated discussions that increased awareness of the Catholic faith and encouraged non-Catholic and non-Christian students to explore the parallels with their own beliefs. The findings emphasize that catechists are to be encouraged to adopt an integral approach to teaching that integrates life experiences and moral dimensions into their lessons to resonate with students' diverse backgrounds. Quimson adds that continuous catechist formation is crucial for keeping educators informed about modern trends in religious education and social issues, enabling them to create an inclusive atmosphere that respects various beliefs. Furthermore, by providing prayer spaces and fellowship opportunities, catechists can cultivate a community where interfaith interactions thrive, extending the impact of catechesis beyond the classroom through collaboration with pastoral ministries.

Exploring the role of catechists in the context of evangelization and interfaith dialogue in places where Muslim population forms the vast majority, Daud (2021) describes Catechists as key figures who engage with both Christian and Muslim communities, often serving in rural areas where Christian families are scattered. The catechists, being local religious leaders, are responsible for nurturing the Christian faith while also engaging in socio-political dialogue with Muslims. This dialogue, Daud observes, is not primarily focused on religion but on mutual understanding and co-existence. Catechists are trained to be aware of Islamic studies, which helps them find common ground, especially since both Islam and Christianity share Abrahamic roots. The article also highlights the importance of practical outreach, such as fasting together during Ramadan and Lent, and the role of catechists' families in fostering interfaith relationships. Social services, such as schools and hospitals, are noted as effective avenues for dialogue, as they serve both Muslim and Christian communities.

While these contributions are significant, there remains a notable gap in the literature concerning the role and influence of interfaith understanding in catechetical practices. This gap is especially evident within the identified ecclesial territory and in contexts where Catholics are minorities or integrated within diverse religious and

cultural settings. Understanding these dynamics is essential for developing effective catechetical approaches that promote harmony and mutual respect in multicultural environments.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design, supported by documentary review and textual analysis, to explore the experiences of catechists participating in the Silsilah Madaris-Gurus and Catechists Formation Program between 2008 and 2019.

When conducting research involving human participants, ethical considerations are paramount. In this study, all respondents were provided with an Ethical and Data Privacy Consent Form detailing the study's objectives, procedures, potential risks, and benefits. This form also clarified their rights, including the right to withdraw from the study at any point without consequence. Participants reviewed and signed the form. This ensured informed consent and a full understanding of the research process before any data was collected. To protect the privacy of the participants, strict measures were implemented. All responses were anonymized by assigning unique codes to ensure no personally identifiable information could be traced back to individual participants. Physical documents were securely stored in a filing system accessible only to the researcher, while electronic data were encrypted and stored on password-protected devices.

In compliance with the Data Privacy Act of 2012 (RA 10173), all personal information was handled confidentially and solely for research purposes. The study was reviewed and approved by an ethics committee to ensure adherence to ethical research standards. No identifying details were disclosed in any reports, presentations, or publications resulting from this research. These measures ensured the confidentiality, security, and integrity of participant data throughout the study.

### ***Document Analysis and Textual Analysis***

Document analysis utilized in this study involved the systematic review of training materials, program records, and reflection papers produced by participants. This process facilitated the identification of recurring themes and program objectives and documented transformations in catechists' approaches to interfaith dialogue and pedagogy. The researcher obtained permission from the Silsilah Dialogue Movement administration to access their archives, specifically, the section titled "Other Formation Programs (XI through XII)," which includes activity proceedings and participant insight papers. This access provided valuable primary data on catechists' experiences and reflections in the formation programs.

Textual analysis was used to critically examine the language, concepts, and narratives within the documents, uncovering deeper patterns and insights that informed the study's findings. Semi-structured interviews complemented this by capturing personal accounts from catechists, allowing for an in-depth understanding of their experiences, challenges, and learnings.

### ***Semi-Structured Interviews***

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with six (6) selected catechists during stay-over visits to their homes in Zamboanga City, Basilan, and Jolo between



January 12-29, 2024. Each visit lasted three days, during which the researcher accompanied each respondent in their daily duties as catechists. The interview questionnaire was designed to gather in-depth insights from catechists who participated in the Silsilah Madaris-Gurus and Catechists Formation Program. The instrument focuses on five key areas: participants' personal background and motivations, their experiences during the program, the lessons learned, the impact on their catechetical practices, and their engagement in interfaith dialogue and community relations.

1. Personal background and motivation in participating in the Silsilah program:
  - Can you please describe your role as a catechist and your involvement in the Silsilah's Madaris-Gurus and Catechists Formation Program?
  - What motivated you to participate in this program?
  - How long have you been a catechist, and what communities or parishes do you serve?
2. Experience in the Silsilah Program:
  - What were your expectations before participating in the Silsilah program?
  - Can you describe your experience during the program? What were some of the most memorable aspects for you?
  - How did the program influence your understanding of interfaith dialogue and cooperation?
3. Lessons Learned:
  - What are some of the key lessons you learned from the Silsilah program? Can you provide specific examples?
  - How have these lessons influenced your approach to catechetical content?
  - Have there been any changes in your pedagogical strategies or pastoral approaches as a result of participating in the program?
4. Impact on Catechetical Practices:
  - In what ways has the Silsilah program impacted your catechetical practices?
  - Can you give examples of how you have integrated interfaith understanding into your catechetical sessions?
  - How have these changes been received by your students and the community?
5. Interfaith Dialogue and Community Relations:
  - How has your relationship with the Muslim community evolved as a result of participating in the Silsilah program?
  - Can you share an example of a positive interaction or collaboration with Madaris-Gurus or Muslim leaders that came about because of the program?
  - What challenges, if any, have you faced in implementing interfaith dialogue in your catechetical ministry, and how have you overcome them?

The interviews, spanning approximately a day and a half per catechist and done mostly in Cebuano, allowed for in-depth conversations and observations. Each of these interviews was audio-recorded with the permission of the respondents. The

recorded interviews were later carefully transcribed and translated into English. Respondents were given copies of the transcript for corrections and confirmation of the content.

### ***Profile of the Respondents***

The respondents for the semi-structured interviews were selected based on specific criteria, focusing on their extensive involvement in the Silsilah Madaris-Gurus and Catechists Formation Program, years of service as catechists, and their teaching experience across different age groups, particularly Grades six (6) to eleven (11), as well as adult catechesis. This paper assigns pseudonyms to each respondent to maintain anonymity and confidentiality while also capturing their experiences and backgrounds concerning the program.

Respondent 1 has been a catechist for the past 14 years. She is a mother of two daughters and married to a Muslim, yet she has chosen to maintain her Catholic faith. This unique personal situation, where she navigates the complexities of an interfaith marriage, informs much of her catechetical work, especially as she serves as a point of contact between the Catholic and Muslim communities. Her teaching spans a broad spectrum, engaging with students of all ages, from young children to adults. The breadth of her involvement highlights her dedication to religious education and adaptability in engaging with different age groups.

Her commitment to interfaith understanding led her to participate in the Silsilah program starting in 2014. Over the years, she has become a recognized figure in her community, serving not only as a catechist but also as a bridge between two religious worlds. Her dual role—as a religious educator and a wife in an interfaith marriage—places her in a unique position to navigate the challenges of religious co-existence in her community.

A veteran catechist, Respondent 2 has devoted thirty-five (35) years to religious education and catechetical ministry. She is a widow, having been married to a Muslim man, and a mother to four children—two daughters and two sons. Her personal life, deeply rooted in an interfaith dynamic, has shaped her understanding of both Catholic and Muslim religious practices. Despite the challenges of living in a predominantly Muslim community, she has remained committed to her faith, balancing her personal life with her professional responsibilities as a catechist.

Respondent 2's role as a catechist encompasses all levels of religious education, from young children to adults. Her extensive service allows her to engage with a wide range of learners, which has helped her to develop a versatile teaching style. She has been a participant in the Silsilah program since its inception in 2008. She has built a reputation in her community as a seasoned educator, drawing from her personal experiences in an interfaith family to navigate the complexities of teaching in a religiously diverse environment.

Respondent 3 has been serving as a catechist for twenty-three (23) years. She is married to a Catholic and is a mother of three daughters. Her role as a catechist involves teaching all grade levels, including adult catechesis, making her a key figure in religious education within her community. Over the years, she has developed a deep connection with her students, drawing from her long-term involvement in catechesis to create an inclusive and supportive learning environment. Her participation in the Silsilah program, from 2015 to 2019, allowed her to expand her understanding

of religious dialogue and interfaith relationships. She continues to be a respected figure in her parish, known for her dedication to teaching and her ability to adapt her methods to suit her students' needs.

Respondent 4, a professed missionary sister, has spent the past twenty-five (25) years focusing on youth catechesis. Her work as a missionary sister is deeply rooted in her commitment to religious education and formation, particularly among young people. Over the years, she has developed a comprehensive catechetical program that seeks to engage youth in meaningful religious discussions, helping them to navigate their faith in a rapidly changing world. Her participation in the Silsilah program from 2016 to 2019 aligned with her broader mission of promoting peace and understanding within her community. As a missionary sister, she brings a unique perspective to the program, drawing from her years of service in religious education and formation. Her role in the community is as an educator and a spiritual leader, guiding young people through their faith journeys while fostering an environment of mutual respect and understanding.

Respondent 5 has been a catechist for twenty-seven (27) years. She is a widow of a Muslim man and a mother to five children. Her personal life, shaped by her interfaith marriage, has greatly influenced her approach to catechetical teaching. She is well-versed in addressing the challenges that arise from religious diversity within her family and community. This has equipped her with a nuanced understanding of the delicate balance between faith and interfaith co-existence. In her role as a catechist, she has been actively involved in teaching across all grade levels. Her participation in the Silsilah program from 2011 to 2019 in Zamboanga allowed her to deepen her understanding of interfaith dynamics within the context of religious education. She has built strong relationships with her students, using her life experiences to inform her teaching. Her role in the community goes beyond that of a catechist; she serves as a mediator and advocate for peaceful co-existence between religious groups.

With thirty (30) years of experience as a catechist, Respondent 6 has been a cornerstone of religious education within her parish community. Married to a Catholic and with no children, she has dedicated her life to teaching both youth and adults. Her long tenure as a catechist has given her the opportunity to develop a deep understanding of her community's religious landscape. She is known for her compassionate teaching style and ability to connect with students of all ages. Her participation in the Silsilah program from 2010 to 2019, provided her with additional resources to address the religious diversity within her community. Her dedication to her role as a catechist is evident in her long-standing service and her commitment to promoting understanding and empathy in her teaching.

## **RESULTS/FINDINGS**

### ***From the Document Analysis***

According to the proceedings from 2008 to 2019, the program's design featured a three-day stay-in activity. This allowed for close interactions between Muslim and Christian participants. The engagement is structured around presenting social issues through the lens of Islamic and Christian teachings, often delivered by influential local leaders from faith and academics. The format aimed at fostering reflective discussions and the sharing of personal experiences. The



program consistently addressed diverse social issues, including the role of religion in countering extremism, values formation, and the promotion of a culture of dialogue and truth-telling. SDM uses the Three-One-Thirds approach to learning, which the Education for Life Foundation has popularized. The first third involves learning from the facilitator, who shares insights and experiences with participants in both formal and informal settings. The second third emphasizes peer learning, where participants gain knowledge from one another. The final third highlights the significance of personal experience, requiring self-reflection to uncover biases that may hinder true understanding; together, these elements are seen to facilitate a comprehensive and effective learning process (Batangan & Pilario, 2017).

The communal meals, shared prayer times, and the requirement for participants to submit written insights at the end of the program contributed to a holistic and immersive experience. For eleven (11) years, the program held a total of twenty-three (23) sessions across various locations, including Harmony Village in Zamboanga City, Jolo, Basilan, Cagayan de Oro City, Davao City in Mindanao, and Antipolo in Luzon.

Of the four hundred sixty (460) insight papers from Muslim and Catholic participants, the catechists wrote two hundred forty-nine (249). Photo-copied and read, these insight papers were written in English, except for a few written in Filipino. In analyzing them, a manual coding process was employed to identify recurring themes that reflected the catechists' experiences and realizations. The manual coding involved a step-by-step approach to categorizing the data into key thematic areas, which emerged consistently across the documents. This process ensured that the themes were captured with accuracy and provided insight into the program's impact on interfaith understanding.

All the selected insight papers were read to gain an overall sense of the content. During this stage, key phrases, sentences, and insights were highlighted that seemed relevant to the themes of Catechist's perceptions and learning from their encounters with Islamic faith teachers and how this would somehow influence their Catechetical practices.

A thematic coding framework was developed based on the objectives of the study. The themes identified were:

1. Enhanced Interfaith Understanding
2. Realization of Shared Humanity with Muslim Counterparts
3. Admission of Bias Against Muslim Counterparts
4. Awareness of Common Challenges in Religious Education (such as secularization that some defined as disinterest and indifference towards what is religious)
5. Realization of Friendship Potential with Islamic Faith Teachers
6. Sense of Non-Competition and Rejection of Demonization between Faith Groups
7. Openness to Teaching Inclusivity and Encouragement of Kindness Toward Children from Other Religions

Each insight paper was segmented into meaningful units of information (e.g.,

paragraphs, sentences, or phrases). Each segment was assigned to one or more of the thematic categories. Using a table format, the segments were manually coded according to the thematic framework. This allowed for the themes to be tracked across the data set and ensured consistency in identifying patterns. To enhance the reliability of the manual coding, a sample of insight papers was cross-checked by another researcher. Any discrepancies in theme identification were discussed and resolved. Table 1 below shows the themes identified in reading the insight papers, the frequency of mention and the sample quotes or insights.

Table 1. Themes from Insight Papers written by Catechist Participants

Theme	Frequency (Number of insight papers in which it is mentioned or referred to)	Sample Quotes/Insights
Enhanced Interfaith Understanding	200	“Through the dialogue we did during the sessions, I realized that Muslims and Christians both seek peace.”
Realization of Shared Humanity with Muslim Counterparts	178	“We share more in common with our Muslim brothers and sisters than I ever thought possible.”
Admittance of Bias Against Muslim Counterparts	120	“I do not deny that I had biases against them... but this program challenged me to look deeper and see beyond stereotypes.”
Common Challenges in Religious Education (Indifference to Religious Education and Secularization)	160	“Both Catholics and Muslims are struggling with growing indifference towards religion and secularization, these affect our classrooms in similar ways.”
Realization of Friendship Potential with Islamic Faith Teachers	140	“This program helped me realize that we can become friends and work together in nurturing faith in the youth.”
Non-Competition and Rejection of Demonization	130	“Instead of competing or viewing each other negatively, we can support each other’s efforts to educate and build values.”
Openness to Teaching Inclusivity	170	“After the sessions, I became more conscious of showing kindness to children from other religions, treating them with care.”

**From the Semi-Structured Interview**

For the data gleaned from the semi-structured interviews, manual coding process was utilized to analyze the qualitative data collected from Respondents 1 to 6, who participated in the Silsilah’s Madaris-Gurus and Catechists Formation Program. In Table 2, the researcher identified several intended and emerging themes through this process. Each theme is accompanied by the frequency of mentions across the six respondents and sample quotes illustrating their perspectives.

Table 2. Themes From Respondents' Experience During and After their Involvement in Silsilah's Madaris-Gurus and Catechists Formation Program

Themes	Type	Number of Mentions	Sample Quotes
1. Interfaith Understanding	Intended	6	"I learned to respect the Islamic faith while deepening my own." (Respondent 1)
2. Catechetical Practices	Intended	5	"The program inspired me to adopt more interactive teaching methods." (Respondent 5)
3. Impact of the Silsilah Program	Intended	6	"The program has transformed my approach to teaching and community engagement." (Respondent 2)
4. Community Engagement	Intended	5	"I initiated interfaith activities that have fostered collaboration" (Respondent 6)
5. Challenges in Interfaith Dialogue	Emerging	4	"There were initial hesitations from community members regarding our programs." (Respondent 4)
6. Personal Transformation	Emerging	6	"My experiences have profoundly changed my understanding of others, specially of Muslims." (Respondent 3)
7. Transformational Experiences	Emerging	6	"The [2013] Zamboanga Siege changed everything for me; I found common humanity in my Friend who is an Ustadz. Our Friendship started at Silsilah and was deepened during that crisis." (Respondent 6)
8. Inclusive Teaching Methods	Emerging	5	"I've learned to teach with gentleness and compassion because my students are not only Catholics." (Respondent 5)
9. Building Relationships Across Faiths	Emerging	5	"Friendships with Madaris-Gurus have been incredibly memorable. We are still friends today." (Respondent 4)
10. Resistance and Acceptance	Emerging	4	"Some community members were resistant at first seeing me getting active in reaching out to them [Muslims], but change is gradual." (Respondent 1)
11. The Role of Personal Experiences	Emerging	5	"My interactions have shown me the goodness in every person." (Respondent 6)
12. Collaboration and Community Support	Emerging	6	"Students become better persons when taught with gentleness and compassion."
13. Syncretistic Views	Emerging	4	"I came to believe that Islam and Christianity are just the same in many aspects... even in doctrines, there are very similar points" (Respondent 2)

DISCUSSIONS

The themes identified from the qualitative analysis of insight papers and interviews can be categorized as ‘lessons’ learned by catechists participating in the Madaris-Gurus and Catechists Formation Program. These lessons reflect their enhanced interfaith understanding, shared humanity with their Muslim counterparts, and significant transformations in their pedagogical approaches.

A significant lesson learned by catechists was the value of interfaith understanding. Engaging with Islamic faith teachers allowed them to appreciate diverse beliefs while deepening their own faith. The literature indicates that interreligious dialogue fosters respect and empathy across faiths, emphasizing the need for solidarity among diverse groups (Gustafson, 2020; Sen, 2019). This recognition of shared humanity is essential for building effective interfaith initiatives.

Catechists also acknowledged their shared humanity with Muslims, leading to profound friendships. Collaborations that emphasize justice and ethical actions can significantly reduce social inequalities (Miles-Tribble, 2020). This mutual recognition fosters community and solidarity, which are critical for the success of interfaith engagements (Berger, 2014).

However, the journey toward interfaith understanding required catechists to confront their own biases. Many admitted that their initial motivations for engagement stemmed from a desire to argue rather than listen. Recognizing these biases was an essential step toward humility, a virtue that scholars argue is indispensable for genuine dialogue (Lattu, 2019). By approaching interfaith conversations with an open heart, catechists shifted from a defensive stance to one of cooperation, paving the way for more profound connections.

These transformations took place against the backdrop of shared challenges in religious education, such as secularization and waning interest among youth. Catechists recognized the need to adapt their teaching methods to address these issues effectively, striving to make religious education more inclusive and relevant to a diverse audience (Berger, 2014). This adaptability ensured that their engagement with interfaith initiatives was not only meaningful but also aligned with contemporary educational demands.

The friendships forged between catechists and Islamic faith teachers exemplified the potential of interfaith dialogue to transcend boundaries. Such bonds not only enriched personal growth but also contributed to a broader culture of peace (Gustafson, 2020; Habermas & Ratzinger, 2006). By building trust and understanding, these relationships illustrated the transformative power of cooperation across faiths.

Central to these experiences was the catechists' rejection of competition and demonization between religious groups. Their encounters reinforced the belief that interfaith relations should be defined by mutual cooperation rather than rivalry, aligning with the idea that understanding religious plurality fosters solidarity (Habermas & Ratzinger, 2006). This perspective highlighted the necessity of emphasizing unity amid diversity in their ministry.

Inclusivity emerged as a key principle in the catechists' teaching practices, as they sought to ensure that children from diverse religious backgrounds felt respected and valued. This inclusivity was expressed in practical actions, such as accommodating Muslim students during Christian faith discussions, reflecting the catechists' commitment to kindness and respect. Such gestures resonated with the broader understanding of interreligious dialogue to foster compassion while deepening one's faith (Gustafson, 2020; Lattu, 2019).

Moreover, a significant development in catechetical practice contextualized within this commitment to inclusivity is the implementation of interfaith collaborative projects. For instance, catechists have begun organizing joint community service

initiatives with Islamic faith teachers and students. These projects foster a spirit of cooperation and provide practical opportunities for catechists and students to engage in shared values, such as compassion and social justice while respecting their respective religious identities.

Furthermore, developing inclusive curricula that reflect students' diverse backgrounds is becoming increasingly important. By integrating teachings that highlight common ethical principles and moral teachings found in Christianity and Islam, catechists can create an environment that values diversity while grounding students in their faith traditions (Lattu, 2019). This contextualization fosters a deeper understanding of inclusivity as a passive acceptance and an active engagement in dialogue, cooperation, and shared moral commitment.

While the benefits of interfaith dialogue are evident, catechists must remain vigilant about the dangers of syncretism, where blending different religious beliefs can dilute core teachings. Among the six interviewed catechists, three are either married to a Muslim or have been widowed by one, placing them in uniquely hybrid religious contexts. These catechists exemplify the complexities of interfaith relationships as they navigate their roles as religious educators within households that embody elements from both Catholic and Islamic traditions.

In these hybrid homes, catechists often experience firsthand the challenges and rewards of interfaith living. They are called to find ways to honor their Catholic faith while also respecting and understanding the Islamic faith of their spouses or deceased partners. This situation presents both a unique opportunity for deepened interfaith dialogue and a challenge to maintain a clear religious identity. The blending of traditions can foster an environment of mutual respect and compassion, but it can also lead to potential confusion about core religious teachings if not carefully navigated.

However, it is vital for catechists to recognize and address the potential pitfalls of syncretism. Blending practices and beliefs can sometimes lead to a dilution of core teachings if catechists are not well-versed in their faith traditions. Ongoing faith formation provides the framework to help them navigate these complexities, ensuring they engage in meaningful dialogue without compromising their faith identity. Scholars like Berger (2014) emphasize that a strong theological foundation allows catechists to negotiate the tensions inherent in interfaith engagement, enabling them to draw from their own faith convictions while fostering understanding and respect for others. Ongoing faith formation is, therefore, crucial for these catechists, as it allows them to remain grounded in their Catholic faith. Engaging in regular theological education helps them articulate their faith clearly and confidently, providing them with the tools needed to discuss and reflect on their experiences in a hybrid context. This foundation strengthens their faith and equips them to serve as role models for their students and families.

In addressing the findings of the Madaris-Gurus and Catechists Formation Program, it is crucial to acknowledge the limitations inherent in the methodology and theoretical frameworks employed in this research. While qualitative methods, such as interviews and content analysis, provide rich, context-specific insights into the experiences of catechists, they also come with certain constraints. For instance, qualitative research often relies on a limited sample size, which may not fully represent the diversity of perspectives within the broader community (Creswell,



2007). Consequently, the findings might not be generalizable to all catechists or interfaith contexts, thereby restricting the conclusions' applicability.

Furthermore, the theoretical frameworks guiding this study, such as interreligious dialogue and solidarity, while valuable, may inadvertently obscure other important dimensions of faith formation and interfaith engagement. Scholars like Berger (2014) emphasize the importance of recognizing the complexities of religious identity in dialogue; however, the present study may have oversimplified these dynamics. The emphasis on dialogue as a vehicle for solidarity might overlook potential tensions or conflicts that can arise in interfaith interactions and therefore could lead to an incomplete understanding of the catechists' experiences.

Thus, readers should approach the findings with a critical lens, recognizing that while they provide valuable insights into the benefits and challenges of interfaith dialogue, they are also shaped by this research's specific methodological and theoretical limitations. Future studies could benefit from employing a more diverse range of methodologies, including quantitative approaches or mixed methods, to enhance the robustness of the findings and further explore the intricacies of interfaith engagements among catechists.

## CONCLUSIONS

This research aimed to fill a notable gap in the literature regarding the practical impact of interfaith interactions among Roman Catholic Catechists and Islamic Faith and Values educators on catechetical practices within specific ecclesiastical contexts of Zamboanga, Basilan and Jolo, Mindanao, Philippines. The findings of this study illuminate the shift of perspectives among Catechists from engagements with the religious other, particularly in terms of enhanced interfaith understanding, the development of shared humanity, and changes in teaching strategies and pastoral approaches. The lessons learned from SDM's Madaris-Gurus and Catechists Formation Program highlight the significant potential of interfaith dialogue to enrich catechetical practices. Catechists reported a greater appreciation for diverse beliefs and a commitment to inclusivity in their teaching. These experiences fostered a sense of solidarity and mutual respect, essential components in addressing common challenges faced in religious education today, such as secularization and youth disinterest.

However, this study also underscores the critical need for ongoing faith formation. While the benefits of interfaith dialogue are evident, there remains a risk of syncretism, which could dilute the core teachings of the Catholic faith. Catechists are called to maintain a strong theological foundation while remaining open to the promptings of the Spirit to navigate the complexities of interfaith relations effectively. As they deepen their own faith, they are better equipped to engage in meaningful dialogue that transcends mere co-existence, ultimately fostering genuine relationships between diverse religious communities.

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