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Understanding and Practice of The Sacrament of Reconciliation among The Faithful: A Case Study at Doan Arung Station, Saint Theresia of Lisieux Parish, Saripoi

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ABSTRACT

The Sacrament of Reconciliation serves as a means through which the faithful are reconciled with God and the Church; however, the congregation of Doan Arung Station, Saint Theresia of Lisieux Parish, Saripoi, has not received this sacrament since 2012. This study aimed to describe the understanding and practice of the Doan Arung congregation regarding the Sacrament of Reconciliation and to identify the factors influencing them. A descriptive phenomenological qualitative approach was employed, involving ten purposively selected informants: the parish priest, station leader, literate congregants, youth, and congregants with limited literacy. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and document analysis, and were analyzed using Colaizzi's method. The findings revealed four main themes: (1) a declining understanding of the sacrament that had not been reinforced since the 2012 catechetical instruction; (2) Father Danang's ministry in 2012 as the primary sacramental experience remembered by senior congregants; (3) multiple barriers, including geographical distance and damaged roads, limited church facilities, restricted priest visitation schedules, literacy limitations, and reluctance within a small and closely connected community; and (4) a consistent desire among all informant groups for the restoration of this sacramental service. The study recommends implementing a more structured pastoral schedule, strengthening the role of lay catechists, and adopting oral catechetical approaches for congregants with limited literacy in remote mission stations.

INTRODUCTION

Of the seven sacraments professed by the Catholic Church, the Sacrament of Reconciliation (Penance) holds a distinctive position because it is closely related to the restoration of the relationship between human beings who have fallen into sin and God. The Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC), Article 1422, affirms that through this sacrament, sinners obtain reconciliation with God and, at the same time, with the Church. Canon 989 of the Code of Canon Law requires every member of the faithful who has reached the age of discretion to confess grave sins of which they are aware at least once a year. This theological ideal is expected to be embraced by all Catholics regardless of their geographical location, including those living in small and remote communities such as Doan Arung Station, one of the stations within the Diocese of Palangka Raya (Doyle, 2012).

However, realities in the field do not always correspond to this ideal. Stations with limited access to priests and inadequate worship facilities often experience a gap between the Church's theological expectations regarding the sacrament and the actual sacramental practices of the faithful (Cauchi, 2012; Fastiggi, 2026). This condition is evident at Doan Arung Station, Saint Theresia of Lisieux Parish, Saripoi, Diocese of Palangka Raya. Established in 2011, the station currently consists of 14 households with 32 members. However, records indicate that the last celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation at this station took place in 2012 and was administered by Fr. Danang. Thus, more than a decade has passed without a sacramental celebration of Reconciliation in this community. This prolonged absence has been compounded by several contextual factors: the church building has only been used since 2025 and remains unfinished; the station is located approximately 11.4 kilometers away and can only be accessed through a damaged company road that becomes increasingly difficult to travel during the rainy season; priestly visits occur only once or twice a month; and some community members have limited literacy and therefore depend primarily on oral explanations during catechetical instruction.

Several previous studies have highlighted similar concerns. Tinenti (2022) found that the Sacrament of Reconciliation was often practiced merely as a formal obligation without sufficient understanding. Senda (2023) reported that both the understanding and practice of the sacrament among Catholic university students remained relatively low. Thalar and Silpanus (2022) identified intrinsic and extrinsic factors influencing Catholic youths' motivation to receive the sacrament, while Suwito (2023) emphasized the confidentiality of confession as a psychological challenge within small communities. Indra (2024) identified several barriers, including shame, superficial understanding, and moral relativism. Most of these studies employed quantitative approaches that measured levels of understanding numerically and were conducted in urban or educational settings. To date, limited research has specifically explored the lived experiences of the faithful in remote stations facing multiple challenges, including geographical isolation and limited literacy, as experienced by the community of Doan Arung Station. This contextual, methodological, and geographical gap provides the scientific rationale for the present study.

The urgency of this research lies in the need to understand the broader implications of prolonged absence of the Sacrament of Reconciliation within a faith community. Beyond the canonical obligation to confess grave sins annually, the absence of this sacramental ministry may influence the spiritual lives of the faithful, their relationship with God, and their sense of belonging to the Church. Understanding how the Doan Arung community has experienced this absence, the factors preventing the restoration of sacramental services, and the hopes expressed by the faithful is essential for developing effective pastoral strategies applicable to similar contexts. This research contributes to pastoral theology by examining the intersection of geographical isolation, limited literacy, and sacramental practice within a remote mission station.

The novelty of this research lies in its focus on the lived experiences of the faithful in a remote mission station characterized by multiple contextual challenges and limited literacy. Unlike previous studies that examined the understanding and practice of the sacrament primarily in urban or educational settings, this study explored the phenomenon from the perspective of a community that had experienced the absence of sacramental

ministry for more than a decade. The descriptive phenomenological approach enabled an in-depth exploration of the cognitive, affective, and conative dimensions of the faithful's relationship with the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Furthermore, the inclusion of informants with limited literacy provided valuable insights into how catechetical approaches can be adapted for communities that rely strongly on oral traditions and interpersonal explanation.

Based on these issues, this article aimed to describe and interpret the understanding of the faithful at Doan Arung Station regarding the Sacrament of Reconciliation, encompassing cognitive, affective, and conative dimensions; explore their experiences and practices related to the sacrament, including their experiences during the absence of sacramental ministry since 2012; identify factors that hindered and supported their understanding and practice of the sacrament; and formulate the essence of the community's lived experience as a foundation for contextual pastoral recommendations.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach with a descriptive phenomenological design to explore the lived experiences of the faithful at Doan Arung Station regarding their understanding and practice of the Sacrament of Reconciliation. The descriptive phenomenological approach emphasized the exploration of participants' experiences through systematic interpretation while applying epoche or bracketing to minimize researcher bias. This principle was particularly important because the researcher was a member of the Doan Arung Station community (an insider).

The study was conducted at Doan Arung Station, within the pastoral area of Saint Theresia of Lisieux Parish, Diocese of Palangka Raya. Field data collection was carried out over two weeks, from 27 May to 11 June 2026. Informants were selected using purposive sampling based on the following criteria: (1) registered members or pastoral ministers of Doan Arung Station/Saint Theresia of Lisieux Parish, Saripoi; (2) willingness to participate voluntarily; (3) ability to communicate orally; and (4) possession of relevant knowledge or experience related to the research focus. A total of ten informants participated, consisting of the parish priest (IF-01), station head (IF-02), four literate parishioners (IF-04–IF-07), two Catholic youths/OMK members (IF-08 and IF-10), and two parishioners with limited literacy (IF-03 and IF-09), as presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Research Informant Profiles

Code	Category	Relevant characteristics
IF-01	Parish Priest	Understands parish pastoral policies, the pattern of visits to the station, and the history of sacramental ministry since 2012.
IF-02	Station Head	Knows the history of the station since its establishment and serves as the main liaison between the faithful and the parish.
IF-03, IF-09	Illiterate parishioners	Rely on oral explanations in receiving catechesis and still remember the 2012 experience through oral recollection.
IF-04, IF-05	Literate parishioners	Had experienced and received the Sacrament of Reconciliation before the prolonged absence of sacramental ministry since 2012.
IF-06, IF-07	Literate parishioners	IF-07 settled in the station after 2012 and has never experienced the Sacrament of Reconciliation in this station.
IF-08, IF-10	Youth / OMK	Have never received the Sacrament of Reconciliation sacramentally.

Data were collected through three techniques: semi-structured in-depth interviews as the primary method, participant observation of the station's physical conditions, worship facilities, and community ecclesial life, and document analysis of parish registers, station records, and Church archives related to the history and sacramental records of the faithful. Interviews were conducted orally for informants with limited literacy. The data were analyzed using Colaizzi's (1978) descriptive phenomenological method, which involved identifying significant statements, formulating meanings, developing themes, synthesizing an exhaustive description, and validating the findings through member checking. Data trustworthiness was ensured through source triangulation, technique triangulation, member checking, and maintenance of an audit trail. The study also followed research ethics principles, including informed consent, confidentiality of informants' identities through coded designations (IF-01 to IF-10), and sensitivity to the participants' experiences related to faith and personal sin.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The faith life of the Catholic community at Doan Arung Station began with the missionary initiative of the Missionaries of the Holy Family (MSF), pioneered by Fr. Yohanes Zoetebier, MSF, who traveled along the Barito River and into the upstream interior regions to reach the Dayak Siang people. Since 1973, the station was under the jurisdiction of Saint Klemens Parish, Puruk Cahu, until Saint Theresia of Lisieux Parish, Saripoi, was definitively established by the Diocese of Palangka Raya on 22 November 2017, after which the pastoral care of Doan Arung Station was entrusted to priests of the Carmelite Order (O.Carm). Construction of the church building began in 2013 at the initiative of Fr. Yohanes Lulus Widodo, and the building has only been used by the faithful since 2025, although it is not yet fully completed. Demographically, Doan Arung Station currently consists of 14 households with 32 members. It is located approximately 11.4 kilometers from the parish center, with a travel time of about 21 minutes through hilly interior roads that are prone to damage, especially during the rainy season.

An examination of the entire interview transcripts produced four major themes, as presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Summary of Research Themes

No	Theme	Description
1	Fading Understanding	The community's understanding was formed from a single catechetical moment in 2012 that was never reinforced; it has become vague for older members and is largely unknown to the younger generation.
2	The Sole Memory of 2012	The ministry of Fr. Danang in 2012 became the only sacramental experience preserved in the community's memory and marked the beginning of a long period without the sacrament.
3	Layered Obstacles	Distance and damaged roads, limited church facilities, infrequent priestly visits, limited literacy, and feelings of embarrassment within a close-knit community.
4	Longing and Hope	All categories of informants expressed the same hope for the restoration of regular Sacrament of Reconciliation services at the station.

a. Fading Understanding

The community's understanding of the meaning of the Sacrament of Reconciliation was formed from a single catechetical event in 2012 and was never reinforced afterward. Informants who had already been married before 2012 (IF-04, IF-05) admitted that their understanding had "become blurred" because there had been no further explanation since then. Meanwhile, the younger generation born afterward (IF-08, IF-10) knew about the sacrament only from the stories of their parents and station leaders, not from direct experience.

b. The Sole Memory of 2012

The ministry of Fr. Danang in 2012 became the only sacramental experience that remained vividly in the memory of the older faithful and simultaneously marked the beginning of the prolonged absence of the sacrament. The Parish Priest (IF-01) and the Station Head (IF-02) confirmed that since that time there had been no special schedule for the Sacrament of Reconciliation, not because of negligence, but because of limitations in arranging pastoral schedules amid the many stations that had to be served.

c. Layered Obstacles

Distance and damaged roads, limited church facilities, infrequent priestly visits, limited literacy, and feelings of embarrassment within a small community where everyone knows one another became obstacles to the restoration of the sacrament. Informants IF-06 and IF-07 expressed discomfort at the thought of confessing sins to a priest who might also know their families personally. Informants IF-03 and IF-09 admitted that they had difficulty following spiritual preparation when it was explained in written form and depended on oral explanations from family members or other parishioners.

d. Longing and Hope

The Parish Priest, the Station Head, adult parishioners, young people, and illiterate parishioners all expressed a common hope for the restoration of regular Sacrament of Reconciliation services at Doan Arung Station, including requests that the sacrament be celebrated directly at the station so that they would not need to travel long distances to the mother parish (Fastiggi, 2026; Morrill, 2014; Turner, 2023).

These findings are consistent with the theological-pastoral framework that views the faithful's understanding as the result of the interaction of cognitive, affective, and conative dimensions influenced by both internal and external factors (Meja, A., & Pius X, 2022). The interruption of intergenerational transmission of faith confirms the findings of Meja, A., and Pius X (2022) that the faithful's understanding often remains partial when it is not supported by ongoing catechesis: people merely know that the sacrament exists, but do not deeply understand why it is important for their lives. This condition also echoes the warning of Tinenti (2022) that when the Sacrament of Reconciliation is practiced only as a formality without deep understanding, its transformative effect is not truly experienced—a cycle that in Doan Arung Station has completely ceased because there has been no opportunity to practice it since 2012.

The layered obstacles identified in this study are in line with the mapping of intrinsic and extrinsic factors affecting the faithful's motivation by Thalar and Silpanus (2022), as well as Suwito's (2023) findings regarding the secrecy of confession (sigillum confessionis) as a source of psychological barriers in small communities where people know one another.

Unlike previous studies conducted mainly in urban or campus settings (Senda, 2023) or focusing normatively on canonical aspects (Suwito, 2023), this study shows that in a remote station these obstacles do not stand alone; rather, they reinforce one another together with geographic, infrastructural, and literacy barriers, forming a condition of prolonged sacramental absence that has not previously been documented scientifically.

The longing consistently expressed by all categories of informants provides a concrete direction for pastoral recommendations (Moschella, 2023). The findings show that the prolonged absence of the Sacrament of Reconciliation at Doan Arung Station is not the result of the faithful's indifference, but of structural limitations in pastoral ministry that need to be addressed systematically by the parish and the diocese. As stated in 1 John 1:9, the confession of sins is not a burden but a gateway to restoration; therefore, efforts to restore the faithful's access to the Sacrament of Reconciliation are also efforts to restore the joy of reconciliation that the community has long desired.

CONCLUSION

The understanding of the faithful at Doan Arung Station regarding the Sacrament of Reconciliation developed in a fragmented manner. The cognitive dimension was shaped through a single catechetical event in 2012 that was not subsequently reinforced; the affective dimension was reflected in the cherished memories of those who had experienced the sacrament; while the conative dimension gradually declined due to the absence of opportunities for renewed sacramental practice. The experiences and practices of the faithful were shaped by the prolonged absence of the sacrament since 2012, which was interpreted differently across informant categories, as well as by mutually reinforcing barriers, including geographic and infrastructural limitations, structural challenges, literacy-related constraints, and psychological factors. The essence of the Doan Arung community's experience can therefore be described as living with the Sacrament of Reconciliation as a single treasured memory and an unfulfilled longing—a longing consistently expressed by all categories of informants.

Based on these findings, it is recommended that Saint Theresia of Lisieux Parish establish a more structured pastoral visitation schedule, including specific agendas for the regular celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation, particularly before the seasons of Advent and Lent. The Diocese of Palangka Raya should consider strengthening the role of lay pastoral workers, such as catechists and trained community leaders, in remote stations. Station administrators are encouraged to revitalize regular catechetical activities through oral and narrative approaches appropriate for the faithful with limited literacy. Future research should expand the range of informants across multiple stations within the Diocese of Palangka Raya to examine whether similar experiences are also present in other communities with comparable geographical conditions.

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