

Eco-Spirituality Towards Ecological Conversion: A Response to Eco-Moral Crises

Asia Pacific Journal
of Management and
Sustainable Development
Vol. 9 No. 1, 136-140
March 2021 (Part II)
ISSN 2782-8557 (Print)

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Date Received: October 28, 2020; Date Revised: March 10, 2021

Abstract– *This study aims to determine what the Middle Grade Students value in life. It also intends to deepen the ecological valuing among the youth. In response to an action research as proposed by the school, a mixed method was conducted among the 135 student- respondents in the NCR region. A striking question “What will you do to a hectare of land which is equivalent to two-football fields?” was given to the respondents and they were tasked to do a drawing or poster with caption in a white paper in response to such question. The data revealed that only 36 students in a 135 population or less than 50% of the respondents drew farms, gardens, and forest parks signifying their intentions to prioritize Nature over other things. Others’ depiction of their drawings includes family business, restaurant, recreational areas, and buildings/ housing / outreach programs for the less fortunate. Since the youth are the pillars of Church’s mission and continuity, there is an urgent need to protect, empower, and deepen a new kind of ecological education for them involving love for God’s creations that might solve the ecological issues like climate change, pollution problems, biodiversity decline, and the recent pandemic affecting the global communities. This research implicates future enhancement and deepening of youth spirituality and education towards interior and ecological conversion as Pope Francis has stated in his “Laudato Si” to save the creations of God.*

Keywords – *ecological challenges, ecological virtue, spirituality, education, “Laudato Si”*

INTRODUCTION

Part of practicing one’s religion or faith is to have pro-environment attitudes [1] which will benefit the whole humanity because every God’s creations are at stake globally and locally due to ecological challenges affecting the contemporary times such as declining biodiversity, natural resource depletion, shift to renewable energy, water quality, food availability, and global climate change which are caused by people’s detrimental activities. Such crises include the Taal volcanic eruption in the Philippines in January 2020, the Pan-Amazon Fire, and the 2019 Novel corona virus which is pandemic according to World Health Organization (WHO) affecting the global health of humans. Because of these alarming and succeeding ecological issues happening, an action research encouraged by the school was done in consonance to the topic in a Religion class regarding Laudato Si. Prior to the lesson discussion, the respondents were asked with a striking question: “What will you do to a hectare of land which is equivalent to two-football fields?” They were tasked to answer this question through poster with caption or explanation of their drawings. If the youth are the pillars of Church’s mission and continuity, there is an urgent need to protect, empower, and deepen a new kind

of spirituality involving love for God’s creations that might solve the ecological issues like climate change and the global pandemic affecting the whole world. This paper intends to determine the students’ awareness and development of ecological virtue/spirituality to prioritize the care for Mother Earth especially in this challenging moment.

Spirituality is a way of living [2] leading to develop an ecological virtue. The term Ecology is also called bio ecology, bionomics, or environmental biology which is dealing with the study of the relationships between organisms and their environment [3]. It deals with interactions or interrelationships of living things to their environment. If ecological balance deals with harmony in nature or the symbiotic or mutual interactions of biotic (plants, animals, humans) and abiotic factors (land, water, air), ecological challenges pertain to the complex problems relating to the environment and its interaction with God’s creations. Consequently, the earth being created by God is in global crises. Tuchman and Schuck (2019) stated that there are six major ecological challenges in contemporary time: declining biodiversity, natural resource depletion, shift to renewable energy, water quality and availability, food quality and availability, global climate change [4]. These things are

being experienced globally and locally. In the local setting, the Philippines is prone to natural calamities such as typhoons, floods, landslides, volcanic eruptions, and earthquakes because it is situated in the active volcanic region known as the “Pacific Ring of Fire,” and in the geologically unstable region between the Pacific and Eurasian tectonic plates. In addition, loss of agricultural lands, deforestation, soil erosion, air and water pollution, improper disposal of solid and toxic wastes, loss of coral reefs, mismanagement of coastal resources, and dynamite fishing are contributing to the ecological crises [5]. Consequently, the global health of people is affected. Even at present, the number of covid19 cases are increasing locally and globally.

Recapitulating the Biblical foundations of Creation, God has given the world every “seed-bearing plant and every tree that has fruit with seed in it for food.” God saw all that He had made, and it was very good (Genesis 1:29-31) because “the earth is the Lord’s, and all that is in it” (Psalm 24:1). However, it is “required of stewards that one be found trustworthy” (1 Corinthians 4:2). In Numbers 35:33, the Lord warned the people “not to pollute the land”. However, the pollution problems are prevalent at current times. Some people have neglected their sacred duties as caretakers of the earth. In the Gospel Creation, God created humans in His image and likeness (imago Dei) and has been given dominion to rule over all creatures (Genesis 1:26) with dignity as children of the Creator and not as polluters. The grace of God offers salvation to all, teaches them to say “no” to ungodliness and worldly passions, to live self-controlled and upright lives in this present age (Titus 2:11-12). Although the “world is fading”, those who “please God will live forever” (1 John 2:17). In Leviticus 20:22, God commanded the people to obey His precepts because of the promised blessings attached to it. Moreover, the Lord revealed that “the leaves of the trees were for the healing of the nations” (Revelations 22:2). Hence, plants are essential for the survival of the world because of the food, air, flood protection and other beneficial materials that a single tree gives [6].

In terms of Church teachings, there are moral principles expressing standards to help people decide which actions contribute to or detract from the well-being of humans, societies, and the natural world. Tuchman and Schuck (2019) stated six moral principles serving as moral guides and actions in the natural world: Care for creation, Human dignity and rights, Common good, Universal destination of goods, Preferential option for the poor and Subsidiarity [4]. Pope Benedict XVI once stated that “in nature, the believer recognizes the

wonderful result of God’s creative activity of God, which people may use responsibly to satisfy one’s legitimate needs while respecting the intrinsic balance of creation. If this vision is lost, people end up abusing them. Neither attitude is consonant with the Christian vision of nature as the fruit of God’s creation [7]. Projects for integral human development cannot ignore the succeeding generations but need to be marked by solidarity and inter-generational justice, while considering a variety of contexts: ecological, juridical, economic, political and cultural” (Caritas in Veritate ,48) [8]. The Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church attests that nature is not a dangerous adversary but the work of God’s creative action because it is Him who made all things, and with regards to each created reality “God saw that it was good” (cf. Gen1:4, 10, 12,18,21,25). The whole of creation participates in the renewal flowing from the Lord’s Paschal Mystery. (CSDC # 455). In addition, the central point of reference for every scientific and technological application is respect for people and other living creatures [9]. The elected representatives have sought to improve the conditions of human living... As believers, “this human activity must be done in according to the will of God” (Gaudium et Spes, 34). “Technology that pollutes can also cleanse, production that amasses can also distribute justly, on condition that the ethic of respect for life and human dignity, for the rights of today’s generations and those to come, prevails” (GS, 465). Grounded from these church teachings, programs of economic development must carefully consider “the need to respect the integrity and the cycles of nature” because natural resources are leading to scarcity and some are not renewable. The present rhythm of exploitation is seriously compromising the availability of some natural resources for both the present and the future. (GS, 470). In the name of super developments, some foreign businesses and capitalists displaced the marginalized groups in their own ancestral lands. In connection to this, the relationship of indigenous peoples to their lands and resources deserves particular attention, since it is a fundamental expression of their identity (GS, 471).

The social doctrine of the Church reminds people that the goods of the earth were created by God to be used wisely by all. They must be shared equitably, in the spirit of justice and charity. This is essentially needed to prevent the injustice of hoarding resources: greediness, be it individual or collective, which is contrary to the order of creation. Modern ecological problems are of a planetary dimension and can be effectively resolved only through international cooperation capable of

guaranteeing greater coordination in the use of the earth's resources (GS, 481) [10]. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops once mentioned that care for the creations of God is an essential part of proclaiming the Gospel of Life [11]. Furthermore, the Church has an obligation to continue to remain vigilant in these areas to ensure that authentic justice is served and human dignity is protected especially on the part of the marginalized tribal communities. Pope Francis, in his encyclical letter, "*Laudato Si*", addressed everyone in this world, regardless of any race or beliefs, to care for the Mother Earth. He calls the Church and the world to acknowledge the urgency of environmental challenges and to join him towards ecological conversion [12].

Tuchman and Schuck (2019) stated that moral virtues are features of the character of a person that contribute to the well-being of humans in the societies and its environment. These virtues can be developed through practice and commitment. A virtuous person pursues moral goals using moral principles as a compass. Accordingly, there are six moral virtues explored as important responses to the natural world such as: Gratitude for the existence, beauty, and resources of the natural world; Courage to live sustainably and advocate for the good of the natural world; Justice in preserving, restoring, and distributing the goods of the natural world; Prudence in decisions that affect the health of the natural world; Temperance in consuming the goods of the natural world and ; Generosity in sharing the goods of the natural world. Practicing these moral virtues will make a world a better place to live in [4]. Hence, there is a need for Eco-Spirituality in this postmodern time as McFague (1993) once wrote that Earth is also sacred [13], not only humans. The ethical choices people make reflect what they value. These values are connected to their beliefs, the conscious and sometimes unconscious convictions that are at the heart of every individual and their view of the world. These core convictions express the inner spirit.

Tomlinson [14] described a set of practices for religious education that integrate ecology as a constituent dimension of Christian formation and discipleship. They are organized around three key educational domains which holistically applied to the heads, hearts, and hands of the students. The suggested samples are as follow: Traditional Christian narratives and the natural world stories with scientific basis can serve as vehicles of religious and ecological knowledge that can also inform students' own lives. Affectivity (an embodied and "felt" type of knowing) is another essential foundation for youth formation in relation with nature. Finally, ethical

education, with a particular focus on the virtues, links students' character development with their actions towards the natural world. This is possible through the promotion and empowerment of the teacher and the school as well. For instance, the Seminary Faith and Ecology Project engaged divinity schools, seminaries, and theological institutions to educate students on religion and ecology interrelationships. They are working to upgrade the emerging clergy to include ecological issues in the missionary task. Since there are existing ecology programs at the Church, this paper intends to explore the valuing of the students in the basic education in terms of ecological prioritization. Furthermore, this study intends to enhance the environmental awareness of the students as well as to develop Eco-spirituality through urgent nature care in response to Eco-moral crises especially at this challenging postmodern time.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The research aims to determine the status of ecological valuing of the Middle Grade students in an urban school. "*What will you do if you are given a hectare of land?*" serves as a guide question before discussing the *Laudato Si* of Pope Francis. Individual responses were made through poster or drawing with captions. After the analysis of illustrations, the researchers recommend better solutions to increase the ecological valuing of the students. Hopefully, this will implicate further ecological spirituality and education among the youth.

METHODS

Research Design & Participants

The study utilized a descriptive mixed research (qualitative and quantitative) method. The respondents were 135 Filipino Middle Grade students both male & female, aged 13-14 years old in an urban school in the NCR.

Instruments & Data Gathering Procedure

Computing the percentages were used in this study. The data gathering happened last February 4, 2020 before the major nationwide lockdown due to the covid19 pandemic. In this method, a survey question (*What will you do to a hectare of land which is equivalent to two-football fields?*), poster and analysis of illustrations were inferred to determine the ecological valuing of the Middle grade students. There were 4 sections in the level with more than 30 students each. The

sections were designated as A, B, C, and D. Those who have drawn the farm, gardens, and forest parks were counted as the ones who prioritize nature hence, following the core value of the school- in Harmony with Nature. The percentage of those who value the Nature were computed.

Ethical Consideration

Confidentiality was given as stated in the class to secure the privacy of the respondents. This study was done also in response to the action research encouraged by the school.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study focuses on selected Middle Grade students in an urban Catholic school. A survey/guide question: “*What will you do if you are given a hectare of land? (Which is equivalent to two football fields)*” was done by the researcher to discover the valuing of the students in response to one of the core values of the school- Harmony with Nature. A description of the results of the respondents will then be discussed.

Table 1. Response of Middle Grade Students of an Urban School

Class sections	Total Students	# of Students who prioritized the nature thru poster/drawings	% of the Class who are in Harmony with Nature
A	34	4	12%
B	34	10	29%
C	34	13	38%
D	33	9	27%
Total:	135	36	

Activity: Poster/Drawing with Caption

Guide Question: What will you do in a one- hectare land (which is equivalent to 2-football fields)?

There are four sections in Middle Grade level where surveys were conducted namely: A, B, C, and D, each with more than 30 male and female respondents aged 13-14 years old.

In Section A class, 4 out of 34 students (12%=lowest) prioritized nature in their illustrations while the B section has 10 (29%) respondents who value nature which is quite higher. Section C class (13 students= 38%) has the highest number of respondents with ecological valuing. While the section D showed 9 students who value nature which is equivalent to 29% of the class. They had drawn farm, garden and other things pertaining to ecological valuing care.

Some respondents had illustrated buildings for orphanages and other outreach activities. Through the works of mercy and other forms of service, these became an avenue for the respondents to become responsible citizens. It made them more self-giving and compassionate towards those who need their help. These works are more Christ-like in example. In addition, they were inspired to create a beautiful town complete with facilities and other recreational areas for their families, friends, and the poor. This is a positive experience among the respondents which allows them to have a deeper understanding of their faith to God and by being charitable to others.

Another positive analysis of their poster /drawings is love for the family and care for the less fortunate especially the victims of calamities due to Taal volcanic eruption that occurred in January 2020. Surprisingly, most of them had drawn restaurants and other industries that will create more decent jobs for the poor as part of economic recovery.

However, the respondents seemed to be lacking in valuing the ecology of nature. Less than 50% of the class have prioritized the nature as shown in their illustrations. Hence, it is an ecological challenge for the young students to commit themselves to the care of the Mother Earth. A cause of it is the family upbringing as well as the existing urban environment where they are situated with all the buildings and other business establishments surrounding them instead of gardens and farms. This is especially challenging for students residing in urban areas.

Based on the data gathered, the ecological valuing of most students residing in mixed urban and suburban areas are somewhat low. However, majority of them will prioritize their family and the poor. Some will do some businesses like restaurants or amusing games and recreations. There are others who are quite architectural and political because they had drawn a better city or place for the people to live. Indeed, the activity done provided them an avenue to determine and enhance their valuing.

However, there are also several challenges that the respondents encountered. It includes the difficulty of relating to the ecological and sustainable care of the nature.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The data gathered among the Middle Grade students showed low results in prioritizing the nature or in ecological valuing. In contrast, the poster depicted love for family and the poor. This paper looked at the level of

valuing of high school students in terms of ecological prioritization and care. It was found out that majority of the Middle Grade students need more deeper ecological education. The themes of Eco-spirituality can be included in the curricula of schools and universities.

In addition, the many distractions in the world such as technology and social media will only result to few young people who will venture into agriculture, farming and ecological or environmental management. This challenge of ecological valuing made it difficult for the Church to do its ecological ministry. Moreover, there is a need for a deeper commitment, energy, and time. Some students find it difficult to commit these ecological assets due to their other priorities.

Hence, this study recommends that the educators of the different disciplines try to devise ways on how to enhance the ecological valuing of the students through positive modelling, for instance. With the help, inspiration and commitment of the religious educators, the continuation of ecological conversion and apostolic work of the Church is possible.

It is also suggested that there will be more education towards ecological conversion through environmental awareness, ethics, management, sustainable development, and committed stewardship among the young generations. This will allow the spirituality of the Church towards ecological care to revive and flourish. This Eco-spirituality education implicates future research involving more youth who will serve the Church by being good stewards of the creations of God as a whole.

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