



Environmental Awareness as a Call of Faith among Students of Saint Thomas Catholic University of Medan

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Abstract

The escalating environmental crisis such as pollution, ecosystem degradation, and climate change demands a moral responsibility from every individual, including those in academic circles. As agents of change, university students are expected not only to possess ecological awareness but also to interpret environmental responsibility as an expression of their faith. This study aims to explore and analyze the extent to which students at Saint Thomas Catholic University of Medan understand and embody faith-based values in their concern for the environment. A qualitative method was employed, utilizing in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and document analysis. The findings reveal that while most students have a fundamental awareness of the importance of environmental stewardship, not all explicitly relate it to Catholic faith values. However, several campus initiatives such as pastoral-based ecological activities and social service programs have contributed to fostering a spiritual consciousness regarding environmental issues. The study concludes that integrating faith education with ecological education is crucial in cultivating a sustained environmental awareness. This research is expected to contribute to the development of character education and ecological spirituality within the higher education context.

Keywords

Environmental awareness, faith, university students, Saint Thomas Catholic University, integral ecology

Introduction

The ongoing environmental crisis increasingly underscores the urgency of transforming human perspectives and behaviors toward the created world. Forest degradation, water and air pollution, and global warming stand as tangible evidence that the Earth, as our “common



home,” is under severe threat. Amidst this complexity, there is a growing awareness that environmental responsibility is not merely a scientific or social concern, but also a profound call of faith especially for faith-based communities, such as the students of Saint Thomas Catholic University of Medan.

The Catholic Church, through its various social documents, has persistently advocated for attention to social and environmental issues as an integral part of the moral vocation of the faithful. One of the pivotal documents, the encyclical *Octogesima Adveniens* (1971) by Pope Paul VI, emphasizes the vital role of young people in addressing the challenges of their time, including social and ecological responsibilities. The encyclical asserts that “every Christian must listen to the cry of the times” and actively participate in building a just and sustainable society. This reinforces that care for the environment is not a peripheral concern but a central dimension of living out one’s faith.

In this context, students are called to be not only academic individuals but also agents of social and ecological transformation rooted in faith. However, current realities indicate that many students remain unaware of the connection between their faith and ecological responsibility. Consumerist lifestyles, limited participation in environmental activities, and a lack of spiritual reflection on ecological issues pose serious challenges within the campus environment.

Therefore, this study seeks to examine environmental concern as a manifestation of faith among students at Saint Thomas Catholic University of Medan, with particular reference to the spirit of *Octogesima Adveniens*. The study aims to address the following research questions:

1. How do second-semester English Education students at Saint Thomas Catholic University of Medan understand the meaning of environmental concern?
2. What are students' perspectives on the relationship between Catholic faith and environmental conservation?
3. How do students concretely express their faith through environmentally responsible behaviors in daily life?
4. What motivating factors drive students to care for the environment as part of their faith commitment?
5. What challenges do students face in integrating faith values with environmental concern?
6. To what extent do fundamental faith values influence students’ attitudes and habits toward environmental preservation?
7. How does early character formation during the first semester of university contribute to students' environmental awareness?
8. What forms of spiritual reflection do students engage in concerning environmental issues?

Through this inquiry, it is hoped that a renewed understanding may emerge—that caring for the environment is not merely an ecological duty, but also a genuine expression of Catholic faith, as affirmed by the Church’s social teaching.

Literature Review

Environmental awareness refers to the conscious and responsible attitude of individuals or communities in preserving nature and preventing ecological degradation. According to Sudarmono (2020), concern for the environment is a key indicator in shaping ecological character an awareness that humans coexist with nature in a mutually dependent relationship.



This concern is reflected in tangible actions such as reducing plastic waste, conserving energy, and participating in conservation activities. In the context of higher education, university students are expected to be pioneers of change who not only understand environmental issues theoretically but also apply them in everyday life (Putri & Santoso, 2021).

Methodology

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach aimed at illustrating how second-semester English Education students at Saint Thomas Catholic University of Medan understand and internalize environmental concern as a call of faith. This approach was selected because it allows for the exploration of subjective meaning, personal reflection, and the relationship between spiritual values and students' concrete behaviors in daily life. The research subjects were selected purposively, based on the consideration that students in the early stages of university education are undergoing a formative process in character and moral value development.

Data were collected through in-depth interviews guided by a semi-structured framework focusing on students' understanding of environmental issues, ecological behaviors, and the connection between Catholic faith and responsibility for creation.

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, beginning with data reduction, followed by data presentation, and concluding with interpretation and conclusion drawing. The researcher sought to identify patterns, themes, and meanings emerging from the interview results in order to understand the extent to which faith influences students' attitudes toward the environment. To ensure data validity, the researcher applied *member checking* by confirming the interview findings with participants to ensure that the interpretations accurately reflected their intended meaning. Additionally, *source triangulation* was conducted by interviewing students from diverse activity backgrounds to obtain broader and more varied perspectives. Through this approach, the study is expected to provide a comprehensive picture of how environmental concern can be understood as a call of faith within the context of Catholic university students.

Findings

RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Research Results

Second-semester English Education students at Saint Thomas Catholic University of Medan generally perceive environmental concern as a tangible expression of their faith as Catholics. To them, the environment is not merely a place of residence but also part of God's creation that must be preserved, respected, and maintained as a moral and spiritual responsibility. They view environmental care as an embodiment of love for both others and the Earth, expressed through simple actions such as proper waste disposal, the use of reusable items, and maintaining cleanliness on campus and at home. This understanding is rooted in their character formation and the influence of Catholic social teachings introduced from the beginning of their university journey, through lectures, spiritual activities, and personal experiences.

This view aligns closely with the message of *Octogesima Adveniens*, an encyclical issued by Pope Paul VI in 1971, which affirms that every believer has a personal responsibility to respond



actively and concretely to the challenges of the times, including social and ecological issues: "It is to each Christian, as an individual and as a member of society, that the Church now issues a fresh and insistent call to action in the face of the realities around them" (*Octogesima Adveniens*, no. 4). Students recognize that Catholic faith involves more than prayer and liturgy; it includes concrete acts that reflect love and justice for creation. Although some students admit facing challenges in consistently practicing an ecological lifestyle, such as limited facilities and the influence of convenience-driven habits, the spirit to protect the environment as an aspect of living faith continues to grow.

As emphasized by the Justice and Peace Commission of the Indonesian Bishops' Conference (KWI, 2015), faith formation must be accompanied by the development of ecological spirituality so that the faithful can live out their beliefs through concrete responsibility for the Earth. In this context, students' understanding represents an important first step toward a more caring, faithful, and ecologically conscious way of life.

Second-semester students believe that Catholic faith and environmental stewardship are deeply interconnected and inseparable. For them, faith encompasses not only a vertical relationship with God but also a horizontal relationship with others and all of creation. They believe that the Earth and all it contains is a gift from God entrusted to humans for care, not exploitation. As such, environmental protection is seen as a moral and spiritual duty. Simple actions such as disposing of waste properly, reducing plastic use, and keeping surroundings clean are perceived not merely as good habits, but as meaningful expressions of Catholic faith in everyday life.

This belief resonates with the spirit of *Octogesima Adveniens* (1971), which calls the faithful to personal responsibility for addressing social and ecological challenges. The document stresses that "all Catholics must recognize their active role in responding to current issues that damage social justice and creation's order, including environmental problems" (nos. 4 & 21). Their views are further supported by Pope Francis in *Laudato Si'* (2015), which highlights the ecological crisis as a reflection of spiritual and moral decay, thus calling for an ecological conversion rooted in faith. Students realize that environmental care is a genuine form of Christian love, as environmental degradation disproportionately affects the poor and vulnerable.

In addition to magisterial documents, students are also influenced by the works of contemporary theologians such as Leonardo Boff (2009), who asserts that ecological spirituality stems from an awareness of the interconnectedness of all creation in a relationship of love and responsibility. Faith, in this view, motivates humans to move beyond individualism and toward ecological solidarity. Hence, environmental preservation is no longer merely a matter of conservation, but an expression of living faith that bears fruit in concrete actions for the common good.

Students manifest their faith through realistic and everyday ecological practices. Although they may not yet engage in complex environmental initiatives such as waste sorting or reforestation, their basic efforts still carry deep significance. For instance, they strive to avoid littering, maintain classroom cleanliness, and encourage peers to care for the campus environment. Some students are also moved to act when witnessing environmental damage, such as scattered trash after classes or prayer meetings, feeling a spiritual discomfort rooted in their Catholic values. These actions reflect an understanding that faith demands responsibility toward God's creation. In *Octogesima Adveniens*, Pope Paul VI stresses that believers must not remain passive in the face of social injustice, including environmental destruction (no. 21). Students thus recognize that true faith is not limited to worship but is also revealed in everyday actions that show love for the Earth and fellow human beings. Their spiritual formation at university—through Faith Building programs, Character Formation, and weekly Masses that often convey moral messages about respecting creation strengthens this perspective.



Caring for the environment is not seen solely as a social obligation, but also as an act of gratitude for the gift of life. Students believe that by protecting nature, they participate in God's salvific work. This aligns with Pope Francis' teaching in *Laudato Si'* (2015) that the Earth is a "common home" that must be preserved in a spirit of ecological conversion. Though their actions may still be limited, the students' enthusiasm and awareness indicate that the seeds of ecological spirituality are taking root in their lives as a manifestation of living and impactful faith.

Their concern for the environment is not spontaneous, but influenced by several key factors. First, ongoing spiritual formation within the campus environment plays a vital role. Through programs such as Faith Building, Character Building, and regular Masses, students are guided to understand that Catholic faith entails responsibility for both humanity and the Earth. These activities help students internalize that spirituality is not confined to vertical relationships with God but extends to actions reflecting love for the environment.

Second, the Church's social teaching particularly in *Octogesima Adveniens* (1971) serves as a value framework that motivates students. The encyclical calls the faithful to engage actively with contemporary challenges, including environmental destruction, as an expression of faith (nos. 4 & 21). This provides a theological foundation for students to view environmental concern as part of their Christian vocation.

Third, personal experiences and sensitivity to their surroundings further motivate students. Many report that witnessing environmental damage, such as blocked drains and scattered garbage, compels them to act, even in small ways. Fourth, peer influence and campus culture also shape their behavior. When surrounded by environmentally conscious peers, they feel encouraged to follow suit.

Fifth, personal faith reflections lead students to see environmental protection as gratitude for God's gifts and a form of love for others. They understand that environmental degradation impacts many people, particularly the poor, thus making ecological responsibility a form of social justice. These factors demonstrate that students' environmental concern is not merely a trend or academic requirement but arises from a conscious, faith-driven way of life.

Despite their awareness, students face challenges in integrating faith values with ecological concern. One major challenge is the lack of collective awareness on campus. While individual students may be committed, not all peers share the same spirit, making it difficult to maintain consistent behavior. Practices such as littering or indifference toward cleanliness still prevail, which hinders behavioral change.

Another challenge is the limited emphasis on ecology in spiritual programs. Although activities like Mass and Faith Formation are regularly held, environmental themes are rarely central. This gap makes it harder for students to fully connect faith with ecological responsibility. Many students also struggle to see simple acts like cleaning up or correcting a careless peer as part of their religious life. The absence of spiritual reflection linking faith and the environment results in a separation between spiritual life and daily practice.

While basic awareness exists, the integration of faith and ecological behavior requires deeper formation, guidance, and role models from the campus community to fully take root. Catholic faith values strongly influence students' attitudes and habits toward environmental stewardship, though their implementation varies. Students understand that faith is not solely about a vertical relationship with God, but includes justice, love, and gratitude toward all of creation.

These values gradually shape habits such as maintaining classroom cleanliness and avoiding littering. However, faith-based motivation does not always translate into systematic or large-scale actions. Many students remain unaware that environmental protection is an integral part of their spirituality. This is partly due to a lack of emphasis on ecological responsibility in spiritual activities.



As *Octogesima Adveniens* (1971) urges believers to respond concretely to social and environmental challenges, it becomes clear that while foundational values are present, their application is influenced by social habits, environmental education, and community role models. Faith provides direction and motivation, but practical guidance is still needed to cultivate consistent ecological habits in daily life.

Character formation during the early semesters contributes significantly to students' environmental awareness, especially in a Catholic university context that integrates education, faith values, and social responsibility. First-year students are introduced to programs such as Character Building, Mental and Spiritual Formation, and weekly Masses, which provide a holistic foundation in values such as responsibility, discipline, solidarity, and love for others and nature.

According to Lickona (1991), character education should encompass moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action all of which indirectly foster ecological awareness when translated into everyday practice. On campus, students begin to realize that maintaining cleanliness is not merely a social rule but a moral act rooted in faith. The Catholic Church supports this direction: *Octogesima Adveniens* calls the faithful to respond personally to contemporary social challenges (no. 4). Environmental damage is among the most urgent of these challenges, and faith-ecology integration must be instilled early in education.

The KWI Justice and Peace Commission (2015) also emphasizes that ecological spirituality must begin with the understanding that the Earth is God's creation, and every believer is called to care for it as an act of gratitude and moral responsibility. Tilaar (2002) argues that quality education must integrate cultural, spiritual, and environmental dimensions. Catholic campuses are beginning to realize this through character development programs, though stronger efforts are still needed through thematic curricula and direct action like campus clean-up events, anti-plastic campaigns, or ecological ethics classes.

Though student actions may still be basic and unsystematic, these values are taking root. As Wiryohadi (2020) explains, environmental ethics in the light of faith is not merely about avoiding harm but about recognizing God's presence in creation. When students begin to see small acts like keeping spaces clean as acts of faith, they are laying the foundation for ecological spirituality. Siregar (2019) adds that living faith must manifest in contextual social actions, including how one treats the environment.

Therefore, early character formation does more than teach moral knowledge—it creates reflective and spiritual spaces for students to link faith values to concrete environmental attitudes. Although still at an early stage, this integration holds great promise for the growth of faith-based ecological awareness, which, if supported continuously, can foster a generation that is spiritually rooted and socially and ecologically responsible.

Students also demonstrate simple yet meaningful spiritual reflections on environmental issues. These reflections stem not only from ecological knowledge but from their Catholic belief that the Earth is God's creation to be honored and protected. Many students express feelings of guilt or spiritual discomfort when witnessing pollution or indifference to nature. They associate these emotions with faith values conveyed through weekly Masses, Faith Building, and Character Building programs.

As stated in *Octogesima Adveniens*, Pope Paul VI reminds believers of their personal call to care for the world and take part in moral renewal (no. 21). Students' reflections are also evident in their prayers and awareness of the link between gratitude and ecological responsibility. Some report offering brief prayers for the Earth or contemplating the environmental impact of daily actions like waste disposal and product use.

To them, these acts are more than compliance they are small manifestations of an active, living faith. The KWI (2015) states that ecological spirituality is not merely doctrinal, but a mindset



that sees nature as kin, not as an object for exploitation. Wiryohadi (2020) suggests that spiritual reflection is the first step in building theological awareness of God's presence in creation.

When students adjust their lifestyle out of faith, it signals growth in ecological spirituality. This is further reflected in their willingness to correct careless peers or speak up against environmental neglect. These actions stem from faith-based reflection and the conviction that caring for the Earth is an act of love for God's creation.

Though not yet theologically structured, such reflections are essential seeds of mature ecological spirituality. As Siregar (2019) notes, faith reflections shaped by social and environmental realities help young people build holistic relationships with God, others, and creation. Thus, students' spiritual reflection on the environment, though still emerging, has the potential to become the foundation of broader, impactful ecological action.

Conclusion

This study indicates that second-semester students of the English Education Program at Saint Thomas Catholic University of Medan have a sound understanding of environmental concern as part of their Catholic faith commitment. For these students, environmental preservation is not merely a social responsibility but a concrete expression of faith, love, and moral obligation toward God's creation. Through simple acts such as disposing of waste properly, maintaining environmental cleanliness, and reducing plastic usage, the students demonstrate that the values of their faith have begun to be internalized in their daily lives. This understanding is further strengthened by spiritual and character formation during the early semesters and is supported by the Church's social teachings, particularly as articulated in the encyclical *Octogesima Adveniens* (Paul VI, 1971), which calls for active Catholic engagement in addressing social and ecological issues in a personal and concrete manner.

Although some students still face challenges in consistently practicing an ecological lifestyle such as lack of collective awareness, limited facilities, and minimal integration of ecological themes in spiritual activities the seeds of ecological spirituality have begun to grow. Their spiritual reflection on environmental issues also reveals a deepening of faith awareness that fosters a more caring and responsible inner attitude. This awareness arises from gratitude to God and from an understanding of the interconnectedness between humans, others, and the universe. Therefore, it is essential for Catholic educational institutions to continue strengthening the formation of students' character and faith through thematic programs that link faith values with ecological responsibility. In doing so, it is hoped that a generation of young Catholics will emerge who are not only intellectually capable but also spiritually and ecologically mature, able to serve as stewards of God's love in caring for the earth as our common home.



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