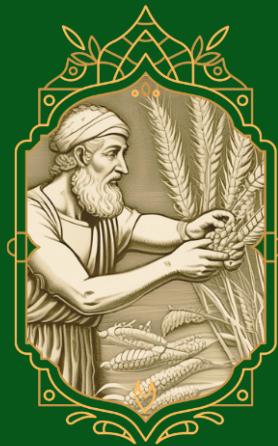


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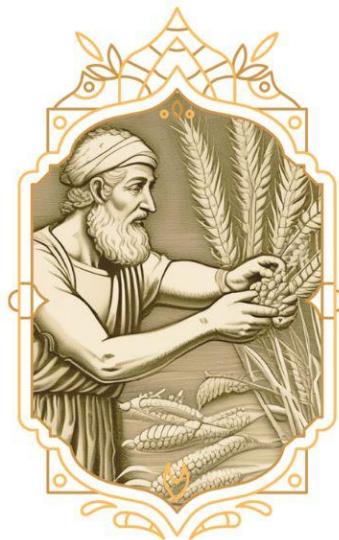
*Frontiers in Religious Education:
Divergence and Convergence*

April 25-26, 2025 | Holy Angel University, Angeles City, Pampanga

A frontier may be a physical border, an intellectual task to be resolved, or an unexplored expanse waiting to be explored. In Catholic practice, a frontier is “mission” which suggest pioneering work in new territories and new endeavors. In education this can include unexplored areas for understanding in teaching and learning. For Religious Education, it can be a “mission field” or a subject of interest that solicits understanding, analysis and reflection as it applies to students’ religious beliefs, dispositions and formation. These mission fields may include new technologies, arts and music, culture, human formation, values formation, justice and peace, dialogue, and ecology. Given that Catholic schools are collaborators in church mission, how do these fields affirm the mission of evangelization shared by the church with Religious Education?

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- perceptive and adept in answering the needs of 21st-century learners.
- responsive in answering the current social, ecological, economic and political issues by putting God's Word into action.
- able to unleash the potentials of their students to create positive change.
- competent in transforming the lives of their students and forming future leaders in faith, with zeal for service and through communion in mission.

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Foreword

Volume 2, Issue 2 (December 2025) of *Hitik: International Journal of Catechists and Religious Educators* features a rich and diverse collection of scholarly articles that explore current challenges in religious education, catechetics, and theology from interdisciplinary perspectives. True to its name, this issue is “hitik,” which signifies its abundance of perspectives, contexts, and methodological approaches. It examines how faith is experienced, expressed, articulated, and transformed across various cultures and generations.

This volume covers various important topics, including Generation Z’s engagement with the Bible, reflections on eco-theology, reforms in catechetics, and the multifaceted relationships among faith, digital media, disability studies, and popular devotions. The contributions emphasize that religious education and catechesis are dynamic fields of study. Although grounded in tradition, they continually adapt to social changes, ecological concerns, and evolving practices of belief and worship.

By bringing together voices from various disciplines and local backgrounds, this volume underscores the importance of scholarly dialogue that is both critically thoughtful and pastorally relevant. The editorial team and contributors are to be commended for their efforts. I look forward to these articles, as they will promote further research, enhance teaching methods, and provide valuable insights for ongoing discussions in religious education, catechesis, and theology both locally and globally.

Prof. Dr. Arvin D. Ebollo

Editorial Board Member

President, Religious Educators Association of the Philippines (REAP), Inc.

Message from the Editor

Faith, culture, and education in motion—insights from Gen Z to eco-mission, shaping Religious Education Studies in the Philippines and Asia

Welcome to this new issue of our journal. We are delighted to present a collection of articles that reflect the vibrant intersections of faith, culture, and education in the Philippines and Asia.

This issue begins with a study on Video App Usability and Creative Empowerment of Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing Learners, reminding us of the importance of inclusivity in digital education. We then turn to Generation Z, with two articles—Zoomers as Contemporary Adherents and Unveiling the Relevance of Reading the Bible among Gen Z College Students—that highlight how young Filipinos are reshaping religious practice and biblical engagement in contemporary contexts.

Cross-cultural insights emerge in Nine Grains of Rice and the Messianic Society, which explores Karen rice—merit networks in Thailand, while philosophical and theological depth is offered in ‘Maganda’ in the Fifth Argument of *Quinque Viae* and Understanding Human Suffering among Black Nazarene Devotees. These works remind us that beauty and suffering remain central to theological reflection.

The ecological and social dimensions of faith are addressed in Earth Rights in Religious Education, which calls for catechetical reform toward care for creation, and Exploring the Role of the *Kariton Klasrum* Project, which demonstrates service-learning as values formation. Finally, The Children’s Gaze on Benedictine Monks offers fresh perspectives from young students on monastic life.

Together, these articles affirm that religious education is dynamic, contextual, and transformative. We extend heartfelt thanks to our peer reviewers, whose collegial contributions have strengthened this issue. May this issue inspire educators, theologians, and pastoral leaders to continue weaving faith and life together in ways that empower, heal, and transform.

Prof. Dr. Rito V. Baring

Editor-in-Chief

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Original Article

Zoomers as Contemporary Adherents: Faith Expressions of Filipino Catholic Gen Zs

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Abstract

In the past decade, contentions and critiques about young people's religious life and faith formation have burgeoned in religious scholarship. The objective of this research is to explore the lived experiences of Filipino Gen Z as contemporary adherents of the Catholic religion, particularly how they express their faith. A total of 357 individuals participated in the quantitative survey, and four participants proceeded to the interview for the qualitative phase. By employing explanatory sequential mixed methods, three key findings were drawn from both quantitative and qualitative data: (1) faith expression remains performative; (2) faith expression is rooted in the family; and (3) faith expression is reflecting on life's meaning and doing good. This study concludes that young people remain faithful adherents, but they have diverse ways in expressing their faith, which are secular and/or supplemental to the doctrinal practices of the church. Further studies should explore how non-Catholic youth and those with low engagement in religious practices express their faith.

Keywords: *Faith expression, Gen Z, Religious life, Spirituality, Young Filipinos*

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Introduction

The Social Weather Station (SWS) registered a steady decline in religious attendance since the 1990s. Despite this statistical reality, more than 81% of the Philippine population still professes the faith, and the country ranked third in terms of the largest Catholic followers, next to Brazil and Mexico (Pew Research Center, 2011). In the National Filipino Catholic Youth Study (2014), 89.5% still consider religion as a very important institution in modern society. According to Cornelio (2020), the issue of non-attendance can be attributed to a generational shift as to “how young Filipinos are approaching their religious lives” (p. 95).

Similarly, at the turn of the century, more personalist and socially engaged adherents have been seen in contemporary religion (Ammerman, 1997). Likewise, young Filipino Catholics have the inclination to highly experiential and self-satisfying modes of religious approaches present in other Christian religions (Sapitula & Cornelio, 2014). They are even labeled as “messy followers” of Christianity or cafeteria Catholics (Cornelio, 2018; Cornelio, 2014), which connotes their subjectivities in the way they view and express their religious and spiritual lives that is often “shaped, differentiated, and animated by the social, political, economic, and historical contexts in which they live” (Castillo, 2020, p. 116). This clearly shows, which may be unpopular, that young people’s perceptions and expressions of their religious and spiritual lives cannot be easily dismissed as one and the same across generations (Cornelio, 2020; Cornelio, 2018; Sapitula & Cornelio, 2014), which therefore calls for multidimensional understanding of spirituality, especially in terms of faith expression and appreciation (Baring et al., 2018; Büsing et al., 2017).

This study aims to explore the expression of faith in Catholic Gen Zs in the Philippines. In this study, faith expression refers to the outward demonstration of beliefs and moral convictions. This builds upon Cornelio’s (2020) argument that there is a generational shift in the way individuals engage in and express their faith and spiritual lives, and that researchers “must not expect the same degree of coherence and subscription among adherents...[and] attention must be given to how [faith] is present—imagined, believed, enacted, narrated, and rehearsed—in the daily lives of individual” (Cornelio, 2020, p. 84). By studying how Catholic Gen Zs embody and express their faith, this study hopes to offer relevant insights into how living out their faith shapes their values, behaviors, and sense of identity. Understanding these expressions also helps churches, communities, and educators respond more effectively to their spiritual needs.

Methodology

Generation Z, or Gen Z, colloquially known as Zoomers, includes individuals born between 1995 and 2010 (Seemiller & Grace, 2017). This research is particularly concerned with how this generation expresses their faith as followers of the Catholic religion in the Philippines, following explanatory sequential mixed methods (Creswell, 2014). Explanatory sequential mixed methods were appropriate for this study because they allowed the identification of patterns and levels of faith engagement among Gen Z Catholics through quantitative data and deepening the understanding of these patterns by exploring their lived experiences and symbolic expressions through qualitative interviews. This design ensured that the quantitative

results strategically informed the qualitative phase, leading to richer and more nuanced insights on faith expression.

A 17-item survey questionnaire entitled Spiritual Practices (Büssing, 2015) was used for the study's quantitative data. The instrument was originally designed by Arndt Büssing as a generic survey to measure a range of traditional and secular religious practices and engagement, and each item was scored on a four-point scale (Büssing, 2015). The instrument was comprised of 17 items subdivided into five factors, i.e., religious, humanistic, existential, gratitude/reverence, and spiritual. Each factor had Cronbach's alpha values: 0.72 for spiritual, 0.77 for existential and gratitude/reverence, 0.79 for humanistic, and 0.82 for religious (Büssing, 2015).

Photo-elicitation interview (PEI) was used as the main method for the qualitative data collection. Photographs were taken by the informants "to promote more direct involvement...in the research process" (Bignante, 2010, p. 20). As every religion relies on symbols, through photo elicitation, the objective was to evoke perceptions, expressions, and experiences of Gen Z of their spiritual and religious lives through "symbolic representations in the photographs" (Glaw et al., 2017, p. 2; Harper, 2002). Before the interview sessions, the informants were instructed that they had full discretion to take photographs that they thought were symbolic of their faith expressions. They were also given the discretion to label the photographs, which were then primarily used to initiate and guide the interview process.

The participants and respondents of this study were senior high school students from a Catholic university situated in the Central Luzon Region. The respondents were selected purposively, using homogenous sampling, with the following criteria: (1) senior high school Catholic students, both males and females; and (2) their parents/guardians were willing for their children/wards to participate. Since some of the participants were minors, informed consent was obtained from the parents/guardians, as the respondents are minors, but they also provided their assent.

Descriptive statistics was used for the quantitative data. The respondents were grouped based on their "engagement scores": greater than 50% means higher engagement, and less than 50% means rare engagement (Büssing, 2015). Based on the quantitative survey results, the qualitative phase focused on participants with higher engagement to capture a concentrated profile of active faith expression, where traditional and secular practices are most visible and meaningfully articulated. Including low-engagement respondents may shift the discussion toward disaffiliation or apathy rather than faith expressions, whereas highly engaged individuals can provide richer and more nuanced insights relevant to the objective of the study. The qualitative data were first presented individually in the results section. The data were treated inductively using Saldana's (2009) codes-to-assertions. Member checking and external validation were conducted for the results. This study guaranteed that no intended and unintended harm surfaced throughout the process and sought the approval of the Holy Angel University-Institutional Review Board (HAU-IRB). This study obtained the following IRB Clearance Protocol Code: 2021-065-MBRIVERA-ZOOMERSFAITH.

Results and Findings

This part shows the quantitative results and qualitative findings of this study. The results are divided into two parts: the quantitative dimension is presented first, followed by the qualitative dimension.

Quantitative Results

A total of 357 young individuals answered the survey questionnaire (Büssing, 2015). The data present the descriptive statistics and summary of engagements of the respondents in relation to their faith expressions based on religious, spiritual, existential, humanistic, and gratitude/reverence factors.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics on the engagement of the respondents' faith expressions based on factors

		Frequency	Percentage (%)
Religious	Rare engagement	116	32.5
	Higher engagement	241	67.5
	Total	357	100.0
Spiritual	Rare engagement	225	63
	Higher engagement	132	37
	Total	357	100.0
Existential	Rare engagement	33	9.2
	Higher engagement	324	90.8
	Total	357	100.0
Humanistic	Rare engagement	14	3.9
	Higher engagement	343	96.1
	Total	357	100.0
Gratitude/Reverence	Rare engagement	19	5.3
	Higher engagement	338	94.7
	Total	357	100.0

Table 1 displays descriptive statistics on the respondents' faith expressions' engagement based on factors. According to the results, 343 out of 357 Filipino Catholic Generation Z members (96.1%) are more engaged in being humanistic, the greatest percentage among the faith expressions. Furthermore, only 132 out of 357 respondents (37%) had a higher sense of spiritual engagement, which was the factor with the lowest percentage. Additionally, religious engagement was higher in 241 out of 357 respondents (67.5%), existential engagement was higher in 324 out of 357 (90.8%), and gratitude/reverence engagement was higher in 338 out of 357 (94.7%).

Table 2. Summary of engagement of the respondents' faith expressions

Level of Awareness on Sacramentals	Frequency	Percent (%)
Higher engagement in multiple faith expressions	348	97.48
Rare engagement in religious but has a higher engagement in other faith expressions	113	97.41
Rare engagement in all faith expressions	3	0.84

The results in the table above are used to determine the respondents' faith expressions' engagement. According to the data, 348 respondents out of 357 (97.48%) have a higher engagement in multiple faith expressions. Furthermore, 113 (97.41%) of the 116 respondents with rare religious engagement have higher engagement in other faith expressions. Meanwhile, only three people out of 357 (0.84%) show a rare engagement in all faith expressions.

Qualitative Findings

This section provides the qualitative data on faith expressions of four young individuals who agreed to proceed with the interview, as they scored higher engagement in multiple faith expressions. As mentioned above, those with higher engagement were selected for the qualitative phase, as their experiences and perspectives can provide richer and more nuanced insights that align closely with the objectives of the study. A pseudonym was used for each of the participants to ensure their anonymity.

Faith for Angelica, age 17

For Angelica, religion still has a great impact on modern society, but it should not define who we are and the way we express our faith. She shared that during holy mass attendance, she always looks forward to hearing the homily, which plays a huge role in her values and character formation. She also believes that it is high time that the Catholic church revisits its interpretation of the Bible, consistent with the demands of the contemporary period.

*"I believe in the motto *Signum Fidei* meaning *Sign of Faith*."* Showing their altar at home, she said that this serves as an important representation of her family's faith. The crucifix at the center, she narrated, *"para na rin po siyang indirect way of saying *Katoliko ako, I believe in Christ. I remember and take to my heart the sacrifices He make for me to live today.*"* [It is like an indirect way of saying that I am a Catholic. I believe in Christ. I remember and take to my heart the sacrifices He made for me to live today.]

"Hindi siya basta-bastang pang-design lang po sa bahay," referring to their Christmas tree at home. [This is not just a mere house décor.] She said that she is celebrating Christmas as a sign of respect and recognition of the history of the Catholic church. She personally feels that Christmas is a significant day for her as a Catholic because it is a reminder that a Savior was born, despite the various contentions on the exact date of birth of Jesus. She argued that no one should question one's way of expressing faith. She expressed that faith is not really a matter of seeing what has been said and disseminated through generations, but it is about having a complete trust and confidence that God exists: *"Gano'n po yung pag-express ng matinding paniniwala at pananalig sa Diyos."* [That is the most potent expression of trust and faith in God.]

Showing a photo of her family, Angelica happily expressed: *"I love them and I care for them."* It is a usual bonding of her family to regularly attend the Holy Mass, as it is their way of conveying gratitude to God for making them safe and healthy. She said, *"bonding with them means I appreciate the gift God gave me."* Mass attendance for Angelica is one of the most significant expressions of faith, as it is an opportunity to listen, talk to God, and accept His words that guide her in life. Angelica considers her family a precious gift from God, and she believes the best way to give back is by loving and respecting them. She expressed that her family is one of the major considerations whenever she has an important decision to make, and that her most relevant achievements were obtained together with her family: *"Mas fulfilling lalo na*

po kapag ginagawa kasama ang pamilya." [It is more fulfilling when I obtain something together with my family.] Through mass attendance, her family becomes closer and more understanding of one another. She believes that she will not be the person she is today if not for her family.

Faith for Gabriel, age 18

Presenting their altar at home, Gabriel shared: "*I think that the altar represents my faith po in a way na eto po 'yung naging foundation po naming family especially 'yung mga first few days po ng enhanced community quarantine (ECQ), when people were still uncertain about the (COVID-19) situation.*" [I think that the altar represents my faith in a way that it has become the family's foundation, especially during the first few days of enhanced community quarantine (ECQ), when people were uncertain about the (COVID-19) situation.] He shared that during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the entire family would gather in the altar, light a candle, and pray the *Oratio Imperata* for protection against the lethal virus that had claimed so many lives. For Gabriel, faith is his root, and he can always rely upon it, particularly during unprecedeted times. He believes everything will fall into its proper place as long as we hold onto our faith.

Faith provides direction and illuminates even in the darkest times of our lives. This really resonates with Gabriel, while showing a photograph of the tabernacle: "*I think that this (tabernacle's light) represents my faith that when things go dark, that when the world shut down, the only light that we can find is our faith.*" In Catholic tradition, the tabernacle is the cornerstone of every church as it holds the *ciborium*, the Eucharist's repository. Gabriel links his faith to the tabernacle's light. He believes that faith allows him to find peace and security, especially during unprecedeted times. While he confessed that he does not entirely follow all the rituals of the Catholic church, he shared that the pandemic has strengthened his faith in God. Faith for him is more than just the rituals; the trust in God matters.

It was during the peak of the pandemic when Gabriel started to question the existence of God. "*I was on the verge of agnosticism, that I didn't see God anymore as a...Supreme Deity dahil po sa tagal ng mga pangayayari, na nagaganap at nangayayari dahil sa COVID-19, like there is no end po with this situation.*" [I was on the verge of agnosticism, that I didn't see God anymore as a...Supreme Deity because of what was happening, the COVID-19 situation, like there is no end with this situation.] Displaying their Bible at home, he shared, reminded him that everything happens for a reason. Ultimately, for Gabriel, it is normal that we sometimes face questions about our faith, especially when we are uncertain of the world's situation. He believes that challenges or problems make us better and stronger individuals, and that we can cope with all these hurdles as long as we have faith in God: "*We should always hold onto our faith...tomorrow will be better.*"

Gabriel described religion as his spiritual and moral guide. He is a Catholic, but he does not necessarily follow the entire tradition and rituals of the Catholic church. In his words, the church has become an "iron cage" that hardly escapes from its conservative genes. He argued that the church must revisit and rethink its positions that are actually antithetical to progressive society. On the other hand, he was impressed with how the Catholic church condemns and does not condone human rights violations and summary executions. Nevertheless, religion provides Gabriel relief, especially during trying times.

Faith for Judiel, age 16

Judiel is convinced that God really exists, as faith for her is about believing in the existence of a Supreme Being who is always there to guide people. While she believes that religion still impacts modern society, she also expressed that it sometimes puts barriers to other adherents. She specifically mentioned how the Catholic church discriminates against other members of society who do not conform to its teaching, *e.g.*, the LGBTQIA+ community. She argued that the church must be open in revisiting its teachings and reinterpreting the Bible.

Judiel described her faith as blooming flowers, a photograph she took for the interview: *“blooming for something beautiful, the one that shines the most.”* She maintained that as a young individual, she has yet to discover many things in relation to her faith, like a bud of a flower that is just starting to bloom. Judiel really appreciates God’s creations. She expressed that when she feels stressed and anxious, God’s creations remind her of the beauty of life. The nature’s beauty also reminds her to pray and be grateful for God’s blessings. She asserted that *“we need to take care of our environment as this is a gift from God to us.”* She expressed her disappointment with people who continue to destroy the environment, and others bear the brunt of such destruction through calamities; the consequences have become more unimaginable at present. Taking care of the environment is also her way of expressing her faith.

Judiel also shared a photo of her family and expressed that loving and appreciating her family is also her way of expressing her faith. While she admits that she seldom goes to church services, *e.g.*, Sunday mass, she believes that loving her family is one of the greatest expressions of faith. She shared, *“family tradition na po namin na at least every Sunday, kumakain po kami nang sabay-sabay”* [It has been our family tradition that at least every Sunday, we eat together as one family.] She asserted that such a family tradition is also their way of bonding and an opportunity for them to talk after a very long week. She added, *“I think that is already expression of faith since you’re giving time with your family.”*

Judiel mentioned that her mother taught her how to pray when she was a kid. As she grows, she believes that prayer must be coupled with doing what is right. She expressed during the interview, *“dapat ang dasal ay may kaakibat din ng paggawa nang mabuti”* [prayer must be coupled with good deeds.] She defines “doing right” as helping other people in need, respecting other people with different beliefs, and loving her family. Lastly, she considers her family to be her North Star, which guides her in every decision she makes in life.

Judiel also took a photo of a campfire as a symbol of how she expresses her faith: *“I am using the fire that God has given me to excel in life.”* She expressed that being faithful is more than just being religious. For her, faith frames who she is as it provides meaning and values in life. That is why faith expression also ensures she lives her life in the right way, *i.e.*, taking care of herself and excelling in every opportunity that comes her way.

Faith for Jaime, age 17

Jaime defines religion as an institution that binds people together to form a community. He also argues that religion still greatly influences our society, *e.g.*, government policy formulation, in which religion is still one of the major considerations. While he describes himself as not utterly religious, he believes having faith is more important than being religious, as faith provides meaning to life, especially amid overwhelming challenges.

When asked about the photos he took, he initially showed a photo of their altar at home, which he labeled as *“the center of our home.”* He expressed that having an altar at home is symbolic of Filipino Catholicism, wherein God is considered the family's center. More than being a center of the family, their altar holds them together—*“parang ang ganda lang isipin na nasa gitna siya talaga, like it is holding us together.”* [It is just interesting to think that it is at the center, like it is holding us together.] The altar is also a reminder for him to pray. He believes praying is still an important mechanism for expressing his faith. But he clarifies that praying does not have to be about memorizing long verses and stances of prayers, but praying for him is about directly talking to God. He upholds that praying is an opportunity for him to meditate, relax, and confide in someone whom he really trusts. When asked what he usually prays for, he answered: *“thank God for everything, to ask for forgiveness.”*

Jaime shared a photo of his family in a church and stated that it has been a family tradition for them to visit various churches within their vicinity whenever they do out-of-town excursions. *“It is a family bonding and a way for us to express our faith in God,”* he shared. He mentioned that he seldom attends Holy Mass, but when he attends, he makes sure that he is with his family. Growing in a Catholic household, Jaime expressed, *“my family plays an important part in my faith formation...na-explore ko ‘yung Catholic religion dahil sa pamilya ko.”* [I was able to explore the Catholic religion because of my family.]

Jaime continued by sharing another photo of his family. Faith expression for him is also about respecting his family, who taught him about faith and religion. He considers his family as his compass and anchor in his faith formation and expression. He maintained that he was so grateful to be surrounded by people who value love and respect, and such an environment for him promotes faith in God. He shared, *“masaya ako kasi God gifted me with such a wonderful family na minamahal at nirerespeto ako.”* [I am glad that God gifted me with such a wonderful family that loves and respects me.] With this blessing of the family, Jaime sustained that faith expression, which is about reciprocating the love and respect he gets from his family.

Jaime expounded that he sometimes questions his beliefs, but this does not lessen his faith. He maintained that probing one's belief is a form of catechism, by obtaining answers that draw him closer to God and better understand his faith. His advice for the future generation: *“never stop being inquisitive about your religion; it only further strengthens your faith.”*

Discussion

Based on the quantitative results and qualitative findings, three themes were mined from the analyses of data. These included: (1) faith expression remains performative; (2) faith expression is rooted in the family; and (3) faith expression is reflecting on life's meaning and doing good. These themes were further discussed vis-à-vis extant literature and studies on faith expressions.

1. Faith expression remains performative

It was clear in the survey results that participants had higher engagement in religious practices to express their faith. This particular finding in the quantitative dimension resonated with the results in the qualitative dimension of this study. Clearly, more than the majority of the participants are still active in religious practices as a way to express their faith. While it is true that faith expression changes (Büssing et al., 2017), adherence to religious practices of the Catholic church is still very apparent among young people. While young people are labeled as “messy followers” of established religious organizations (Cornelio, 2020), this study found that praying

is still very relevant among young adherents in expressing their faith. Such finding mirrors Cornelio's (2018) and Castillo's (2020) argument that young Filipinos have subjective ways of expressing their faith, which can be seen in how they understand and approach praying or contemplative practices.

It is noteworthy that faith for the participants of this study is not abstract, as they truly believe in the existence of God (Cornelio, 2020), but they also argued that it is incumbent upon the church to revisit some of its teachings. Clearly, these young adherents were not disgruntled with God, but with some of the pronouncements of the church, e.g., how the Catholic church stands with the LGBTQIA+ community. Hence, atheism in this generation cannot be simply defined as anti-God, but a resistance against long-standing ideology of the church that no longer resonates with the values and experiences of young adherents. The participants asserted that the Catholic church must also be mindful of the changing construct of faith (Baring, 2018), and in recognizing these changes, the church must be open in revisiting and redesigning its teachings to further encourage young individuals to participate in performing certain religious practices (Farah, 2019; Gomez & Gilles, 2014).

2. Faith expression is rooted in the family

Having a family-oriented culture in the Philippines clearly influences how young people express their faith (del Castillo, 2018). This study found that young people expressed their faith by exercising gratitude, having a feeling of wonder and awe, and learning to experience and value beauty. This speaks truth to Cornelio and Sapitula's (2014) assertion that young Filipinos were inclined toward highly experiential and self-satisfying modes of faith expressions. It is not extraneous to claim that the family greatly influences the formation of Filipino faith. In fact, catechism in the Philippines starts at home as children are taught about the basics of faith and religion at home, i.e., praying the rosary, reading the Bible, and learning how to be grateful for God's blessings.

The influence of family in faith expression was very apparent in this study. For instance, the participants showed their family pictures and described such bond as symbolic of love and respect. This clearly shows that the family is instrumental in the formation of young people's faith (Mansukhani & Resurreccion, 2009). This shows that family has a great role in the way young people approach and understand faith. This proves that faith expression is never limited to being familiar with and performing religious rituals, but it can also be found in how young Filipinos treat their family. This study echoed existing literature that faith expression may vary from generation to generation (Cornelio, 2020; Cornelio, 2018; Sapitula & Cornelio, 2014). It is clear among young Catholic adherents that faith expression is also about loving and respecting their families, dubbed as the greatest gift from God.

3. Faith expression is reflecting on life's meaning and doing good

This study clearly proves that the participants are active in helping other people, e.g., engaging in social and charitable services, and it is in these pro-social behaviors that they find life's meaning. True enough, social commitment is Gen Zs' fundamental opportunity to deepen and express their faith (Synod of Bishops, 2018). For instance, the participants maintained that their faith provided them meaning and security, especially during uncertain times. They affirmed that faith aids in interpreting their life experiences and navigating the complexities of life. Hence, faith expression also revolves around reflecting on and appreciating life's meaning by recognizing, interrogating, and valuing one's own experiences. This particular pronouncement from these young people during the interview sessions relates to

Aguilar's (2006) assertion that young people are actually looking for a religious community that provides a better and deeper understanding of life's meaning.

This study also nods with Ammerman's (1997) concept of Golden Rule Christianity: faith expression among Gen Zs remains to be about doing good. Young people emphasized that prayers must be coupled with good deeds, e.g., helping and respecting others and loving their family. Similarly, good deeds may also manifest by how they treat themselves. Apparently, self-care is viewed by young people as a relevant factor in faith expression, which ultimately benefits not only themselves but also their community as well.

Conclusions

The main objective of this study is to investigate how young people, particularly Gen Zs, express their faith. Following explanatory sequential mixed methods, three key conclusions were culled from both quantitative and qualitative data. First, the participants still recognize the important role of religion and religious practices in faith formation and expression. However, they underscored that the church must also be open in reinterpreting and redesigning these practices consistent with young people's values and experiences. Second, faith expression for the participants is about having an attitude of gratitude, i.e., recognizing one's blessings. Probing during the PEI, the participants emphasized that their love and respect for their families is also a way for them to express their faith. They all considered their family as the greatest gift from God, and loving and respecting them demonstrates appreciation of God's blessing. Lastly, young people of today express their faith by reflecting on life's meaning and doing good. They maintained that faith expression is navigating complexities by recognizing and valuing life's meaning. Golden Rule Christianity resonates with the participants as well. But they articulated that doing good must not only revolve around helping other people, it must also be manifested in the way they take care of themselves, i.e., self-care.

While young people are labeled as "messy followers" with the way they exercise their religious lives (Cornelio, 2018; Cornelio, 2014), this study proves that the way Gen Z Catholics define faith is not messy and abstract. This study concludes that young adherents remain faithful to God, but they have diverse ways of expressing their faith, which are secular and/or supplemental to doctrinal church practices.

Further investigation must be conducted in non-Catholic schools and among college students to elicit a more holistic understanding of Gen Zs' faith expression. Another limitation of the study was the participants in the qualitative dimension. Note that these participants scored higher in engagement in all factors in the quantitative survey questionnaire. Thus, further study on young people with rare engagement in faith and spiritual aspects may provide more nuanced results on how Gen Zs approach and express their faith.

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Original Article

Unveiling the Relevance of Reading the Bible among Generation Z College Students

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Abstract

This qualitative study explores the perceptions, barriers, and motivations surrounding Bible reading among Generation Z college students at Holy Angel University, a Catholic institution in Angeles City, Pampanga. Using a narrative research approach, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with ten Catholic students aged 18 and above. Findings revealed that while students recognize the Bible as a meaningful source of inspiration, guidance, and spiritual growth, consistent engagement remains limited. Academic demands, poor time management, and the Bible's complex language were identified as primary barriers to regular reading. Despite these challenges, students still turn to the Bible during personal struggles or when invited through academic or religious settings. Their engagement with Scripture positively influences personal values, emotional comfort, and decision-making. The study underscores the need for more accessible and relatable Bible reading strategies for youth and highlights the importance of supporting spiritual development alongside academic growth. These findings can inform educators, pastoral workers, and campus ministries in designing relevant faith-based programs.

Keywords: Bible Reading, Catholic University, College Students, Gen Z, Spiritual Engagement

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Introduction

The Bible holds significant influence over personal, cultural, and religious life, particularly among Filipinos, where over 80% of the population identifies as Christian (Pew Research Center, 2015). Beyond being a religious text, the Bible shapes beliefs about morality, life's meaning, and God's nature (Parrott, 2001; DeYoung, 2016). Pope Francis (2022, 2024) emphasized that Scripture revives paralyzed faith, calling it central to a believer's life and prayer. For Filipino Christians, the Bible is not merely a doctrinal guide but a living source of wisdom that informs their worldview, moral choices, and social relationships.

In the Philippine context, Bible reading contributes to moral formation and communal worship, reinforcing values such as familial loyalty, humility, and communal unity (Fegarido, 2002; Combinido et al., 2018). These values are deeply embedded in Filipino social life and spirituality, where Scripture often serves as a moral compass and a means of strengthening collective identity. Historical and cultural factors, such as Spanish colonization, local religiosity, and the need for contextual theology, shape how Filipinos interpret and apply the Bible (Agoncillo, 1990; Del Castillo, 2022). Localized interpretations, including those reflecting Filipino concepts like *utang na loob* and *bayanihan*, help make biblical teachings more relatable and meaningful (Bowe, 1998).

Understanding how younger generations engage with Scripture is vital, particularly Generation Z, who are emerging as a dominant demographic in the Philippines. Generation Z, commonly defined as those born from 1997 to 2012 (Pew Research Center, 2019), are digital natives who value diversity, mental health, and purpose-driven living (Feinstein & Coats, 2020; Róbert & Gubik, 2022; Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2024). However, while these generational categories originate in Western discourse, their characteristics may not fully capture the Filipino Gen Z experience. Filipino Gen Zs, shaped by local family structures, religiosity, and community-based values, navigate global digital culture while maintaining connections to traditional spirituality. Thus, defining Filipino Gen Z requires nuance, acknowledging their exposure to global trends yet recognizing their distinct moral and cultural formation within the Philippine context (Ortiz, 2022).

The Bible, derived from the Greek word meaning "the books", is a collection of sacred writings encompassing the Old Testament, which preserves ancient Israel's traditions, and the New Testament, which recounts the life of Jesus Christ and the beginnings of the early Church (McKenzie, 1965; Evans, 2012). For Filipino Gen Z, encountering this ancient text within a digital and pluralistic environment demands accessible and meaningful approaches to interpretation.

Despite its enduring importance, engagement with Scripture among Filipino youth remains inconsistent. The Philippine Bible Society (n.d.) notes that language barriers, limited interpretive tools, and reduced interest in traditional study methods hinder accessibility. To maintain relevance, Scripture should be taught using digital media, vernacular translations, and culturally grounded approaches that speak to Filipino experiences. Interactive and reflective Bible engagement, integrating technology, local idioms, and communal learning, can deepen faith and foster lifelong transformation.

Thus, Bible reading among Filipino Gen Z not only nurtures spirituality but also strengthens cultural identity and supports personal growth. Recognizing the influence of social change and digital culture on this generation, it is essential to understand how Scripture continues to shape their beliefs, values, and relationships within contemporary life. This study, therefore, examines the relevance of Bible

reading in the lives of Generation Z college students, focusing on how engagement with Scripture informs their faith, moral development, and sense of community in Catholic higher education. It also investigates the factors that facilitate or hinder Bible reading, such as academic demands, accessibility, and comprehension of biblical language. Through this exploration, the research aims to provide insights that can guide Catholic Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and theology educators in designing programs that integrate faith formation with academic life. Ultimately, the study seeks to contribute to the development of contextualized and transformative approaches to Scripture engagement, enabling young Filipinos to encounter the Word of God in ways that are meaningful, relevant, and sustaining in both their spiritual and personal journeys.

Reading the Bible

People consult the Bible for various reasons. A primary motivation is spiritual development, as the Bible deepens faith and one's relationship with God (Plante, 2008). It also provides historical and cultural insights into ancient customs and traditions (Evans, 2012). The Bible offers ethical guidance through narratives and characters whose choices offer lessons for modern life (Alter, 1981; Plante, 2008). Beyond its sacred role, it is valued for its literary richness, filled with symbolism and diverse narrative forms (Alter, 1981). Challenges in reading include understanding the historical context (Evans, 2012), translation variations affecting meaning (Newman, 2017), and navigating multiple literary genres (Alter, 1981). Despite this, tools like academic commentaries (Newman, 2017), study guides (American Bible Society, n.d.), and digital platforms like Bible Gateway make Scripture more accessible. Reading the Bible combines spiritual, intellectual, and literary engagement. With the right mindset and resources, it provides insights into religion, culture, and personal values.

Reaffirming the Relevance of Scripture in Contemporary Life

In today's fast-paced world, where technological advances and cultural shifts dominate, traditional religious practices often lose prominence. Amid this change, Christians may question the Bible's relevance and authority. Modern society increasingly portrays Scripture as outdated or fictional, and without realizing it, some believers may internalize this skepticism (Wright, 2013). This trend highlights the need to reaffirm the Bible's foundational role in Christian life. As N.T. Wright (2011) asserts, the Bible is not merely historical but a living text shaping identity, community, and purpose.

Understanding Scripture is essential, as it reveals God's nature, will, and redemptive plan (Fee & Stuart, 2014). Romans 10:17 underscores its spiritual necessity: "Faith comes by hearing the message... through the word about Christ." The Bible also offers moral guidance, enabling believers to navigate life's challenges with divine wisdom (Longman & Dillard, 2006).

Spiritual maturity includes both personal transformation and responsibility toward others. Scripture reveals humanity's need for God, which often begins the process of healing and renewal. Goldstein (2015) notes that self-awareness, facilitated by spiritual texts, fosters growth, compassion, and divine connection. Bible engagement, then, remains crucial for deepening faith and cultivating resilient communities.

Theological Framework: God's Healing, Promise, and Hope

The biblical narrative presents a unified vision of God's relationship with humanity, one grounded in healing, promise, and hope. Scripture reveals God's desire to restore creation and to guide human life toward meaning and wholeness. As Psalm 57:2 declares, "I cry out to God Most High, to God who fulfills his purpose for me" (Wright, 2011). This purpose is manifested throughout salvation history, culminating in Jesus Christ, whose ministry embodies divine restoration. Known to the Church Fathers as the "Divine Physician," Christ's works of healing demonstrate that redemption encompasses both physical and spiritual renewal (Miller, 2020; Keener, 2009). His death and resurrection invite believers to trust in God's greater redemptive plan (Ladd, 1993), which continues through the Church's mission of pastoral care, justice, and accompaniment.

Closely linked to this healing mission is the biblical theme of divine promise. Scripture repeatedly portrays God as faithful to His covenant with humanity, offering "rivers of living water" to those who believe (John 7:38, NIV; Fee & Stuart, 2014). The word *promise*, appearing more than a hundred times in the Bible, emphasizes the universal scope of salvation (Towner, 2007). The Gospel's "good news... for all people" (Luke 2:10) and Paul's vision of unity in Christ, breaking down divisions (Ephesians 2:14, NRSV; Galatians 3:28), reveal that divine promises extend beyond cultural and social boundaries (Bartholomew & Goheen, 2014). This inclusive vision establishes the foundation for Christian education: God's Word is not only to be believed but to be lived, forming communities shaped by reconciliation and service.

The third dimension of this theological framework is hope, which sustains believers amid uncertainty and suffering. The Psalms express human vulnerability while affirming God's enduring faithfulness (Brueggemann, 2014). Romans 15:13 (NIV) declares, "May the God of hope fill you... so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit." Theologically, hope orients Christian life toward God's promised future, as Jürgen Moltmann's *theology of hope* affirms (Moltmann, 1965, 1970). Psychologically, research shows that hope strengthens mental well-being and reduces despair, particularly among youth (Beck et al., 1979; Huen et al., 2015; Liu et al., 2021). Thus, the experience of divine promise and hope is not only spiritual but educational, nurturing moral resilience and meaning in learners' lives.

Together, these biblical themes form a theological framework for exploring how Scripture informs moral and spiritual formation within education. Healing reflects restoration of identity, promise expresses divine faithfulness within community, and hope inspires perseverance and purpose.

The Bible in the lives of the young people

The Bible has long served as a foundational source for moral principles, spiritual growth, and community cohesion. However, in the 21st century, its influence among youth appears to be diminishing due to increasing secularization and a decline in traditional religious practices (Pew Research Center, 2018). Additionally, the Bible's historical context and complex language can pose challenges for younger readers, making it seem less relevant or harder to understand (Evans, 2012). Research highlights the importance of accessible, relational approaches. Hutson (2018) emphasizes the power of biblical storytelling and community-based engagement to foster lasting connections with Scripture. A recent longitudinal study by Dougherty et al. (2024) found that frequent Bible reading among college students positively predicted prosocial behavior and civic involvement. Broader literature supports these

findings, showing that adolescent religious engagement is linked to empathy, resilience, and mental health (Hardy et al., 2019; King & Boyatzis, 2015).

To address these challenges, promoting digital and interactive methods, such as apps, videos, and guided reading plans, can modernize Scripture engagement (American Bible Society, 2022). Creating spaces where youth feel safe expressing doubt and asking questions is essential. Role models who embody Christian values also inspire deeper faith integration. Ultimately, the Bible remains a vital tool for shaping values like compassion, humility, and integrity, principles that offer enduring relevance for personal and communal life.

The Bible in the lives of College students

The college experience marks a critical stage of identity exploration and cognitive development, during which many students reevaluate their core beliefs and values. In this context, the Bible continues to hold significance, offering direction, solace, and a framework for personal growth. A 2024 study among Filipino Gen Z students found that spiritual growth is significantly associated with their personal values, suggesting a strong link between religious engagement and ethical identity (Villanueva, 2024). Another recent study involving Filipino college students validated a Bible reading attitude scale, revealing that students generally view the Bible as deeply connected to their personal experiences (Baring, 2006).

However, academic pressures and limited time remain key barriers. A 2020 study among Manila college students found that while prayer was seen as helpful to academic performance, time constraints often hinder spiritual practices like Bible reading (Fabula, 2020). Similarly, during the COVID-19 pandemic, students turned to prayer and Scripture for comfort amid stress and isolation (Cleofas et al., 2022).

In the Philippines, where Catholic tradition is deeply rooted, college offers a unique opportunity for communal faith formation (Baring, 2018). Filipino values of social connection encourage group scripture study and shared reflection, supporting sustained engagement. Despite digital distractions, Gen Z students still seek God's Word during personal challenges, showing the Bible's enduring relevance in uncertain times (Park & Eusebio, 2024).

The Bible in the lives of Filipino Gen Z

The Philippines, a predominantly Catholic nation, offers a unique setting to study Generation Z's (born 1997–2012) engagement with the Bible. Technology, family, and culture significantly shape this relationship. Social media can challenge traditional beliefs (Atienza, 2022) but also fosters faith-based dialogue (Pineda Nuncio et al., 2021). Family and church remain key in transmitting values (Santos & Cruz, 2020), while a shift toward personal, critical engagement with Scripture is emerging (Cruz & Manalo, 2022).

However, academic pressures hinder spiritual practices. Time constraints and poor time management affect Bible reading (Guzman et al., 2024; Santos et al., 2021). Research gaps include Gen Z's preferences for Bible format, translation, reading habits, and the link between Scripture and mental well-being. Despite distractions, many still find the Bible meaningful (Pineda Nuncio et al., 2021; Park & Eusebio, 2024). Further research can inform programs that support youth spirituality in a fast-paced, digital world.

Educational Institutions' Bible Reading Practices

The inclusion of Bible reading in education remains debated globally and in the Philippines. While the Philippine Constitution upholds the separation of church and state, the Enhanced Basic Education Act of 2013 allows values formation that may include religious education. However, research on Bible use in classrooms is limited. Del Castillo and Cacho (2023) advocate dialogic, participatory religious instruction in Catholic higher education. Internationally, Dutch schools adopt community-driven Bible engagement (Sonnenberg, de Kock, & Vogel, 2023), while German reforms show that removing compulsory religious education reduces long-term religiosity (Arold et al., 2022). Supporters view Bible reading as fostering virtues and cultural literacy (Sophy & Ryrie, 2021), while critics raise concerns about religious coercion (Freedom from Religion Foundation, 2023). Modern approaches encourage inclusive, reflective practices rather than forced recitations (Del Castillo & Cacho, 2023; Sonnenberg et al., 2023). As Catholic educators, we must investigate this issue to uphold faith and benefit student development.

Methodology

This qualitative study explores Generation Z college students' personal experiences with Bible reading at HAU. Using a narrative research approach (Edmonds & Kennedy, 2015), the researchers gathered participant stories to understand perspectives, emotions, and behaviors. Data collection involved collaborative storytelling and review to ensure accurate interpretation and meaning.

This study involved ten (10) Holy Angel University college students selected through purposive sampling. Inclusion criteria were: (1) Generation Z (born 1997–2012), (2) at least 18 years old, (3) enrolled for the 2024–2025 school year, and (4) self-identified as Catholic. Non-Christian and non-religious individuals were excluded.

The researchers, serving as the primary instrument of this study, conducted personal interviews with college students using a semi-structured questionnaire containing both closed- and open-ended questions, often followed by supplementary "why" or "how" inquiries (Adams, 2015). The tool was grounded in a specific philosophical framework (Thomas, n.d.) and was validated with a certificate of validation.

For the interview process, both face-to-face and online formats were considered. A letter of request to conduct the study was submitted to the OIC-President. Letters and informed consent forms were provided to participants in advance to ensure they were fully informed prior to the interviews. Moreover, the study adhered to the Data Privacy Act of 2012 and followed Inter-Agency Task Force (IATF) health protocols to safeguard participants' safety and confidentiality. For face-to-face interviews, a voice recorder was used to capture responses, while online interviews were conducted and documented via Zoom using cyber-ethnographic methods.

The collected data were analyzed using coding, categorizing, and thematic analysis. Coding involved examining transcripts to identify key patterns. Similar codes were grouped into categories. Thematic analysis then identified overarching themes by reviewing categories, continuously refining them to ensure accurate representation of the participants' narratives and insights.

This study strictly adhered to research ethics, operating under study protocol code 2024-103-JCDELEON-BibleReadingRelevanceGenZStuds. Prior to data collection, IRB approval was secured. Informed consent was obtained, ensuring

voluntary participation, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw at any time. Data was handled following the Data Privacy Act of 2012, securely stored, and will be deleted within two years. No compensation was given; participants may request a summary of findings or decline future data use.

Results and Findings

This chapter presents the data gathered from ten participants, structured around the study's key objectives: (1) to explore Generation Z college students' perceptions of reading the Bible, (2) to identify perceived barriers to Bible engagement among Generation Z college students, and (3) to understand their reasons for reading the Bible.

Significance of the Bible in Life

Most participants described the Bible as a source of inspiration, motivation, and guidance in their daily lives. They view it as a moral and spiritual reference that helps them navigate life's challenges. Statements such as "*it's a source of inspiration and kindness*" (Spb1), "*the Bible gives people hope and faith during difficult times*" (SpC1), and "*it serves as a symbolism of solace*" (SPf1) illustrate this perspective.

Several participants also emphasized that the Bible serves as their "guide" or "moral compass." For example, "*The Bible acts as a guide on how to connect to God and how to live my life properly and doing good all the time*" (SPd1). This recurring idea of the Bible as a life guide suggests that participants see Scripture not only as a sacred text but also as a practical tool for moral decision-making and spiritual reflection.

Meaning of Reading the Bible

When asked about what reading the Bible means to them, participants expressed that it provides opportunities for growth and personal change. For instance, one student said, "*I see it as an opportunity to reflect and for growth*" (Spa4), while another shared, "*Bible has changed me, and it helps me to know God better*" (SPh3).

A few participants emphasized relational and spiritual connection, describing Bible reading as "*a way to learn about wisdom, history, and life lessons*" (SPg4) or "*a guidebook where if life gets tough, I look into it to change my perspective*" (SPd2). These responses reveal that students experience Bible reading as both reflective and relational, an activity that connects them with divine wisdom and with themselves.

Frequency and Factors Affecting Bible Reading

Findings show that most participants do not read the Bible regularly. Typical responses include "*I read the Bible once in a while*" (SPc5), "*I rarely read the Bible*" (SPd4), and "*To be honest, I read the Bible when I have free time*" (SPc3). Only two participants reported reading weekly: "*I read the Bible twice a week*" (Spb4) and "*every week, after praying the rosary*" (Spi3).

Many admitted that they turn to the Bible mainly during times of distress or need: "*What pushes me to read are difficult situations and wanting something to believe in*" (SPc6). Others mentioned situational factors such as academic requirements, family practices, or group invitations that encouraged them to read.

Challenges in Reading the Bible

Time management and academic workload emerged as the most common challenges. Several participants admitted difficulty in balancing Bible reading with their school responsibilities: “*One challenge I face when it comes to reading the Bible is balancing my academic workload with my personal time*” (Spa8). Another wrote, “*Probably time management and academic workloads*” (Spb6).

A few participants identified linguistic barriers: “*The primary challenge that I face that makes it difficult to read the Bible is the deep vocabulary that the earlier versions have*” (SPf4). Others mentioned distractions and a lack of interest due to the modern lifestyle and digital engagement.

Comfort, Guidance, and Inspiration from the Bible

All participants reported that the Bible provided them with comfort or inspiration during personal trials. Examples include: “*When I hit the lowest part of my life, it comforted me through it*” (SPf5), “*When I was being outcasted and bullied, the Bible guided me and inspired me to do good*” (SPc6), and “*When I am feeling down, I will simply read a Bible because it helps me release the pain*” (SPh6).

These experiences highlight that Scripture serves as a source of reassurance and spiritual strength, particularly in moments of emotional or psychological distress.

Influence on Personal Growth and Decision-Making

Participants shared that reading the Bible helps them develop moral values and virtues such as forgiveness, patience, and discipline. “*It taught me how to be more forgiving, not only to others but also to myself*” (SPc7), and “*Reading the Bible shaped my values—compassion, patience, and understanding*” (Spa10).

Some noted that Scripture helps them resist temptation or avoid negative influences: “*It helps me to avoid temptations and stay committed*” (Spb9). Others emphasized perspective: “*Reading the Bible made me look at things holistically in every situation*” (Spi7). These responses show how engagement with the Bible contributes to moral formation and decision-making.

Discussion

The results show that Filipino Generation Z college students regard Bible reading as a significant and transformative spiritual activity. Numerous individuals regard the Bible as a wellspring of inspiration, ethical direction, and optimism, especially in times of emotional or academic adversity. They described it as a compass for ethical living and a means of encountering God in daily life. This echoes Bartholomew and Goheen’s (2014) claim that Scripture provides a narrative shaping one’s moral identity and worldview, and Fee and Stuart’s (2014) view of the Bible as practical instruction for living faithfully. Similarly, Baring (2018) observed that students who find the Bible personally relevant are more likely to integrate its teachings into decision-making. Villanueva (2024) likewise affirmed that Filipino Gen Z students link Bible engagement to moral development and ethical self-understanding.

Participants’ reflections indicate that reading Scripture functions as both reflection and relationship, an encounter with God that gives meaning to their experiences. Wright (2008) describes this as finding one’s place in God’s ongoing story, while Bowe (1998) emphasizes that contextual reading allows Scripture to become transformative within one’s cultural reality. This dialogical approach

resonates with Pope Francis's (2024) reminder that the Bible is a "living word" meant to sustain prayer and guide daily life. For these students, reading the Bible is not primarily academic but relational and experiential, a practice of growth and meaning-making.

Despite these insights, several barriers hinder consistent engagement. Academic demands and time constraints were the most common, echoing Fabula's (2020) and Britton and Tesser's (1991) findings that students' time pressures often limit spiritual activities. Guzman, Santos, and Reyes (2024) reported that academic stress among Filipino students leads to neglecting religious practices. Participants also cited difficulty understanding biblical language, paralleling Atienza's (2022) and the Philippine Bible Society's (2021) observations that traditional translations can alienate young readers. These challenges highlight how intellectual and cultural distance can affect spiritual engagement.

Even with such barriers, the study reveals that the Bible remains a significant source of comfort, wisdom, and renewal. Students shared that Scripture offered guidance in hardship, aligning with Cleofas, Albao, and Dayrit (2022), who found that spiritual practices helped students cope during stressful times. These experiences reflect Moltmann's (1965) "theology of hope," where faith sustains individuals amid struggle. The Bible also fosters moral growth, encouraging forgiveness, patience, and compassion, echoing Del Castillo and Cacho's (2023) findings that Scripture engagement supports ethical maturity, and Santos and Cruz's (2020) conclusion that biblical values shape moral reasoning in faith-based contexts.

Overall, Bible reading among Gen Z students is infrequent but spiritually impactful. Catholic higher education institutions should integrate pedagogies that unite spirituality and learning to deepen engagement. Strategies such as *lectio divina*, digital theology, and service-learning can connect faith with lived experience. These approaches align with *Gravissimum Educationis* (Second Vatican Council, 1965) and *Dei Verbum* (Vatican II, 1965), which call for Scripture to be at the heart of Christian education and formation. As Del Castillo (2022) argues, when theology is contextualized and participatory, students encounter the Bible not merely as text but as transformative experience, shaping reflective, value-oriented individuals who integrate faith into academic and personal life.

Conclusions

The study concludes that the Bible remains profoundly significant for Generation Z college students, providing inspiration, moral guidance, and spiritual direction. It continues to shape their values and strengthen their faith identity, even amid a rapidly changing cultural landscape. However, despite recognizing its importance, consistent engagement with Scripture is often disrupted by the pressures of academic life and time constraints. Many students struggle to balance intellectual pursuits with spiritual formation, leading to the marginalization of Bible reading in their daily routines.

These findings underscore the need for Catholic higher education institutions to reexamine how faith formation is integrated into academic life. In light of *Gravissimum Educationis* (Vatican II, 1965), which calls for holistic formation that unites faith and reason, schools should create spaces where Scripture informs not only theology classes but also the broader learning experience. Likewise, *Dei Verbum* (Vatican II, 1965) emphasizes that the Word of God must "inspire all the faithful to a more active participation in the life of the Church," urging educators to make Bible reading a living encounter rather than a mere academic exercise.

To nurture enduring spiritual practices, Catholic HEIs can adopt initiatives such as guided *Lectio Divina* sessions, Scripture-based reflection courses, and faith-sharing communities. By embedding Scripture into the institutional mission, education becomes both intellectually formative and spiritually transformative, preparing students to live out the Gospel in personal and professional life.

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Original Article

‘Maganda’ in the Fifth Argument of *Quinque Viae* of St. Thomas Aquinas

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Abstract

God created everything as “*maganda*.” However, human interference with creation has led to its degradation. In the fifth argument of the *Quinque Viae*, Saint Thomas Aquinas introduced the idea that the universe was created with order and purpose, or simply “very good” (Genesis 1:31), governed by a wise Sustainer. Dr. Jose de Mesa argued that “The universe created by God is “*maganda*” [in Hebrew, *tôb*; in English, beautiful], and humanity is “*magandang-maganda*” [very beautiful] because they reflect the graciousness of the Creator.” Yet, in the present time, can we still perceive the will of the Creator in how humanity interacts with and manages the beauty of creation? This paper will utilize the concept of cultural contextualization of the “*mabathalang atas*” [divine mandate] (Genesis 1:26, 28) using the *Suri-Nilay-Kilos* [See-Discern-Act] approach. This reflection seeks to demonstrate that the Filipino concept of *maganda* [understood as ethical beauty] corresponds to the form of governance implied in the *quinta via* of the *Quinque Viae*. It further aims to inspire a deeper commitment to the care and preservation of the *ganda* (beauty and goodness) of creation, grounded in the *kagandahang-loob* [gracious will; love] of the Creator.

Keywords: Fifth Argument, Ganda/Maganda, Inculturation, Pangit, Quinque Viae, St. Thomas Aquinas

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Introduction

In 2017, a book authored by Dr. Jose M. De Mesa, Dr. Estela P. Padilla, Dr. Levy L. Lanaria, Dr. Rebecca G. Cacho, Yuri D. Cipriano, Dr. George N. Capaque, and Dr. Timoteo D. Gener was published, titled *Ang Maganda sa Teolohiya* [“The Beauty in Theology”]. This book is a collection of theological essays centered around the concept of the word *ganda* [beauty]. It aims to illustrate the importance and beauty of theological studies from a Filipino perspective. The book advocates for a cultural approach to theology to make it more relatable, meaningful, and transformative for Filipino Christians. It emphasizes the inculcation of theological ideas into everyday experiences and the realities of Filipino culture, rooted in contextual or lived theology. The authors recommend a theology that is not only intellectual but also pastoral, one that responds to the needs and aspirations of communities using Filipino sentiment and thought (De Mesa et al., 2017).

In the chapter “*Kapag ang ‘Ganda’ ang Pag-uusapan: Mungkahi para sa Dulong at Paraan ng Mabathalang Pag-aaral*,” Dr. De Mesa illustrates that the concept of “*ganda*” is both broad and profound. He states that true beauty has an impact and resonates because it transforms the inner being of the person who perceives it (De Mesa, 2017, p. 5). This explains why, when we encounter something beautiful, we often say, “*ang lakas ng dating!*” [poorly translated as “It has presence!”] or “*may dating!*” [“It stands out!”] as if we feel beauty deep within, *tagos* [penetrating] to the bones! According to the *Diksyunaryo ng Wikang Pilipino* (1989), *ganda* refers to anything that ‘evokes admiration and delight’ [“*pumupukaw ng paghanga at pagkalugod*”] and is ‘visually appealing or attractive’ [“*kaakit-akit ang anyo*”]. Unlike the Western concept of beauty, which predominantly focuses on aesthetic [visual or external] appeal, Filipinos understand beauty as encompassing both admiration and deep appreciation [something very affective and morally uplifting]. Dr. De Mesa argues that the Filipino perspective on *ganda* is inseparable and intertwined—a fusion of aesthetics (captivating goodness or “*nakahahalinang kabutihan*”) and ethics (what is good or “*ang mabuti*”) (De Mesa, 2017, p. 5, 18).

This symbiotic relationship between aesthetics and ethics is evident in Filipino expressions such as “*magandang araw*” [good day], “*magandang asal*” [good manners], and “*magandang loob*” [good-heartedness]. It indicates that in Filipino culture, what is deemed ethically good is beautiful. As Dr. De Mesa (2017, p. 5) explains, we evaluate what we see, observe, experience, and witness in our surroundings by saying ‘*maganda*’ [beautiful/good] or ‘*di maganda*’ [not beautiful/not good]. For instance, when we say, “*Maganda ang ginagawa mong pag tulong sa kapwa*” [translated as ‘Your act of helping others is beautiful.’], we are referring to the ethical dimension of *ganda* (De Mesa, 2016, p. 23-24).

According to Dr. Estela Padilla (2017), in the chapter titled “*Ganda: Isang Pagtinging Kultural*,” the word *ganda* is often used as an adjective or adverb to describe actions or objects. To provide a deeper semantic meaning, the author conducted an interview and asked respondents to provide synonyms and antonyms for the word “*maganda*.” The purpose of this study was to explore the sentiment and cultural concept of beauty among Filipinos from various fields and social standings. Despite differences in status, circumstances, and backgrounds, a significant percentage of respondents shared similar meanings for the word *ganda* (Padilla, 2017, p. 25). It was found that words synonymous with “*maganda*” include “*maayos*” [orderly], “*mabuti*” [good], “*totoo*” [truthful], and “*walang daya*” [sincere], which, upon closer examination, reflect ethical foundations experienced in beauty, whether in people, objects, actions, or events. Conversely, words associated with the absence

of beauty include “*nakakasira*” [destructive], “*marumi*” [dirty], “*magulo*” [chaotic], and “*nakapagpapahirap sa tao*” [burdensome to people]. (Padilla, 2017, pp. 25, 35)

According to Dr. Levy L. Lanaria, in the chapter titled “*O Kay Ganda, Sana!*”, there exists a kind of *ganda* that is not truly beautiful—a deceptive or superficial *gandang pangit* (false beauty). He explains that despite God’s graciousness to Adam and Eve, granting them a *magandang tahanan* [the world] and filling it with *kagandahan*;

“*Naatim pa nilang piliin ang isang “gandang” pangit o mapaglinlang. Kaya’t pangit nga ang pagwawakas ng kuwento nila sa paraiso dahil ang kalooban ng Diyos ay hindi nila ginampanan nang lubusan.*”

(Lanaria, 2017, p. 53).

“They still chose a deceptive or false ‘beauty’ [or ‘ugly beauty’]. Thus, their story in paradise ended in ugliness [pangit], for they did not fully fulfill the will of God.”

(Lanaria, 2017, p. 53).

According to Dr. Rebecca G. Cacho, in the chapter “*Tungo sa Kaganapan ng Magandang Buhay*,” every Filipino dreams of *magandang buhay* [a good life], and all their aspirations and efforts are directed toward achieving it. As Dr. Cacho (2017, p. 63) states,

“*maganda ang buhay kapag maginhawa ang pakiramdam at katayuan; hindi nagkukulang at sapat sa lahat ng pangangailangan...*

kung ang pinaiiral ay ang kagandahang-loob ng Diyos, ang inaasam na magandang buhay ay magkakaroon ng katuparan.

Ngunit dahil sa pangit na ugali, pakikitungo, at pamumuhat nagiging mailap ang hinahangad.

Lumalabo ang pag-asa tungo sa buhay na maganda.”

(Cacho, 2017, pp. 66-67).

“Life is beautiful when one feels at ease and secure, lacking nothing and having all needs sufficiently met.

If God’s ‘kagandahang loob [graciousness/love] prevails, the longing for a good life will find fulfillment.

However, due to undesirable attitudes, poor relationships, and misguided ways of living, the desired life becomes elusive.

Hope for a truly beautiful existence fades.”

(Cacho, 2017, pp. 66-67).

The title of this study is “*Maganda*” in the Fifth Argument of Quinque Viae of St. Thomas Aquinas. The central objective of this paper is to examine the concept of *maganda* (beauty) through the lens of the *quinta via* [fifth way] of Saint Thomas Aquinas, highlighting its theological and ethical dimensions. Specifically, it seeks to explore how *maganda* functions not merely as an aesthetic form but as a manifestation of divine order and purpose (*telos*) observable in creation.

In the *quinta via*, Aquinas presents the teleological argument, which points to the observable order and design in the universe as evidence of an intelligent designer.

The beauty of all existing things, living and non-living, reveals a sophisticated mechanism governed by divine intelligence, sustaining both existence and coexistence. Within this framework, *maganda* reflects not only harmony and order but also the moral good that proceeds from the Creator's will.

This study further situates *maganda* within biblical anthropology, affirming that humanity, created in the image and likeness of God, is *magandang-maganda* [exceedingly good/beautiful]. As Genesis 1:26 and 28 express, humanity is entrusted with a *mabathalang atas* [divine mandate] to care for creation. Yet, despite the Creator's *kagandahang loob* [gracious will; love], the world still suffers from *kapangitan*—destruction, impurity, disorder, and suffering. Saint Thomas explains that while the universe follows the Eternal Law [*Walang-hanggang Batas; Kalooban ng Bathala*], human misuse of freedom disrupts this divine order.

Thus, this research aims to articulate *ganda* as a reflection of divine order and purpose, emphasizing humanity's responsibility to embody the *kagandahang loob* of the Creator through *mabathalang pananagutan* [divine responsibility]. Utilizing the Suri-Nilay-Kilos model, the study proposes a framework that contributes to curriculum development by offering a pedagogical approach in catechesis and religious education. This eco-theological pedagogy encourages learners to observe, reflect, and act toward preserving the beauty of creation as an expression of faith (Buencibello & Aton, 2024).

Methodology

This study employs the **Suri-Nilay-Kilos** (literally means *Observe-Reflect-Action*) framework as its principal analytic method to advance the argument that the Filipino concept of *Maganda*, as both ethical and aesthetic beauty, embodies the divine order and purpose articulated in the *quinta via* of Saint Thomas Aquinas. The study aims to demonstrate how this theological vision, when inculcated in the Filipino context, can inform an eco-theological pedagogy grounded in *mabathalang pananagutan* [divine responsibility].

The **Suri-Nilay-Kilos** method, adapted from the Catholic *See-Judge-Act* model, is used as a contextual theological approach integrating reflection and praxis. It was chosen for its compatibility with Filipino theological thought and its capacity to link faith expressions with concrete ethical action. While alternative frameworks such as theological aesthetics or phenomenological hermeneutics could apply, *Suri-Nilay-Kilos* was preferred for its cultural resonance and pedagogical practicality.

In the **Suri (See)** phase, the paper examines instances of environmental degradation, illustrating how human interference disrupts divine order (*kapangitan*). The **Nilay (Discern)** phase engages the *quinta via* of Aquinas and insights from Filipino theologians like De Mesa and Cacho to interpret *maganda* as the manifestation of *kagandahang-loob* [gracious will] in creation. Finally, the **Kilos (Act)** phase translates these theological insights into a pedagogical framework for catechesis and religious education that promotes ecological conversion and action.

In summary, this methodology proceeds by (1) observing the disruption of divine order in creation (*Suri*), (2) discerning the theological meaning of *maganda* as divine order and ethical goodness (*Nilay*), and (3) proposing a pedagogical praxis that restores harmony with creation (*Kilos*). This three-way method allows the paper to move coherently from argument to application, demonstrating that the rediscovery of *maganda* as order and goodness offers a viable theological foundation for eco-theological pedagogy in the Filipino context.

Discussion

“Pangit”: Consequences of Human Interference

In 2009, Typhoon Ondoy struck the Philippines, severely affecting Provident Village in Marikina. The devastating floods in the area resulted in numerous casualties and the destruction of property. The storm was followed by the onslaught of Typhoon Ulysses, which caused nearly the same level of devastation to the same location. Reports indicate that Provident Village was built in a catch basin (ABS-CBN News, France-Presse, & Flores, 2023), resembling a bowl that collects water whenever the Marikina River overflows. Naturally, the design of this area to accommodate excess water from the river makes it prone to flooding. However, in humanity’s pursuit of urban expansion, even this flood-prone space, intended to absorb overflowing waters, was developed into a residential zone, ultimately leading to disastrous consequences.

In 2020, a government agency in the Philippines decided to place crushed dolomite, an artificial sand, as part of the Manila Bay Rehabilitation Project. The project aimed to enhance the appearance of Manila Bay. Unfortunately, because this artificial sand was not natural to the area; it continued to erode, leading to wasted financial resources. Beyond the erosion, the impact on the location where the dolomite was sourced, in Cebu province, was severe and highly damaging. Google Maps' satellite images reveal the mountain in the town of Alcoy, where the dolomite extraction took place, to be barren. Reports also indicate health-related concerns due to the crushed dolomite in the province (ABS-CBN News, 2020).

“Kagandahan”: Order and Purpose

In essence, *ganda* serves as a *bakas* [trace] of God, continuously manifesting in the created world. As a *bakas* (De Mesa & Cacho, 2017, p. 52-53), *ganda* mirrors the graciousness of the Creator, the source of order and purpose in the universe, which is inherently beautiful. In Filipino culture, the term *maganda* encompasses both an aesthetic aspect [*ang nakahahalinang kabutihan*] and an ethical dimension [*ang mabuti*] (De Mesa, 2017, p. 7). From an aesthetic perspective, *ganda* refers to the external appearance, design, or form of creation. Meanwhile, from an ethical standpoint, *ganda* pertains to the internal essence of creation—something that is felt, transformative, and deeply moving [*may dating at talab*] (Padilla, 2017, pp. 26-27). Thus, the beauty in creation can be discerned through its order and purposive designs.

According to Saint Thomas Aquinas, the universe manifests the existence of an Active, Conscious, and Independent Something [*Aktibo, may Malay, at Malayang Meron*] (De Leon, 2015, p. 36), or simply an Independent Being (Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I-I, q. 2, a. 3). Thus, the universe serves as an instrument through which one can perceive a reality that represents both the visible and the felt. For instance, the existence of a table symbolizes a tangible material—whether wood or metal—that takes the form of a square or circle, with legs for support. However, beyond its visible attributes, the table also carries an intangible yet discernible aspect. This is the “table-ness” of the table, which signifies the order that governs its function and essence. Simply put, Saint Thomas Aquinas utilized both observable and experiential elements to demonstrate the existence of an intelligent Creator. According to the Fifth Argument, the universe inherently possesses order and purpose, which cannot—and should not—be violated. This principle highlights the ethical aspect of creation, meaning that every entity—whether living or non-living—exists within a structured system governed by natural order (Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I, q. 2, a. 3). Examples such as climate, human metabolism, or the growth of harvestable crops

follow specific structures and laws of nature, ensuring meaningful continuity. As Saint Thomas Aquinas states;

Quinta via sumitur ex gubernatione rerum.

Videmus enim quod aliqua quae cognitione carent, scilicet corpora naturalia, operantur propter finem, quod appetit ex hoc quod semper aut frequentius eodem modo operantur, ut consequantur id quod est optimum; unde patet quod non a casu, sed ex intentione pervenient ad finem.

Ea autem quae non habent cognitionem, non tendunt in finem nisi directa ab aliquo cognoscente et intelligente, sicut sagitta a sagittante.

Ergo est aliquid intelligens, a quo omnes res naturales ordinantur ad finem, et hoc dicimus Deum.

(Summa Theologica, I, q. 2, a. 3)

“The fifth way is taken from the governance of the world.

We see that things which lack intelligence, such as natural bodies, act for an end, and this is evident from their acting always, or nearly always, in the same way, so as to obtain the best result.

Hence it is plain that not fortuitously, but designedly, do they achieve their end. Now whatever lacks intelligence cannot move towards an end, unless it be directed by some being endowed with knowledge and intelligence; as the arrow is shot to its mark by the archer.

Therefore, some intelligent being exists by whom all natural things are directed to their end; and this being we call God.”
(Summa Theologica, I, q. 2, a. 3)

The anthropomorphic adherence of creation to its natural structure and system, which carries inherent meaning, serves as a *bakas* [trace or sacrament] (Cacho, 2011) of the Creator’s intelligent design woven into all living and non-living beings. Creation, devoid of intelligence, cannot produce ugliness, for the Creator Himself governs its structure and order. Humans are special, as they were created with their reason and intelligence, which they can use to decide whether to follow or deviate from the natural structure and system instilled by the Creator in the universe. Simply put, humans possess the ability—and the tendency—to introduce *kapangitan*. *Kapangitan* in creation arises from humanity’s interference with *maganda*. For example, forests serve as sanctuaries for diverse species of animals and plants, following a designated structure and system that maintains harmony. These ecosystems possess a distinctive order and purpose [or simply, *ganda*]. However, when humans destroy forests to build commercial infrastructure, the delicate balance of forest life collapses, disrupting natural flood control and soil stability producing *kapangitan*.

Ang “pangit”—ang pinalalagay na kabaligtaran ng “ganda”—ay taguri para sa di nagugustuhan, nakasisira

“Pangit”—often considered the opposite of “beauty”—is a label given to something unpleasant, disruptive, or perceived as harmful.

ng araw, o kaya'y sa ipinalalagay na nakasasama.

Subalit tulad din ng maganda, kakakitaan ang tinatawag na "pangit" ng iba't ibang tindi ng kalagayan.

Hindi basta't masasabi na lubos ang kapangitan ng itinuturing na "pangit."

Kung gagamitin natin ang larawan ng kulay na puti't itim bilang kasukdulan ng kagandahan [puti] at kapangitan [itim], sa kadalasan mala-abo ang magiging pagsasalarawan natin ng ating karanasan ng "maganda" o "pangit."

Sang-ayon sa pagkiling ng ating interpretasyon, ipapalagay natin ang ating nararanasan na maganda o pangit...

Ang pangit ay may dating din, subalit negatibo ito.
(De Mesa, 2017, p. 6-7)

However, much like beauty, what is deemed "ugly" exists in varying degrees.

It cannot be simply defined as absolute ugliness.

If we use the imagery of black and white to represent the extremes of beauty (white) and ugliness (black), our experience of "beauty" or "ugliness" is often portrayed in shades of gray.

Depending on our interpretation, we may perceive an experience as either beautiful or ugly.

Even ugliness carries an impact, though that impact is inherently negative.

(De Mesa, 2017, p. 6-7)

As Dr. De Mesa states, our perception of beauty and ugliness is often ambiguous, or what could be considered a 'double standard' (see Cambridge English Dictionary, n.d.). For instance, we condemn deforestation, the outright destruction of forests, yet at the same time, we admire the "dolomite beach" created by the Manila Bay Rehabilitation Project. So, where do we really stand?

On the other hand, according to the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus said that birds neither sow nor reap nor store food in barns, yet they are fed by the Creator. Birds rely on the order and purpose of nature, which sustains them. This order and purpose originate from the Creator's *kagandahang loob* [gracious will; love], ensuring that all things align with His divine nature. However, the question remains: where does humanity draw the audacity to manipulate the natural order and purpose of creation?

Mabathalang Atas: Caring for the Ganda of Creation

If we examine Genesis 1:28 in its English translation, it states that God blessed the first humans and said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth." The term "subdue" in Tagalog is translated as *pasukuin*, *talunin*, *supilin*, or *sakupin* (English, 1977, p. 1026). The Hebrew word for this is *kabash*, a verb often used to indicate the exertion of force over conquered subjects, territories, or battle situations. For example, it refers to military force in occupied lands. The term *kabash* can also be applied in contexts such as

enslavement or violence (Botterweck, Ringgren, & Fabry, 1995, p. 56). According to Old Testament scholar Terence Fretheim, it is crucial to recognize that in most Old Testament passages, *kabash* refers to human-to-human interactions [interhuman relationships]. However, Genesis 1:28 is unique in that *kabash* is applied to human interaction with nonhuman creation. This distinction, according to Fretheim, requires careful interpretation because the original usage of *kabash* primarily deals with human relationships (Fretheim, 2005, p. 52). On the other hand, Norman Habel, an expert in Old Testament studies, argues that there is nothing gentle about the verb *kabash*, as it conveys an inherently harsh meaning (Habel, 2000, p. 47).

The English word “dominate” translates to *pangingibabaw* or *paghahari* (English, 1977, p. 1026). The Hebrew equivalent of this term is *radah* (Coloe, 2013, p. 23). John Rogerson, an Old Testament theologian, argued that the relationship between humans and creation was originally harmonious, particularly before the narrative of the Great Flood in Genesis chapter 7. It has been suggested that in the first chapter of Genesis, the terms *kabash* and *radah* should be understood within the context of a peaceful world rather than the harsh interpretations seen in other Old Testament passages (Beauchamp, 1987, p. 180). Nonetheless, Genesis 1, with its references to subdue (*kabash*) and conquer (*radah*), has been misused to justify the irresponsible exploitation of nature’s beauty (Coloe, 2013, p. 23). A tyrannical and anthropocentric interpretation of Genesis 1:28 leads to *kapangitan* or ugliness rather than divine stewardship. As Pope Francis states, such a view is flawed, emphasizing that, ‘*We are not God. The earth came before us and was given to us as a gift.*’ (Laudato ‘Si, par. 67).

Table 1. Comparative analysis of the translations of the words “Subdue” and “Dominion” from Genesis 1:28 across different languages: Hebrew-Masoretic, Greek-Septuagint, Aramaic-Targum, Latin-Vulgate, Tagalog, and English.

Hebrew Masoretic	Septuagint	Aramaic Targum	Latin Vulgate	Tagalog Translation	English Translation
<i>KABASH</i> “Subdue” (Coloe, 2013)	<i>katakurieusate</i> “Power, lordship over.” Benign/pastoral power of God (cf. Genesis 1:28 and Jeremias 3:14; Coloe, 2013)	<i>takaph</i> – “to seize, to overpower.” The noun <i>tikooph</i> , based on the verb means “strength, power, help, protection.” (Coloe, 2013, p. 27)	<i>Subicite</i> – to throw under, place under, set up, make subject, submit, ascribe (Coloe, 2013)	”At sila'y pinagpala. Wika Niya [Diyos], ”Magpakaram i kayo at punuin ng inyong mga supling ang buong daigdig, at <i>pamahalaan</i> ito.” (Philippine Bible Society, 1973)	God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and <i>subdue</i> it; (The Holy Bible New Revised Standard Version: Catholic Edition, 2006)

<i>RADAH</i> "Have dominion"	<i>Archete</i> "Rule" <i>archai</i> (beginning, a founding leader)	<i>Shalat</i> "To handle, rule, to have power over" P.T. uses <i>shalat</i> in the sense of "power of attorney over another's property"	<i>Dominamini</i> "to be Lord, to reign, to govern, to rule, to command" – in a godly way.	Binibigyan ko kayo ng <i>kapangyarihan</i> sa mga isda, sa mga ibon, at sa lahat ng mailap na hayop, maging malalaki o maliliit."	and have <i>dominion</i> over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.'
(Coloe, 2013)	(Coloe, 2013)	(Coloe, 2013)	(Coloe, 2013)	(<i>Ang Magandang Balita Biblia: May Deuterocanonico</i> , 1973)	(<i>The Holy Bible New Revised Standard Version: Catholic Edition</i> , 2006)

This table illustrates the progression of translation from the ancient Hebrew language to old translations in Greek, Aramaic, and Latin, as well as comparisons with contemporary English and Tagalog translations. Upon examination, we can observe that the harsh Hebrew verbs *kabash* and *radah* were rendered more moderately in their respective translations—*katakurieuseate* and *archete* in Greek, *takaph* and *shalat* in Aramaic, and *subicite* and *dominamini* in Latin—all conveying notions of governance and the authority to rule. According to Mary Coloe, a scholar specializing in the New Testament, translations of Genesis 1:28 in Greek, Aramaic, and Latin reflect an effort to soften the meaning and interpretation of the strong wording in the original Hebrew text. She further explains that this moderation is often overlooked not only in translation but also in real-life applications (Coloe, 2013, p. 31). Similarly, the Tagalog translation also demonstrates moderation in the rendering of the verbs "*kabash*" and "*radah*," reinforcing a respectful and faithful interpretation that aligns with the concept of stewardship rather than domination over God's creation. To fully understand the context of the terms "subdue" and "dominion" in Genesis 1:28, we must revisit the reason behind the elevated recognition of the authority granted to humanity by God. This can be found in the earlier verses of Genesis (1:26).

Table 2. Comparative analysis of the translations of Genesis 1:26 across Latin, Tagalog, and English:

Latin Vulgate	Tagalog Translation	English Translation
" <i>et ait faciamus hominem ad imaginem et similitudinem nostram et praesit piscibus maris et volatilibus caeli et bestiis universaeque terrae omniq[ue] reptili quod movetur in terra.</i> " (<i>Latin Vulgate Old Testament Bible</i> , n.d.)	"Ngayon, lalangin natin ang tao. Ating gagawin siyang kalarawan natin. <i>Siya ang mamamahala</i> sa mga isda, mga ibon, at lahat ng hayop, maging maamo o mailap, malaki o maliiit." (<i>Ang Magandang Balita Biblia: May Deuterocanonico</i> , 1973)	'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have <u>dominion</u> over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.' (<i>The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version</i> , 2006)

This second table presents excerpts of Genesis 1:26 in Latin, Tagalog, and English translations. According to Genesis 1:26, God created humanity to govern all living creatures. The Latin word “*praesit*” conveys “responsibility” or “leadership.” In the Tagalog version of Genesis 1:26, we find the following passage: “*Ngayon, likhain natin ang tao ayon sa ating larawan, ayon sa ating wangis. Sila ang mamamahala ...*” In the Tagalog translation, we can read “*mamamahala*” as significantly synonymous with the Latin word “*praesit*.” However, if we examine the English translation, we find the following passage: “*Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion ...*” Therefore, the English term “dominion” should be understood as “stewardship” rather than absolute control. It is important to remember that stewardship inherently implies care and responsibility. For instance, a parent governs their children not through subjugation or domination but through nurturing and guidance. Genesis 1:26 and 1:28 establish a *mabathalang atas* for humanity to protect and sustain creation according to the capabilities granted by the Creator. In essence, humanity was entrusted with the responsibility of preserving the beauty and harmony [or simply *maganda*] of creation rather than exploiting or destructively [in other words, *pangit*] reshaping it.

This *mabathalang atas* [divine mandate] calls upon humans to be creative stewards, not harmful manipulators of the natural world. As seen in Genesis 3:5, the serpent tells Eve, “*kayo'y magiging parang Diyos...*” [you will be like God...]. This moment led the first humans to deviate from God’s command, exceeding the boundaries of the privilege granted to them to partake of all the fruits of the Garden except the forbidden one. The act of consuming what was expressly forbidden reflects humanity’s greed and excessive desire. Therefore, overindulgence—beyond what is rightfully given by the Creator—goes against the divine principle of stewardship, distorting the intended beauty and balance of creation. According to Pope Francis (2015, par. 66), the relationship between humanity, God, and all of creation is severed whenever people turn away from the *kagandahang loob* [or love] (Cacho, 2011) of the Creator by claiming God’s role for themselves and rejecting their inherent limitations as created beings. Such an attitude leads to choices that are not aligned with the desires of the Creator’s heart.

Humanity as Magandang-Maganda [Exceedingly Beautiful/Very Good]

God created all things beautiful. This truth is evident in the creation narrative, where the Creator, upon making light, the seas and skies, land and forests, the sun, moon, and stars, fish and birds, and all other living creatures, declared that “it was good” [*nakita ng Diyos na ito'y maganda*]. Furthermore, in Genesis 1:31, when God created humanity on the sixth day, He gazed upon all of creation and said, “Indeed, it was very good” (tunay ngang ito'y magandang-maganda). Humanity served as the crown of creation—a glory and honor distinct from other creatures. This profound distinction is emphasized in Psalm 8:4-6;

*Ano ba ang tao upang iyong
pahalagahan; o ang anak ng tao
upang iyong pangalagaan?*

*Nilikha mo siyang mababa sa iyo nang
kaunti, pinuspos mo siya ng dangan at
ng luwalhati.*

What is mankind that you are mindful
of them, human beings that you care
for them?

You have made them a little lower
than the angels and crowned them
with glory and honor.

Ginawa mo siyang pinuno ng lahat ng iyong nilikha sa lahat ng mga bagay, siya ang iyong pinamahala.
(*Ang Magandang Balita Biblia*, 1973)

You made them rulers over the works of your hands; you put everything under their feet.
(*New Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition*, 2006)

How beautiful is humanity? Exceedingly beautiful [*Magandang-maganda*] (De Mesa, 2017, p. 16). Humanity stands out as the greatest expression of God's gift of beauty, surpassing all other created beings—whether living or non-living. This beauty is rooted in God's *kagandahang loob* [gracious will; love], reflecting His nurturing and compassionate nature. This also means that humans carry a moral responsibility to preserve the beauty of creation, just as God has cared for them. The commandment "Love your neighbor" extends beyond human relationships—it includes the stewardship of nature as an act of love towards all creation. Proverbs 16:4 affirms that all beings were brought forth from God's purpose, signifying that all existing things come from the mind of the Creator. When humanity lived according to God's will, everything existed in harmony. The first humans dwelled happily and freely in the Garden of Eden (*Genesis 2:16*), coexisting with the animals (*Genesis 2:19*). What was God's intention for humanity upon placing them in Eden? "The LORD God took the man and placed him in the Garden of Eden to cultivate and take care of it." (*Genesis 2:15*). Additionally, God 'entrusted' [in Tagalog, *ipinaubaya*] humans with authority as rulers over the animals of the field and the birds of the air (*Genesis 2:19*). It is evident that before the serpent entered the narrative, humans lived fully aligned with God's will. When the first woman was tempted by the serpent to disobey God's command, the instruction was clear—she could eat from any tree in the garden but not exceed what was permitted by God (*Genesis 3:2-3*). Has humanity forgotten its original mandate to care for creation? Has humanity reached the point of neglecting the responsibility entrusted to them by the Creator? Have people become indifferent toward the care of creation? Indeed, humanity is prone to forgetting. In the story of Adam and Eve, they chose a deceptive beauty, one that led to a tragic end (De Mesa, 2017, p. 53). Even today, we continue to embrace this false beauty. For instance, instead of appreciating natural wonders such as rivers, streams, or waterfalls, we opt for artificial attractions—ones that require payment and contribute to environmental destruction. As the saying goes, "*Ano nga ba ang gamot sa limot? Paalala!*" [What is the cure for forgetfulness? A reminder!]

Humanity is exceedingly beautiful when connected to the Creator's *kagandahang loob*. According to Dr. De Mesa (2017, pp. 53-54),

*"Kapag ang tao ay
naputol ang kanyang
ugnayan sa batis o
bukal ng ganda siya ay
maghahanap at
maghahanap ng uri ng
gandang hindi galing sa
kanyang loob kundi
galing sa labas. Itong*

*"When a person is disconnected
from the stream or
source of true beauty,
they will constantly seek
a kind of beauty
that does not come from within
but from the outside.
However, this beauty is not genuine—
it is deceptive,
a beauty full of illusion,*

*gandang ito ay hindi
totoo...
mapaglinlang, isang
gandang punong-puno
ng daya, kaya
tinatawag na panlabas
na ganda... 'Parang'
maganda lang pero sa
totoo pangit."*

(De Mesa, 2017, p. 53-54)

thus referred to as external beauty.

It only appears beautiful, but in reality,
it is flawed."

(De Mesa, 2017, p. 53-54)

Humanity is encouraged to reawaken their consciousness of their divine responsibility to safeguard the beauty of creation. To restore themselves to their true beauty, they must undergo conversion—a return to their authentic nature [*loob*] (Miranda, 2021) as intended by the Creator. Within every person dwells *Bathalang Ka-loob na Walang Kasing Ganda*—the Divine Presence that continuously makes itself known (De Mesa, 2017, pp. 55 & 57). In essence, humanity must return to its true human nature, aligned with its design and purpose, which constitutes the *telos* [ultimate goal] of being human.

“Maganda” as a Model for Eco-Theological Pedagogy

Education serves as the meeting point for ecological awareness, faith formation, and the pursuit of concrete responses to environmental crises. It plays the role of a bridge, connecting the three key elements: *Sensitivity* to ecological issues, *Spiritual* depth rooted in faith, and *Solution-oriented* actions aimed at addressing environmental challenges.

According to Education for Sustainable Development (UNESCO, 2024), the classroom serves as a training ground where young learners develop the ability to analyze the interconnections between climate, social justice, and the economy. This concept is further enriched by Sterling (2011) through transformative learning, a process in which outdated and anthropocentric perspectives are broken down and replaced with an Earth-centered mindset—one that ultimately leads to concrete action. In the realm of faith, *Laudato Si’* emphasizes that “integral ecology” is at the heart of the Church’s mission (*Laudato Si’*, par. 209–215). As a result, Catholic schools and catechists are challenged to incorporate eco-theological conversion into daily learning and formation. According to Boff (1995), it is not enough to liberate humanity from unjust systems; creation itself must also be freed from the destructive and harmful actions of humanity.

If we apply the concept of “*ganda*”—along with its ethical and aesthetic dimensions—to ecological discussions, we can develop a clear model for eco-theological pedagogy. This framework can serve as a concrete foundation for educational methodologies both inside and outside the classroom. For example, at the curriculum level, this approach can be integrated into a service-learning module that combines ecological education with the cultivation of a culture of care. This can be done using *Suri-Nilay-Kilos* reflection framework [See-Discern-Act]. In the *Suri* (See) phase, students can explore their school grounds and surroundings through a waste-audit walk, where they count, list, and take photos of “*ganda*” elements [such as well-maintained plants or compost bins] and “*pangit*” elements [such as single-use plastics or improperly segregated waste]. In the *Nilay* (Discern) phase, Christian

Living educators can use Aquinas' Fifth Argument and *Laudato Si'* as guiding lenses. Students can then write in two-column journals, reflecting on how "ganda" and "pangit" intersect in their personal lives and faith journey. During the *Kilos* (Act) phase, the class can choose a project, such as "Adopt-a-Tree, Reflect-a-Verse," where each student plants a seedling on school grounds and attaches a Bible verse about creation. Another option is "Eco-Rosary Friday," where each mystery is dedicated to meditating on the beautiful and destructive effects of human actions on creation.

Teachers should also be encouraged to use the *Suri-Nilay-Kilos* framework in classroom discussions. A great starting point is a quiz-poll featuring images of local environmental issues, such as smog over EDSA or high-rise buildings versus the pristine blue waters of Palawan, where students debate which represents true "ganda" based on ethical and aesthetic standards. For catechesis, an activity like "Letter to My Future Child" can prompt students to articulate the kind of "beautiful world" they hope to pass on. As a concluding spiritual exercise, students may pray Psalm 8:1-9 in reflection.

Technology can also be integrated to enrich environmental discussions. For example, students can produce a five-minute podcast where they perform selected Filipino songs, such as "Masdan mo ang Kapaligiran" by Asin or "Karaniwang Tao" by Joey Ayala, followed by a brief reflection on ecology and faith before uploading it to Spotify or YouTube. Alternatively, they can create a QR code to be placed on a parish church, school, or community bulletin board, making the content easily accessible to the public. Students may also connect the message of the songs to Aquinas' Fifth Argument and the teachings of *Laudato Si'*. In this way, the project blends the traditional practice of the Filipino's love for singing with digital evangelization, ensuring that eco-theological awareness is promoted both inside and outside the classroom.

Conclusions

This study affirmed that all of creation was made *Maganda* [good, ordered, and purposeful], reflecting the *kagandahang-loob* [gracious will; love] of the Creator (De Mesa, 2017; Cacho, 2017). Humanity, created in the image and likeness of God, is *magandang-maganda* [exceedingly beautiful] (Genesis 1:26, 28, 31) and entrusted with a *mabathalang atas* [divine mandate] to safeguard the beauty and harmony of creation. Yet, human self-centeredness has disrupted this divine order, resulting in *kapangitan* [ugliness, disorder, destruction] (ABS-CBN News, 2020; *Laudato Si'*, 2015).

By employing the **Suri–Nilay–Kilos** (*See–Discern–Act*) framework, this paper demonstrated that *maganda*, in light of Saint Thomas Aquinas's *quinta via* (*Summa Theologica*, I, q.2, a.3), expresses both the aesthetic and ethical dimensions of divine order and purpose. The *Suri* phase revealed the brokenness in creation; the *Nilay* phase deepened theological reflection through the integration of Thomistic thought and Filipino contextual theology; and the *Kilos* phase proposed eco-theological pedagogy that transforms faith reflection into responsible action (Buencibello & Aton, 2024; UNESCO, 2024).

This study attained its objective of articulating *maganda* as an expression of divine order and moral goodness. It contributes to the expanding field of contextual theology by bridging Aquinas's teleological argument with Filipino moral imagination and ecological ethics. Furthermore, it advances religious education by offering a contextual and transformative framework that fosters ecological conversion and *mabathalang pananagutan* [divine responsibility]. To rediscover humanity's *magandang-maganda* nature is to return to the Creator's *kagandahang-loob*,

restoring both the integrity of creation and the moral beauty of human life. For creation's beauty to be restored, humanity must also undergo a return (*balik*) to its true nature, or *loob* (Miranda, 2021), embracing the exceedingly beautiful essence of being human. This rediscovery and transformation can only take place if people return to the "*kagandahang loob*" of the Creator, seeking to align themselves with the will of the Father rather than their own frail and flawed desires (*cf. Luke 22:42; Buencibello, 2024, pp. 132–133*). This longing is consistently reinforced by the prayer taught by Jesus, which reminds us: "*Ipasunod mo ang loob mo dito sa lupa parang sa langit*" [literally means, "let your *loob* (authentic self; will) be followed here on earth as it is in heaven."] (*De Mesa, 2011, p. 111; Buencibello, 2024; Doctrina Christiana en lengua Española y Tagala, 1593*).

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The original manuscript of this research is written in the Filipino language and is entitled "*Ang 'Maganda' sa Ikalimang Argumento ni Santo Tomas De Aquino*." The researchers utilized Microsoft Copilot to translate the texts, aiming to improve the writing style, as many Filipino expressions are challenging to convey in the English language. The researchers manually reviewed, validated, and paraphrased the translation, ensuring it accurately reflected the intended nature and meaning of the words or sentences. We also retain the original Filipino words or texts to enable readers to verify the accuracy of the translation according to their own discernment and knowledge.

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Original Article

Nine Grains of Rice and the Messianic Society: A Religio-Cultural Analysis of Karen Rice-Merit Networks in Northern Thailand

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Abstract

This study examines how the Karen Rice-Merit Networks (RMNs) in Northern Thailand express a lived religio-cultural solidarity grounded in the indigenous philosophy of the Nine Grains of Rice. Rooted in the Theology of Rice, this worldview sacralizes agriculture by linking rice's life cycle to Christ's Paschal Mystery. Using a qualitative design, the research draws on semi-structured interviews with 10 Karen priests, 2 organic intellectuals, and 3 RMN coordinators, supported by textual analysis of Church documents, participant observation of RMN's zonal meeting, and diocesan records. Findings reveal that the RMNs embody three interrelated dimensions: (1) self and family welfare, fostering food security and moral formation; (2) community welfare, promoting mutual aid and social justice; and (3) spiritual welfare, integrating Eucharistic symbolism with Karen identity. These practices sustain a counter-capitalist ethos rooted in reciprocity and sufficiency. The study concludes that the Nine Grains of Rice provides a religio-cultural developmental model for constructing a Messianic Society, and it recommends deeper youth engagement, ecological formation, and contextual catechesis to ensure the continuity of the missiological economy of grace.

Keywords: Karen rice-merit networks, Messianic society, nine grains of rice, religio-cultural identity, theology of rice

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Introduction

Rice is deeply woven into the world's agricultural traditions and spiritual beliefs. Seen as both sacred and all-encompassing, it touches nearly every part of agrarian life—shaping economies, societies, and rituals, and serving as both economic and spiritual force (Davidson, 2016). For the Karen people of Northern Thailand—who call themselves *P'gaz k'Nyau*, or “*human person*”—rice is not just food; it is central to who they are and how they live. Their way of seeing the world views nature, humanity, and the Absolute Being (*Ta Thi Ta Tau*) as interconnected, creating and upholding both life and morality (Fung SJ, 2024; Phatthanaphraiwan & Greene, 2023). Within this perspective, Catholic Karen communities—who were evangelized by Betharram missionaries beginning in 1951 after they left China—wove their farming values with Christian ideas of community and self-giving (Bistis SCJ, 2022b). This blend led to a unique *Theology of Rice*, which Fr. Niphon Thianwihan later articulated, an understanding that interprets the rice cycle as a symbol of Christ's self-giving love and resurrection. (Thianwihan, 2021).

In 2002, the Diocesan Social Action Centre (DISAC) and the Research and Training Center for Religio-Cultural Communities (RTRC) established the Rice-Merit Networks (RMNs), turning this theology into real-life practices of sharing rice and supporting each other across more than 700 villages (Karunan, 2019). The RMNs are grounded in the *Nine Grains of Rice* doctrine, an indigenous belief that treats farming as sacred and lays out an ethical way to share resources—not just within the family, but with the poor, the larger community, and even ancestors. At its heart, this network stands against capitalist values, contrasting rice—which represents life, sacrifice, and mutual support—with money, which stands for competition and hoarding. The Nine Grains promote a theology of solidarity, making sharing a sacred responsibility, and they reflect the Church's call for full human development and joining in the Messianic Kingdom (Paul VI, 1967; Francis, 2015).

This study takes a close look at the Karen RMNs, showing how the ideas behind the Nine Grains encourage people to think theologically, care for the environment, and stay strong in tough economic times. It explores how Karen wisdom acts as a faith-based answer to today's social and economic challenges. This research, therefore, addresses the question of how Karen religio-cultural wisdom functions as a theological response to modern socio-economic disruption. Specifically, the study aims (1) to interpret the religio-cultural meaning of the *Nine Grains of Rice* as a theological model of solidarity and transformation and (2) to evaluate how the Rice-Merit Networks operationalize these principles in forming a Messianic society within contemporary socio-economic contexts.

Literature Review

The literature review synthesizes the historical background of the Karen RMNs of Northern Thailand, the Karen holistic worldview and indigenous wisdom blended with the ‘Theology of Rice’, and the elements of contextual Catholic theology as articulated in Church documents.

Role of Rice in Shaping Asian Culture

Rice occupies a central role in shaping the identities and cultural traditions of Asian civilizations. In Southeast Asia, it is the most significant crop due to its political, economic, and social importance, although sustaining productivity remains a persistent challenge in certain countries (Fuller, 2011; Mutert & Fairhurst, 2002). The crop is widely regarded as sacred, and rituals throughout the cultivation cycle reflect reverence for rice. Traditional paddy rice farming demanded substantial labor and

required coordinated irrigation, fostering interdependent cultures characterized by strong social norms. Existing studies prove that for many Southeast Asian communities, rice serves as the primary means of subsistence, and rice culture reinforces key identity concepts such as communal values and religious practices, often involving expressions of gratitude to nature spirits, including the Rice Goddess, *Mae Phosop* (McDermond, 2014; Siriwan, 2015; Talhelm, 2022). A study conducted by Nosten (2015) states that rotational farming, practiced by groups such as the Karen, illustrates the connection between agricultural self-reliance and the preservation of cultural heritage. However, the modernization of rice cultivation has led to the increased use of intensive agricultural inputs, resulting in environmental and health impacts from the use of fertilizers and pesticides. These pressures, combined with socio-economic changes and declining yields in some regions, threaten the traditional rice complex and risk the erosion of cultural cohesion (Shepherd, 2017; Toolkiattiwong et al., 2023).

Karen Rice–Merit Networks in Northern Thailand

The RMNs began in Northern Thailand in the late 1970s, when Betharram missionary priests established “rice banks” to assist families facing rice shortages and famine, and to protect them from exploitative lenders. Over time, these efforts evolved into the Rice–Merit Ceremony (*Pha Pha Khao*) during the 1980s, initiated by Fr. Niphot Thianwihan, marking a shift from merely surviving to valuing the moral importance of sharing within the community. In 2002, the network became official as the Rice–Merit Network (*Khrua Khai Gong Boon Khao*) through a partnership between the DISAC and the Research and Training Center for Religio-Cultural Communities (RTRC) in Chiang Mai. Today, the network brings together approximately 1000 village groups that run revolving rice funds, support families in need, and build solidarity through shared ceremonies (Karunan, 2019).

The RMNs are more than just an agricultural group; they embody a moral economy rooted in the idea that rice provides both nourishment and spiritual significance. By treating rice as “*life that dies to give life*,” the network transforms the simple act of sharing into a way of embodying Christ’s redemptive love (Thianwihan, 2021).

This qualitative theological method aligns with the Church’s invitation to discern the “*signs of the times*” (Paul VI, 1965). By interpreting social practices through the lens of faith, the study seeks to reveal how divine grace operates within local economic and cultural systems. The RMNs, therefore, are not only community initiatives but also theological texts—places where the Gospel becomes incarnate in daily life.

The Karen Holistic Philosophy

The Karen see life as a web that connects people, nature, and the divine, a harmony summed up in the saying *Tar Oh Mu So Per*, meaning “*all life together*.” This outlook is kept alive by the ethic of reciprocity, *Maz dauv Maz Kaf* (“I help you, you help me”), which is the foundation for strong community bonds (Karunan, 2019; Suhardiman et al., 2025). This ethos ensures self-reliance in traditional practices like rotational farming (*rai mun wian*) and underpins Indigenous Community Welfare Systems (ICWS) such as rice banks (Rigert, 2024). In this way, the RMNs serve as practical examples of reciprocity, helping to distribute rice fairly, keep society balanced, and support local self-reliance.

Looking at RMNs as creative institutions that evolve over time, they draw on traditional ways of farming together to push back against outside economic forces and

protect their food security. In doing so, they put into action the Catholic Church's vision for complete human development, living out what *Populorum Progressio* and *Gaudium et Spes* describe as "a more perfect form of justice among men" (Paul VI, 1967, 1965).

The Theology of Rice

The Theology of Rice, developed by Fr. Niphot Thianwihan, connects Christian sacramentality with agrarian ethics. It treats the rice cycle—sowing, harvesting, and pounding—as symbols of Christ's passion, death, and resurrection. This perspective sees agriculture as a calling for self-giving and supporting the community, making daily farm work a way to share in divine grace (Thianwihan, 2021). Thianwihan also compares rice and money, using the RMN to question capitalist individualism and encourage an "economy of sufficiency" based on gratitude, justice, and shared wellbeing.

The Messianic Society

The RMNs also embody what Catholic social teaching envisions as the construction of a Messianic Society—the lived realization of the Kingdom of God in temporal structures. Drawing on Church documents such as *Lumen Gentium* (Paul VI, 1964), *Gaudium et Spes* (Paul VI, 1965), *Populorum Progressio* (Paul VI, 1967), *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (Paul VI, 1975), *Laudato Si* (Francis, 2015), and *Dilexi Te* (Leo XIV, 2025) this vision encompasses three dimensions: integral human development, social justice, care for the common home, and the sanctification of temporal affairs. The Church's mission of evangelization thus includes the transformation of economic and cultural life so that faith becomes incarnate in social practice (Francis, 2015).

In this theological framework, the RMNs become microcosms of the Messianic Kingdom. Each act of rice-sharing is a sacrament of solidarity, embodying the Christian call to build communities rooted in justice, reciprocity, and peace.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design integrating semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and document analysis to explore the religio-cultural and theological meanings of the RMNs in Northern Thailand. The qualitative approach was chosen because it enables the interpretation of lived experiences and theological expressions that cannot be fully captured through quantitative methods (Patton, 2002).

Participants and Sampling

The study sample comprised 10 Karen priests (five parish priests and five assistants) from the Diocese of Chiang Mai, two organic intellectuals, and three RMN coordinators. Purposive sampling was used to select individuals directly involved in RMN activities and able to provide theological and cultural insights. According to Subedi (2021), purposive sampling, which emphasizes in-depth exploration, may involve a limited number of participants. This approach is particularly valuable in qualitative research, as it facilitates intensive understanding, especially when employing semi-structured interview designs.

All participants were adults between 35 and 70 years of age. Selection criteria required active involvement in pastoral ministry, familiarity with the RMN, and willingness to participate. This participant composition provided diverse yet complementary perspectives on the influence of the Karen philosophy and culture on faith and community life.

Data Collection and Analysis

The semi-structured interview questionnaire was developed using themes identified in a literature review on the influence of ethnic community culture on religious and social life. Drawing from Church documents and the Karen philosophy of life, the questionnaire was divided into two sections. The first section addressed the impact of the Nine Grains of Philosophy and the practice of RMNs at personal, social, and religious levels. The second section focused on the challenges of implementing the Nine Grains philosophy and RMNs effectively.

To ensure validity and depth, the open-ended questionnaire was reviewed by three experts in Karen culture and academics with experience in RMNs functionality. All experts held doctoral degrees and possessed over 5 to 10 years of experience in their respective fields. The validated questionnaire items were used to collect data through semi-structured interviews with participants. These interviews were guided by open-ended questions designed to elicit rich and reflective responses in qualitative research (Park, 2025).

The researcher also participated in a zonal RMN meeting at Chiang Mai Zone 2, observing committee members' interactions and administrative practices. Supplementary data were obtained from annual RMN reports and records from the DISAC. Information collected from the participatory meeting and the annual report was used to enhance the discussion and findings sections.

Interview transcripts, observational notes, and documentary materials were coded thematically following Naeem et al. (2023). Recurrent themes related to solidarity, reciprocity, and spirituality were identified and synthesized to construct a conceptual model of the RMN as a lived theology. Descriptive analysis across sources ensured validity and interpretive depth.

All participants were informed of the study's objectives and provided consent before participation. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained throughout the research process.

Results/Findings

This section shares the main findings of the study based on its two objectives: (1) to interpret the religio-cultural meaning of the Nine Grains of Rice as a theological model of solidarity and transformation, and (2) to examine how the Rice–Merit Networks (RMNs) put these principles into practice to shape a Messianic society in Northern Thailand.

The results bring together qualitative data from interviews, diocesan reports, and observations at RMN meetings.

1. The Nine Grains of Rice as a Theological Framework of Solidarity

The *Nine Grains of Rice philosophy* reflects the Karen belief in the connection between people, nature, and the divine. It treats agriculture as sacred, seeing rice as the “Essence of Life” (*K’la*), symbolizing both physical and spiritual nourishment. Dividing the harvest into nine parts—for self, family, relatives, the poor, community, exchange of things, religious formation, ancestors, and the hope of a Messianic society—shows an ethical system based on reciprocity and gratitude.

In theological terms, the Nine Grains reflect a contextual expression of the Theology of Rice, where the process of cultivation embodies a rhythm of self-giving and renewal inspired by the Paschal Mystery. This cycle reflects the Paschal Mystery of Christ and turns farm work into a sacred act. The practice stands for a spirituality that values sharing and sacrifice, in contrast to money, which represents

individualism and accumulation. By making rice a moral symbol, the Karen see material exchange as an act of faith that supports the community instead of competition.

Seen this way, the Nine Grains act as a model of solidarity, where the cycles of growing and sharing rice reflect divine generosity. This worldview turns everyday survival into a clear sign of the Kingdom of God.

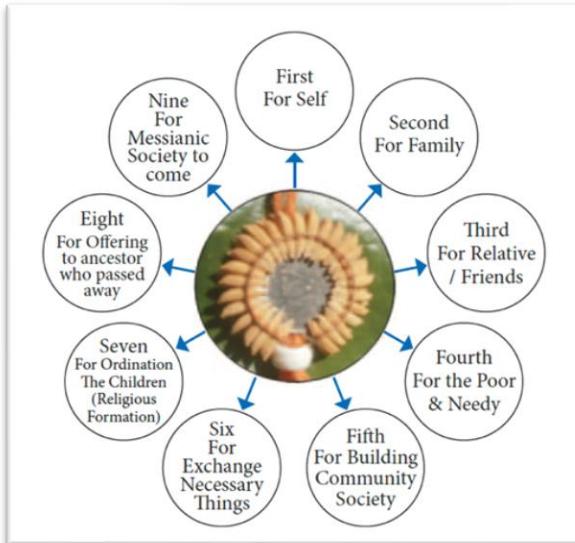


Figure 1. The Philosophy of Nine Grains of Rice

2. Dimensions of Practice within the Rice-Merit Networks

The field data show that the RMNs put the Nine Grains philosophy into practice in three ways: caring for self and family, supporting society and community, and nurturing religious and spiritual life. These areas move from meeting personal needs to reaching shared and higher goals, reflecting a complete Messianic vision.

a. Self and Family Welfare

Participants said rice is the basis of both physical life and moral growth: “*no rice, no life.*” The RMN approach helps families have enough food, avoid debt and exploitation, and pass on values like hard work, sufficiency, and contentment to the next generation.

At this level, rice becomes both nourishment and moral pedagogy. Personal stewardship is sanctified as participation in God’s creative work, and the family unit becomes the first locus of faith-based resilience.

b. Society and Community Welfare

RMNs help not just families but the wider community through mutual aid, shared rice banks, and emergency help. They support widows, the elderly, the sick, orphans, young men and women in religious formation, and families hit by disasters (Rugchat & Buochareon, 2021). Parish married men and Marian Solidarity groups also help children from low-income families attend school.

These actions put the Karen idea of reciprocity—*Maz dauv Maz Kaf* (“I help you, you help me”)—into practice as organized solidarity. RMNs become local examples of Catholic social teaching on justice and fairness, turning charity into real community change.

c. Religious and Spiritual Welfare

Rice has profound religious meaning: it “dies three times to give life,” reminding people of Christ’s death and resurrection. The connection between bread and rice in the Eucharist adds to the spiritual meaning of daily work. Through the RMNs, local sharing rituals become part of Catholic practice, strengthening Karen Catholic identity. The network’s motto, “*Delicious rice, Good people, Have virtue,*” sums up its values of gratitude, forgiveness, and virtue.

In this setting, RMNs are places where farming and Christian faith come together. Sharing rice in rituals acts as a sign of unity, showing that holiness grows from community life.

3. Integrative Analysis: From Grain to Kingdom

In all these areas, the Nine Grains of Rice serve as both a symbol of faith and a guide for development. The RMNs turn beliefs into daily actions, letting communities experience salvation through sharing. Growing, storing, and sharing rice shows the path from personal duty to community and spiritual fulfillment.

Table 1. Consolidated Findings on RMNs’ Contributions to Self, Society, and Religious Welfare Systems

Question	Keyword/Phrases	Theme	Meaning
How do the Nine Grains of Rice support self and family welfare?	“Rice is life”; “rice dies three times”; “no rice, no life”; “family security”; “avoid debt”; “sufficiency vs. consumerism”; “passing on values to next generation”	Self-sufficiency; Moral discipline; Agrarian resilience	The Nine Grains model grounds personal life in discipline, food security, and moral formation. Rice becomes a pedagogy of character and dignity.
How do RMNs strengthen community and society?	“Sharing with widows/orphans”; “help sick & elderly”; “Maz Dauv Maz Kaf mutual aid”; “emergency rice reserve”; “unity across villages”; “committee discernment”	Communal reciprocity; Social justice; Collective welfare	RMNs serve as a community safety net rooted in reciprocity, distributing resources fairly and strengthening social cohesion.
How do the Nine Grains express religious and spiritual meaning?	“Rice has spirit (khwan)”; “Eucharist connection”; “thanksgiving Mass”; “rice procession”; “delicious rice, good people, virtue”	Sacrificial spirituality; Inculcation; Eucharistic identity	Rice symbolizes Christ-like self-giving. RMN rituals embed Catholic faith in Karen cosmology and nurture spiritual identity.
How do RMNs contribute to forming a Messianic Society?	“Helping without repayment”; “unity in sacrifice”; “rice vs. money worldview”; “building hope for	Lived theology; Transformative solidarity; Kingdom values	RMNs embody a micro-Messianic society where justice, compassion, and dignity shape

	future generations”; “sufficient economy as Christian ethic”		communal life through shared grain.
How does RMN participation shape youth and future leadership?	“Youth proud to join rituals”; “declining participation”; “need teaching”; “use media to attract youth”; “elders teach rice wisdom”	Cultural transmission; Youth fragility; Formation needs	RMNs offer a formation ground for future leaders, teaching identity, ecology, spirituality, and solidarity.
What are the key challenges for sustaining RMNs?	“Urban migration”; “climate change”; “monetization of life”; “less rice farming”; “dependence on priest leadership”	Structural vulnerabilities; Economic pressure; Ecological fragility	Sustainability requires adaptive strategies: ecological awareness, youth formation, and consistent pastoral leadership.

Table 1 provides a synthesis of qualitative findings derived from semi-structured interviews with Karen priests, RMN coordinators, and organic intellectuals, wherein participants’ responses—organized around six guiding questions addressing the influence of the Nine Grains of Rice philosophy on self and family welfare, community support systems, religious life, social solidarity, youth engagement, and the challenges faced by RMNs—were analyzed for direct keywords and recurring phrases, subsequently categorized thematically to reflect salient patterns and principal domains of RMN practices and experiences as consistently articulated by informants.

Table 2. Consolidated Document-Based Findings on Indigenous Community Wisdom, Religious Beliefs, and Welfare Systems

Document Focus	Keywords/Phrases	Themes	Meaning
Indigenous philosophy self-development	“ <i>Maz Dauv Maz Kaf</i> mutual aid”; — ‘you help me, I help you’”; “rotational farming (<i>rai mun wian</i>)”; “self-reliance”; “food self-sufficiency”; “solidarity-based survival”; “rice seed at cheaper price”; “support for sick and poor families”	Subsistence ethics; Reciprocity; Household resilience	Indigenous philosophy ensures family welfare through cooperative labor, reciprocal exchange, and food security. It forms a moral economy that protects families from hunger, debt, and vulnerability.
Indigenous philosophy and community development	“Rice collection systems”; “humanitarian relief”; “networks of solidarity”; “community seed systems”; “support for conflict-affected households”; “resource sharing”	Social cohesion; Communal welfare; Mutual responsibility	Community welfare systems operate as culturally embedded welfare systems that distribute resources fairly, prevent exploitation, and sustain community-wide security during crises.

Indigenous welfare system towards spiritual development	“Rice, land, water are sacred”; “Creator (<i>Ta Thi Ta Tau</i>)”; “wellbeing of human and more-than-human beings”; “ecological rituals”; “sacred environment”; “Messianic Kingdom already among us”	Sacred ecology; Holistic spirituality; Sacramental worldview	Indigenous cosmology perceives nature as sacred and interlinked with divine presence. Rituals sacralize ecological life and embody a spirituality of gratitude, harmony, and interconnectedness.
Indigenous welfare system towards religious fulfilment	“Sharing embodies Kingdom values”; “reciprocity as spiritual virtue”; “communal harmony”; “justice and peace”; “ecological reverence”; “solidarity practices”	Kingdom ethics; Transformative solidarity; Communal virtue	Community welfare practices become lived expressions of the Kingdom of God—where justice, sharing, and peace govern relationships, revealing a lived Messianic social vision.
Indigenous welfare system and ongoing generational development	“Youth research groups”; “participatory mapping”; “formalizing customary systems”; “mediators/translators”; “Training of Trainers (ToT)”; “visibility and legibility”	Youth empowerment; Leadership formation; Cultural renewal	Youth participation ensures cultural transmission and equips new leaders with skills to negotiate with state authorities, strengthening long-term continuity of Indigenous governance.
Challenges to sustaining Indigenous wisdom and practices	“State land policies”; “criminalization of customary land use”; “protected forests”; “cash-crop economy”; “youth migration”; “loss of traditional knowledge”; “decline in rice-growing culture”	Structural marginalization; Economic pressures; Generational rupture	Sustainability is threatened by restrictive state policies, market-driven agriculture, and declining youth engagement, leading to erosion of Indigenous ecological and cultural systems.

Table 2 presents a synthesis of findings from documentary sources, such as research articles, reports, cultural records, ecological statements, and governance descriptions. The extracted content is systematically organized according to six guiding questions that examine Indigenous philosophies, community welfare systems, sacred ecological perspectives, spiritual expressions, youth involvement, and sustainability challenges. Identified keywords and phrases are thematically categorized to highlight recurrent patterns. The themes derived from documentary analysis complement the interview data by elucidating the structural, cultural, and ecological foundations that support Indigenous community welfare practices.

Table 3. The Diocesan Social Action Centre (DISAC)'s report on RMNs, 2025

Name of Zone	Number of Parishes	Amount of Rice Collected (Kg)	Amount of Donation (THB)	Number of Participants	Participation Percentage (%)
CM-1	3	-	-	-	-
CM-2	8	25,416	300,900	1,385	27.7
CM-3	5	13,452	145,061	865	17.3
MHS	10	28,536	640,570	2,757	55.0
Total	26	67,404	1,086,531	5,007	100

RMN REPORT – 2025

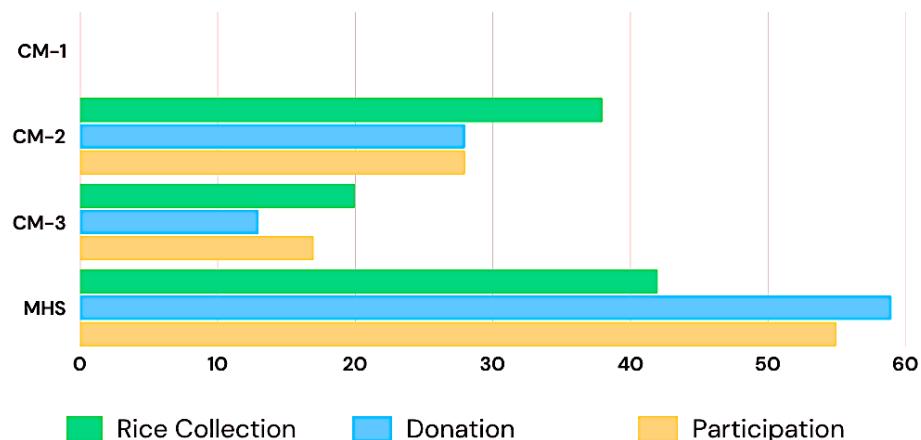


Figure 2. Diagram of RMN Contribution and Participation Report for 2025 (Percentage Breakdown)

Table 3 and Figure 2 present the data reported by DISAC for 2025, showing rice collection, monetary contributions, parish participation, and engagement levels across the four administrative zones, as well as the percentage breakdown of participants in the RMN events.

Theologically, this journey from grain to Kingdom puts the Church's vision of full human development into practice and looks forward to a Messianic Society—a community where economic life is shaped by compassion, justice, and balance with nature. It is because every Christian has a role in building the Kingdom of God, utilizing their unique abilities and opportunities to accomplish God's purposes, and thereby acting as a necessary link in the plan for the world's salvation (Bistis SCJ, 2022a). By sharing rice in simple but meaningful ways, Karen Catholics transform daily labor into a sign of divine grace and communal hope.

In summary, the *Nine Grains of Rice* function as both a spiritual symbol and a developmental framework within the Rice–Merit Networks. They link personal virtue, community welfare, and faith-based solidarity into a lived expression of the Karen Theology of Rice. These findings reveal how local agricultural and religious practices embody an integrated vision of human flourishing that prepares the ground for the following theological discussion.

Discussions

This discussion builds directly on the organized presentation of interview and document findings, synthesizing their thematic patterns without repeating the data already shown in the Results section. The Catholic Church, driven by its mission of solidarity and commitment to integral human development and dignity, supports marginalized populations as crucial social safety networks, providing welfare, support, and holistic formation to reach mainstream systems (Bistis SCJ & Kobvithayakul, 2025). The RMNs within the Chiang Mai diocese are administratively divided into four zones: Chiang Mai-1, Chiang Mai-2, Chiang Mai-3, and Mae Hong Son. The 2025 DISAC report documents significant engagement across 26 parishes within the Chiang Mai Diocese. Collectively, the RMNs collected 67,404 kilograms of rice, THB 1,086,531 in donations, and involved 5,007 participants, illustrating both the material and spiritual vitality of the Nine Grains of Rice philosophy. These data reveal a theological pattern of solidarity, with rice-sharing serving as an expression of faith.

A comparative analysis of the four administrative zones reveals distinct emphases with theological significance. Mae Hong Son contributed the largest share of rice (42.3%), funds (59%), and participants (55%). The high rice-to-cash ratio in this zone indicates a community deeply rooted in agricultural symbolism, where rice maintains its sacred status as *'life that dies to give life.'* Chiang Mai Zone 2 demonstrated balanced integration, while Zone 3 showed increasing monetization, reflecting a compromise between traditional reciprocity and modern economic structures. In contrast, Zone 1 reported no contribution in 2025, a gap that extends beyond material measurement and suggests a religio-cultural crisis of belonging. This absence of participation risks exclusion from the communal sacrament of sharing and underscores the need for alternative, non-agricultural forms of contribution, such as participation with other zones, savings groups, or liturgical offerings.

Interpreted theologically, the rice-to-money ratio functions as an indicator of cultural transformation. Rice, as a counter-symbol to money, represents the moral economy of mutual aid. Where monetary donations increase disproportionately, the sacred symbolism of rice is weakened, and the community's theological inventiveness risks configuration with capitalist logic rather than Eucharistic solidarity. Mae Hong Son's predominance in rice contributions thus becomes more than statistical—it is a witness to the persistence of a '*sufficiency economy*' and a spirituality of contentment grounded in the theology of rice. As Pope Francis writes in *Laudato Si'*, "*the human environment and the natural environment deteriorate together, and we cannot adequately combat environmental degradation unless we attend to causes related to human and social degradation*" (Francis, 2015).

The findings also reveal that the RMNs are not merely welfare institutions but grassroots sacramental communities. Their structure mirrors a lived ecclesiology in which faith and economics intersect. Each grain of rice offered embodies the principle of kenosis (self-emptying love) and becomes a medium of evangelization. Participation in the RMN transforms members into co-creators of the Messianic

Kingdom, where justice, equity, and peace are not abstract ideals but daily practices.

The act of giving rice functions as a tangible participation in God's redemptive economy, where material sustenance becomes a channel of spiritual communion

Challenges faced by the Rice-Merit Networks

However, sustaining this Messianic society model faces critical challenges. The first is *declining youth participation*, driven by urban migration and material aspirations. Furthermore, the cash-crop economy causes a generational gap as youth migrate to cities, often prioritizing earning money over growing rice, leading to a decline in participation and a loss of traditional knowledge (Walker, 2001). Young people increasingly perceive rice-merit activities as outdated, privileging economic success over community service. Without strategic catechesis and leadership formation, the transmission of this religio-cultural tradition risks interruption. Secondly, structural changes in agriculture and the economy, including land fragmentation, reduced rice cultivation, and *climate-related disruptions*, have reshaped livelihoods. These changes disrupt the subsistence base that supports the theology of rice. Thirdly, *institutional dependence*—particularly reliance on the motivation and leadership of local parish priests—creates vulnerability in continuity. When leadership transitions occur, enthusiasm for RMN participation can wane.

Theologically, these challenges represent tensions within the ongoing construction of the Messianic Society. The Church's mission of integral human development, as articulated in the Church documents, calls for a faith that transforms temporal structures without losing cultural rootedness. The RMNs exemplify this transformation by translating Eucharistic sharing into economic solidarity. Yet, for the movement to endure, it must re-contextualize its methods for new generations—linking traditional agricultural metaphors with ecological stewardship, youth education, and social media engagement. In doing so, the networks can continue to embody Christ's command to “*give them something to eat yourselves*” (Mk 6:37) in a contemporary idiom.

The study indicates that the Nine Grains of Rice continue to function as an effective religio-cultural instrument for constructing a Messianic social vision in Northern Thailand. This practice bridges indigenous cosmology and Catholic theology, allowing Karen communities to articulate salvation through daily acts of reciprocity. The primary challenge is generational rather than conceptual: maintaining rice as both a material and spiritual symbol, so that economic modernization does not diminish its sacramental significance. When informed by this religio-cultural perspective, the RMNs can persist as a prophetic witness to an alternative moral economy, one that envisions the Kingdom of God through the everyday sharing of food, faith, and communal life.

Limitations of the Study

This study provides valuable insights into the religio-cultural aspects of the RMNs in Northern Thailand; however, it has some limitations. The research focused primarily on the Chiang Mai diocese and relied heavily on interviews with clergy and RMN coordinators, which may not accurately reflect the views of lay members, women, or youth. Additionally, since the study employed a qualitative approach, it does not reveal the quantitative effects of RMN practices on household food security or local economies.

Future research could compare different dioceses or ethnic groups to identify regional differences in the theology of rice, as well as in farming practices and their implementation. Using both ethnography and participatory measurement methods

could give stronger evidence of the social, economic, and spiritual effects of RMNs. More study is also needed on how to involve youth, how eco-spirituality adapts to climate change, and how indigenous agricultural wisdom can be combined with Catholic social teaching. This research would help us better understand how the *Nine Grains philosophy* can continue to serve as a living theology for human development and the building of a Messianic Society today.

Conclusion

The study concludes that the RMNs of Northern Thailand embody a dynamic synthesis of religion, culture, and community development. Through the practice of the Nine Grains of Rice, the Karen people integrate Catholic faith with indigenous wisdom, constructing a lived religio-cultural solidarity that unites material welfare with spiritual purpose. Sharing rice becomes both an act of communion and a reflection of Christ's redemptive generosity—a spirituality of self-giving that transforms ordinary labor into participation in divine grace. Each grain becomes a sacrament of gratitude, sacrifice, and communion, transforming everyday subsistence into a witness of the Messianic Society envisioned in the Gospel.

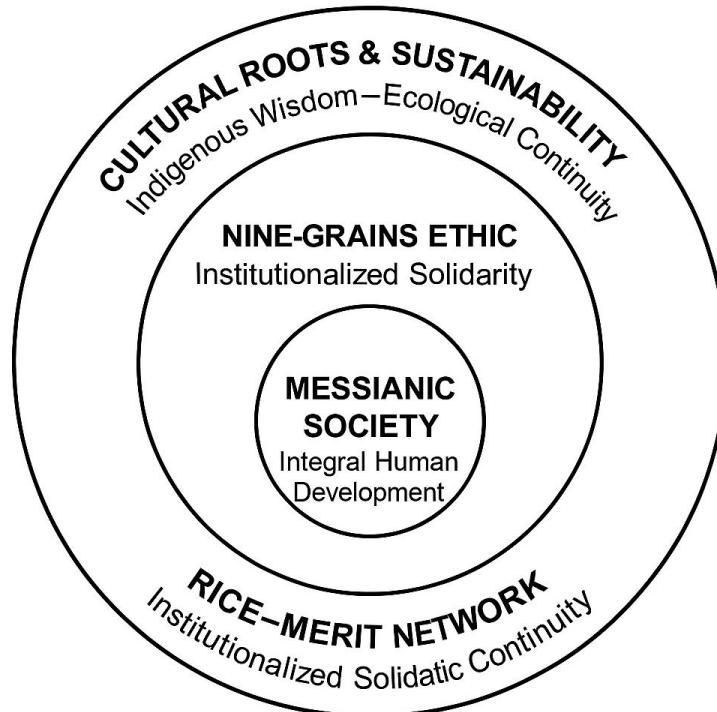


Figure 3. Proposed Model for RMNs' Vision of Messianic Society

Figure 3 shows the proposed circular Model for the RMNs' Messianic Society. The model uses concentric layers to show integration and reciprocity, not just a step-by-step process. And thus, it is reciprocally inter-connected and not pyramidal. This model highlights how theology, culture, and community life are interrelated among the Karen people. At the center is the Messianic Society, which stands for the highest goal of human development, where justice, peace, and unity reflect the Kingdom of God. Around this is the Nine Grains Ethic, which represents mutual support and moral sharing, based on the Karen idea of *Maz dauv Maz Kaf*, meaning "I help you,

you help me." The next layer, the Rice–Merit Networks (RMNs), puts this ethic into action by building solidarity and turning faith into social and economic activities. The Theology of Rice treats farming as a sacred act and a way to join in Christ's Paschal mystery—"life that dies to give life." The outermost layer, Cultural Roots and Sustainability, represents local wisdom and ongoing care for the environment, ensuring that beliefs and practices remain connected to cultural identity and nature. All these layers together show a complete theology of solidarity, where grace moves from the spiritual center to bring about social change and harmony with nature.

The findings confirm that RMNs function simultaneously as (1) *a religio-cultural model*, illuminating the anthropology of self-giving rooted in the Theology of Rice; (2) *a social mechanism*, institutionalizing mutual aid and collective welfare; and (3) *a spiritual practice*, nurturing conversion and community identity through Eucharistic symbolism. By grounding theological meaning in agrarian ethics, the Nine Grains philosophy resists consumerist individualism and offers an indigenous counter-discourse to capitalist values. The networks thus enact a contextual realization of Church documents, fostering integral human development and revealing that faith can transform economic life into an arena of salvation.

Nevertheless, the continuity of this incarnational economy depends on the Church's ability to engage new generations and respond to ecological and social change. Youth detachment, agricultural decline, and environmental degradation threaten to dilute the networks' moral and symbolic vitality. Hence, the RMNs' future relevance lies in reinterpreting the Theology of Rice for a digital, and climate-challenged world.

Recommendations

Strengthen Youth Engagement and Formation

Develop catechetical modules and school-based programs integrating the Nine Grains philosophy with Catholic social teaching.

Establish youth leadership teams within RMNs to foster responsibility, creativity, and continuity.

Utilize digital and social media platforms to communicate the spirituality of rice-sharing as a living Gospel value.

Promote Ecological and Cultural Stewardship

Encourage RMN communities to link rice-merit activities with ecological awareness campaigns, forest ordination, and biodiversity preservation.

Support seed conservation projects and the use of organic farming methods as expressions of the theology of creation and sufficiency economy.

Integrate eco-theological education into parish and diocesan formation programs. As Laudato Si affirms, "*everything is interconnected, and this invites us to develop a spirituality of that global solidarity which flows from the mystery of the Trinity*" (Francis, 2015).

Diversify Forms of Participation and Inclusion

For urban and landless parishes, introduce alternative modes of "rice-merit" through volunteer service, savings cooperatives, and solidarity funds.

Ensure the active involvement of women and lay leaders in decision-making roles within RMN structures to embody inclusivity and shared discipleship.

Enhance Institutional Support and Sustainability

Strengthen collaboration among RMNs, the DISAC, and parish pastoral councils to enhance administrative transparency and capacity building.

Encourage periodic evaluation and documentation of RMN practices to facilitate replication in other dioceses and ethnic contexts.

Advance Religio-Cultural Research and Dialogue

Support interdisciplinary studies linking the Theology of Rice with Biblical theology, contextual missiology, and Catholic social ethics.

Facilitate regional symposia and publications that highlight Southeast Asian approaches to the Theology of Development and the Messianic Kingdom.

In essence, the Rice–Merit Networks reveal that the Nine Grains of Rice is more than a moral code—it is a living theology that sustains community, sanctifies labor, and anticipates the Kingdom of God. By nurturing solidarity through shared grain rather than competitive gain, the RMNs embody the Christian vocation to transform history from within, cultivating a Messianic Society where faith, justice, and love take root in the soil of everyday life.

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Original Article

The Children's Gaze on Benedictine Monks: Insights from San Beda University Students

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Abstract

The primary purpose of this descriptive qualitative design study is to understand how Bedan pupils perceive Benedictine life and its influence on their faith formation. This study gathered insights from fifty (50) pupils (Grades 4-6) at San Beda University - IBED using an open-ended questionnaire, with data processed through thematic analysis. Findings indicated that pupils mostly view Benedictine monks as "prayerful," "disciplined," and "faithful," often using terms like "holy" and "devoted." While pupils recognized the sacrifice and conversion required, they also expressed curiosity about the monks' daily routines and vocational discernment. Based on these findings, the study recommends enhancing the Benedictine Spirituality curriculum, increasing the visibility of monks on campus, expanding the range of respondents, and organizing experiential activities, such as abbey tours and vocational talks. These insights may guide classroom strategies and resources to enhance pupils' understanding of Benedictine spirituality.

Keywords: Bedan; Benedictine Monks; Christian Living; Faith Formation; Religious Life; San Beda University

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Introduction

Catholic educational institutions, particularly those rooted in monastic traditions, play a vital role in the spiritual formation of their pupils. At San Beda University (SBU), an institution established by the Order of Saint Benedict (O.S.B.), pupils are introduced to Benedictine spirituality from an early age through the Christian Living curriculum (San Beda University, n.d.). The Benedictine monks, known for their commitment to prayer, work (*Ora et Labora*), and community, are a visible presence and serve as spiritual mentors (Sant'Anselmo, 2018). This educational model aims to instill Benedictine values and foster an environment conducive to spiritual growth (Pusztai & Rosta, 2023). In addition, the study by Bustamante reveals the importance of stability during challenging times, particularly in fostering leadership, as observed in school settings, where students approach this value through spirituality and learning (Bustamante, 2023). This commitment to spiritual development is mandated by the Second Vatican Council's Declaration on Christian Education, *Gravissimum Educationis* (1965), which holds that all educational endeavors must contribute to the spiritual perfection of the human person. However, despite the strong Benedictine presence and curriculum, little is known about how the children themselves perceive this monastic life and its figures.

Despite the strong Benedictine presence, little is known about how the pupils perceive monastic life and its monks. While the university emphasizes holistic development (Newman, 2022), existing literature often assumes that pedagogical practices directly translate into pupils' understanding; however, children's perceptions are uniquely shaped by a combination of school, family, and societal influences (Clements & Bullivant, 2022). From a psychological perspective, this spiritual formation process is inherently transformative, aligning with Loder's (1989) theory of the logic of the spirit; thus, understanding pupils' unique perceptions is crucial. This is often rooted in Fowler's (1981) Mythic-Literal Stage (Stage 2), which forms the psychological basis for their faith development and how they perceive the monks' spiritual roles in a literal sense. This gap is significant, as pupils' familiarity and understanding of religious figures can profoundly influence their own spiritual development and vocational aspirations (Gyllander et al., 2024; Afen & Egunjobi, 2023).

Research affirms that the roles of educators and religious figures are critical in shaping pupils' religious identities. Catholic educators, for instance, play a crucial role in promoting Church teachings that shape perceptions of religious life (Batu & Sihotang, 2022). Similarly, religious education teachers contribute directly to students' character formation by modeling and promoting spiritual values (Samuels et al., 2023; Julia et al., 2022). The influence of relatives who are priests or religious also reinforces spiritual norms, often prompting individuals to consider a religious life (Conway et al., 2023). This formation is particularly relevant to vocation. Studies specify a correlation between engagement in religious education and a student's understanding of a "calling" (Paul & Wa-Mbaleka, 2023). However, pupils may lack clarity regarding the nature of a religious vocation, particularly the transformative process of becoming a monk (Kasim & Salleh, 2023). Understanding pupils' personal reflections is crucial, as spirituality plays a significant role in guiding young people to make value-based life choices (Tambunan & Simbolon, 2023). This highlights the need for a curriculum that effectively connects spiritual teachings with pupils' lived experiences (Ivaniuk, 2024).

Overall, gaps remain in understanding how pupils conceptualize the daily lives and roles of monks, their views on religious vocation, and the relevance of Benedictine

spirituality to their own lives. As a religious and values educator, the teacher-researcher was inspired to conduct a study on the pupils' perceptions of Benedictine monks at San Beda University. This study aims to:

1. Explore how Grades 4-6 pupils conceptualize the daily lives and roles of Benedictine monks.
2. Examine pupils' understanding of religious vocation and the process of becoming a Benedictine monk.
3. Analyze pupils' personal reflections and questions regarding Benedictine spirituality and its relevance to their lives.

The insights gained from this research may serve as a basis for developing classroom strategies and educational resources that enhance pupils' understanding and appreciation of the Benedictine community within the Christian Living curriculum at San Beda University.

Methodology

The primary goal of this research was to explore how Bedan pupils perceive Benedictine life and its influence on their faith formation. To achieve this, a descriptive qualitative design was employed. This approach is ideal for gaining an in-depth, holistic understanding of a specific phenomenon within its real-life context (San Beda University - IBED). The participants were pupils from Grades 4 to 6 of the Integrated Basic Education Department (IBED), selected through convenience sampling. This was based on the pupils' availability and willingness to participate, as recommended by the Christian Living teachers for Grades 4-6. The final sample of fifty (50) pupils was identified by the subject teachers who had been exposed to Benedictine Spirituality lessons, obtained parental consent, and matched the total approved by the Office of the Principal. It was considered sufficient to reach thematic saturation.

The research adhered to strict ethical protocols. First, approval was obtained from the IBED principal. Following this, informed parental consent was obtained for each participant, and pupil assent was also secured, with the explanation of the study's purpose and its voluntary nature. Data was then collected over two weeks using an open-ended questionnaire administered via MS Forms. This instrument was divided into four parts: (1) Respondent Profile, (2) Perceptions of Benedictine Monks, (3) Understanding of the Benedictine Vocation, and (4) Reflections on Benedictine Spirituality. To ensure confidentiality, all responses were anonymized, and all collected data were stored securely on a password-protected computer accessible only to the teacher-researcher.

The qualitative data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis, following the six-phase framework developed by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019). This systematic process involved (1) data familiarization (repeatedly reading responses), (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing potential themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report. The analysis was specifically structured to explore the three key objectives of the study: the pupils' perceptions of the monks, their understanding of the Benedictine vocation, and their personal reflections on Benedictine spirituality.

Results/Findings

The results and analysis of the data are presented below.

Pupils' demographic profiles

Table 1. Profile of Pupil-Respondents according to Demographic Variables

Profile	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Year Level		
Grade 4	24	48
Grade 5	14	28
Grade 6	12	24
Total	50	100
Gender		
Male	27	54
Female	23	46
Total	50	100
Religious Club Membership		
Yes	19	38
No	31	62
Total	50	100
Religious Relative		
Yes	15	30
No	35	70
Total	50	100
Considering Religious Life		
Yes	26	52
No	24	48
Total	50	100

Following the survey conducted among 50 respondents from Grades 4 to 6, the data reveal a diverse distribution across levels, genders, and religious interests. Most respondents were in Grade 4 (48%), followed by Grade 5 (28%), and Grade 6 (24%). A slightly higher proportion was male (54%) than female (46%). The majority (62%) were not members of religious clubs, and only 30% had relatives in religious life. Despite this, 52% expressed openness to considering a religious vocation in the future.

The Views of the Bedan Pupils on Benedictine Monks

Table 2. Pupil-Respondents' on Benedictine Identity

Exploring Perceptions of Benedictine Monks

When you hear the words "Benedictine Monk," what are the first things that come to your mind? Write down as many things as you can think of.	Conceptualization of Benedictine Monks: Pupils associate Benedictine monks with prayer, devotion, discipline, and a deep connection to God.
Imagine you are telling a friend about a Benedictine Monk. How would you describe what they do every day?	Daily Activities: Pupils describe monks' daily activities as centered around prayer, teaching, community service, and maintaining discipline.

What do you think are the most important things that a Benedictine Monk should be good at?	Important Skills: Pupils believe monks should be good at prayer, obedience, discipline, teaching, and helping others.
Where do you think Benedictine Monks live? What do they do in that place?	Living Arrangements: Pupils understand that monks live in monasteries or abbeys, where they follow a structured routine of prayer and work.
Do you think Benedictine Monks talk to people who are not monks? How do you think they do that?	Community Interaction: Pupils believe that monks interact with non-monks through teaching, guidance, and community service, emphasizing the importance of hospitality and mutual respect.
Have you ever met a Benedictine Monk or heard stories about them? If yes, please tell me about it.	Personal Encounters: Some pupils have met monks or heard stories about them, describing them as kind, humble, and dedicated.
What do you think are the good things about being a Benedictine Monk? What do you think are the hardest things?	Benefits and Challenges: Pupils identify benefits such as closeness to God and a peaceful life, as well as challenges like strict rules and separation from their families.
What do you think about the spiritual life of a Benedictine Monk? (Like, how they believe in God)	Spiritual Life: Pupils acknowledge monks' deep faith and daily devotion to prayer and worship.
How do you think Benedictine Monks learn about God and the Bible?	Learning About God: Pupils believe monks learn about God through reading scriptures, studying the Bible, and participating in communal prayers.
How do you think Benedictine Monks help other people?	Helping Others: Pupils mention that monks help others by teaching about God, offering spiritual guidance, and providing community service.

Pupils described Benedictine monks as “holy,” “prayerful,” “disciplined,” and “close to God.” One participant wrote, “They pray a lot and teach students to be kind.” Another shared, “They follow rules and help others like Saint Benedict.” Such remarks highlight a perception of monks as moral and spiritual exemplars who live meaningful yet straightforward lives. When asked about monks’ daily activities, pupils associated them with prayer, teaching, community service, and disciplined living. Their responses demonstrate familiarity with the Benedictine motto *“Ora et Labora”* (prayer and work).

The Understanding of the Bedan Pupils of Benedictine Vocation

Table 3. Student-Respondents on Benedictine Vocation

Understanding of the Benedictine Vocation	
If someone decides to become a Benedictine Monk, what do you think will happen to them?	Lifetime Commitment: Pupils believe that becoming a monk involves a lifelong commitment to prayer, work, and community service, leading to spiritual transformation.

How do you think a person's life changes when they become a Benedictine Monk?	Lifestyle Changes: Pupils think that a person's life changes significantly when they become a monk, with deeper faith and a structured routine
Why do you think some people choose to become Benedictine Monks?	Motivation: Pupils believe individuals choose to become monks due to a calling from God, a desire to serve, and the pursuit of spiritual fulfillment.
What do you know about the promises that monks make?	Vows and Commitments: Pupils recognize the vows of stability, obedience, and conversion of life, understanding the solemn commitments made by monks.
How do you think a person's family and friends feel when they become a monk?	Family and Friends' Feelings: Pupils think that family and friends may feel both proud and sad due to limited contact with the monk.

When asked why someone might become a Benedictine monk, pupils frequently mentioned “God’s calling” and “wanting to serve and pray.” They also recognized the vows of stability, obedience, and conversion of life, viewing them as signs of total dedication to the religious life. One pupil reflected, “They give their whole life to God and follow His rules every day.”

The Reflection of the Bedan Pupils on Benedictine Spirituality

Table 4. Pupils-Respondents on Benedictine Spirituality

Reflecting on Benedictine Spirituality

Imagine you are talking to a friend who is thinking about becoming a Benedictine Monk. What advice would you give them?	Advice to Friends: Pupils would encourage their friends to pray, seek guidance, and prepare for the commitment involved in becoming monks.
What questions do you have about Benedictine Monks or their way of life?	The pupils expressed curiosity about various aspects of monastic life, including the monks' daily routines, interactions with non-monastics, and the challenges they faced. Questions like “What do monks do for fun?” and “How do they know if God is calling them?” reflect a desire to understand the practical and spiritual dimensions of monastic life.
Write a short story or draw a picture about a day in the life of a Benedictine Monk.	The pupils interpreted the monks' daily lives as a prayerful schedule balanced with productive work in the monastery and school. Other pupils drew pictures of Buddhist monks as illustrated below.



In reflecting on Benedictine spirituality, pupils offered advice such as “pray always,” “listen to God,” and “be ready to serve.” Some expressed curiosity about practical aspects of monastic life, asking questions like, “What do monks do for fun?” and “How do they know if God is calling them?” These inquiries reveal both wonder and a search for concrete understanding, typical of children’s faith at the imaginative, inquiry stage. A few pupils’ drawings also depicted monks at prayer or working in gardens. In contrast, others mistakenly depicted Buddhist monks.

Discussions

The demographic data indicate that younger pupils, particularly those in Grade 4, were the most represented in the study. Their early formative stage, as highlighted by Clements and Bullivant (2022), is a critical period for the development of religious and spiritual formation. Exposure to religious teachings and figures during this time can shape their initial understanding of vocation and religious life. Balanced gender participation, with a slight male majority, may influence how children interpret the roles of religious figures, particularly the distinct roles of male and female figures, such as monks, nuns, and priests (Conway et al., 2023). Gender identity may also influence how pupils envision themselves in religious life. The low participation in religious clubs and religious life may reflect the limited exposure of pupils to structured religious activities that could nurture spiritual interest. Paul and Wa-Mbaleka (2023) emphasize that involvement in church youth groups contributes significantly to spiritual growth and a sense of vocation, and the lack thereof may hinder such development. Moreso, this also suggests that most children may lack direct family role models in religious life. However, studies by Pusztai and Rosta (2023) and Conway et al. (2023) show that having religious relatives can significantly reinforce young people’s spiritual values, norms, and vocational inspiration. Despite limited direct influence from religious clubs or relatives, the data indicate a strong

inclination toward exploring religious life. This supports findings from studies such as those by Julia et al. (2022) and Bustamante (2023), which underline the important role of school-based religious education and spirituality in shaping students' perceptions and openness to religious vocations.

Pupils' descriptions of monks as "holy," "prayerful," and "disciplined" reflect an understanding of Benedictine life as centered on spirituality and service. Their familiarity with "*Ora et Labora*" suggests that school-based exposure effectively conveys core Benedictine values. This finding aligns with the views of Sant'Anselmo (2018) and Newman (2022), who suggest that Benedictine monks serve as "living catechesis" — visible signs of contemplative presence and service within educational settings. Children's perceptions, therefore, reflect not only cognitive understanding but also affective admiration, consistent with Fowler's (1981) Stage 2: Mythic–Literal Faith, where religious figures become concrete moral role models in a child's developing faith.

Responses on vocation highlight pupils' recognition of divine calling and commitment. Their responses mirror elements of vocational formation outlined in Church documents such as *Gravissimum Educationis* (1965), which emphasizes nurturing faith that matures into service. From a developmental lens, this aligns with Loder's (1998) theory of the transforming moment, where faith encounters stimulate the reorganization of a young person's worldview toward purpose and transcendence. For religious educators, these insights underscore the importance of creating formative spaces where students can explore their calling and purpose beyond cognitive instruction — through reflection, prayer, and firsthand experiences of religious life.

Reflections on Benedictine spirituality emphasize prayer and service but also show misconceptions, such as confusing Benedictine monks with Buddhist monks. This suggests that while the concept of "monk" is understood, denominational distinctions require reinforcement. This underscores the pedagogical challenge of connecting abstract spirituality with familiar experiences, as observed by Tambunan and Simbolon (2023).

Overall, these reflections show that, as pupils see it, Benedictine spirituality is marked by prayer, service, and simplicity. These values are deeply rooted in the Rule of Saint Benedict. For monastic schools, this requires intentional teaching methods that reflect Benedictine presence in ways accessible to children, such as storytelling, guided visits to monastic spaces, and teachers demonstrating faith in action.

Conclusion

The study concludes that the youthful demographic has varied experiences and perspectives toward religious life. Despite low membership in religious clubs and fewer family ties to religious roles, the relatively high interest in considering religious vocations may reflect the influence of faith formation programs within the school setting.

Most pupils associate Benedictine monks with a life deeply rooted in religious and spiritual practices. They describe monks as prayerful, disciplined, and dedicated to their faith. Terms like "holy," "devoted," and "prayerful" frequently appear in their responses. Furthermore, many pupils acknowledge the significant commitment and sacrifice required to become a Benedictine monk. They mention the vows of stability, obedience, and conversion of life, highlighting the transformative nature of this vocation.

However, the pupils express curiosity about various aspects of monastic life, including the monks' daily routines, interactions with non-monks, and the challenges they face. Questions like "What do monks do for fun?" and "How do they know if God is calling them?" reflect a desire to understand the practical and spiritual dimensions of monastic life. However, a few draw a wrong interpretation of what Benedictine monks are. Concurrently, the study reveals that pupils view the priest as a servant leader who models Christ's compassion and strengthens the faith community. These insights can inform vocation-promotion strategies and guide the design of religious curricula that foster a deeper appreciation for priestly and spiritual vocations.

Based on the above findings and conclusions, several key recommendations are suggested. First, the Benedictine Spirituality topics in the Christian Living subject should be expanded to include more information on how Benedictine monks live their lives in modern times. This can help pupils relate better to the monks' practices and understand their relevance in today's world.

Second, the visibility of Benedictine monks on campus should be increased. Encourage more visibility of Benedictine monks on campus so pupils can interact with them. This can include regular visits, participation in school activities, and informal discussions. Third, organizing an Annual Abbey Tours for all pupils interested in seeing the monastery's beauty and gaining a deeper understanding of Benedictine life. This can be a valuable experiential learning opportunity.

Furthermore, introducing vocational talks at the elementary level helps students understand the path to a religious vocation early on. These talks can inspire students and guide them in pursuing a spiritual calling. Finally, for future research, the study should be expanded to include a wider range of respondents, such as students from public schools and other institutions. This can provide a broader perspective on students' perceptions of Benedictine monks and improve the findings. Future studies could also compare students from Benedictine and non-Benedictine schools to see how institutional charisms influence students' views on vocation. Additionally, including teachers and parents as participants could lead to a more comprehensive understanding of the school's role in vocational awareness and development.

Artificial Intelligence Disclosure

The researcher used Grammarly (2009) to enhance grammar, and Gemini AI (2024) assisted in organizing and interpreting the data for this research study. These tools supported the researcher in maintaining coherence, academic rigor, and efficiency throughout the research process.

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Original Article

Earth Rights in Religious Education: An Eco-Missiological Mandate Toward a Catechetical Reform

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Abstract

This theological discourse addresses the problem of how religious education can respond to the ecological emergency and moral crises arising from humanity's exploitative interpretation of the biblical command to "subdue the earth." It examines how religious education can foster ecological awareness, moral responsibility, and solidarity with both creation and marginalized communities. Using the See–Judge/Discern–Act method, the study observes current ecological realities, interprets them in light of Christian teaching, and proposes practical educational and pastoral responses. The findings reveal that misinterpretations of Scripture have contributed to the rise of consumerism, throwaway culture, and anthropocentrism while a renewed theological and pedagogical approach can reframe 'to subdue' and 'to have dominion' as care for creation, that is the central meaning of Christian stewardship in the Genesis accounts. The study concludes that integrating ecological consciousness into religious education strengthens both spiritual formation and social transformation, positioning care for the breathing Earth as a vital expression of Christian discipleship and the promotion of the culture to life.

Keywords: *Earth rights; ecology; environmental theology; missiology; religious education; rights of nature*

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Introduction

Earth rights, also called “rights of nature,” were created as a criticism of laws that focus on people and give them the right to take and damage nature for their pleasure and profit, which endanger other species and upset the balance of nature (Bookchin, 2006; Berry, 1999; Suzuki, 2020). This means that ecosystems, nature, and other living things have the right to exist and should not be seen as anything more than resources for profit (Cullinan, 2011; Stone, 1996; Nash, 1989). These rights should be reflected in laws, treaties, city ordinances, and court decisions (Kauffman et al., 2019; Kauffman, 2020; Kauffman & Sowers, 2021; Kauffman, 2022). Legislating laws that protect and uphold the environment should impose responsibility and liability on everyone. While it is true that *ignorantia legis neminem excusat* (Garner, 1979), we cannot deny that ignorance persists in the first place. Catholic schools, as an institution of learning, are expected to be operative in shunning ignorance and liberating consciousness. Pope Francis, in *Laudato Si'*, is convinced that it is impossible to achieve change without motivation and pedagogical processes (*Laudato Si'*, par. 15). To form and transform are the modus operandi of religious education today (Roche, 2008). Environmental emergencies and policies on environmental conservation and ecological welfare are powerful starting points for teaching care for God’s creation as a Christian social doctrine. One of the visions of *Laudato Si'* is to integrate ecological education into catechetical or religious education, trusting that it will have lifelong effects on the youth (*Laudato Si'*, par. 213). Creating a series of partial responses to environmental problems is not enough. There needs to be a long-lasting way to fight back against the technocratic paradigm’s attacks, such as a set of teaching methods, a way of thinking, and a way of life (*Laudato Si'*, par. 111; 202).

In the Christian tradition, the Sacred Scriptures are considered the resource to validate our morality, faith, and actions. However, the biblical command to “subdue the earth” should not be interpreted as a license for domination or exploitation but as a moral responsibility of stewardship. Therefore, religious education must integrate eco-missiological principles, along with proper exegetical-hermeneutical readings of the relevant texts, connecting care for creation with the Church’s missionary and educational mission to cultivate ecological awareness, moral responsibility, and justice for both nature and marginalized communities. In other words, the study contends that religious education should serve as a transformative platform for promoting ecological consciousness and ethical responsibility. Through a faith-based pedagogy inspired by Pope Francis’ *Laudato Si'*, educators can help counteract the prevailing culture of consumerism, anthropocentrism, and apathy toward environmental crises. The authors emphasize that protecting the Earth is not merely an environmental concern but a spiritual and missiological mandate rooted in the Christian duty to care for both creation and the poor (Buencibello & Aton, 2024).

How can religious education respond to ecological and missiological crises by integrating the concept of *earth rights* (or the rights of nature) into its teaching and practice to promote ecological justice and responsibility?

To address this question, the study focuses on several key areas. First, it examines how biblical texts, particularly the command to “subdue the earth,” have been misinterpreted throughout history to justify people-centered and egoistic satisfaction. Second, it explores the theological and missiological principles, especially those articulated in *Laudato Si'*, that can guide a renewed and more responsible understanding of stewardship and the rights of nature. Third, the study seeks to redesign religious education as a pedagogical framework that fosters ecological awareness, moral responsibility, and active participation in caring for

creation. Ultimately, it highlights the crucial role of the Church and educational institutions in promoting both ecological and social justice, ensuring that vulnerable and marginalized communities are safeguarded from the adverse effects of environmental degradation.

This study will benefit every educational institution targeting Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the Catholic schools that target the visions and advocacy of Laudato Si' against throwaway and death culture (including other life forms that is at the risk of extinction), the catechists and religion teachers that seek viable solutions on how to facilitate ecologically oriented religious education and values education.

Methodology

This study employs a theological reflection approach using the See–Judge/Discern–Act method, a framework rooted in Catholic social teaching (Sands, 2018; Krier Mich, 1998; Holland & Henriot, 1983; Valeriano et al., 2024, p. 11-13). It provides a practical and theological framework for addressing these key areas of the study (Catholic Charities USA, 2020).

In the See stage, the method encourages a critical examination of current ecological realities, such as the misuse of biblical texts and the resulting environmental and social injustices. This stage allows us to recognize the real-world consequences of human exploitation and ecological neglect. In the Judge/Discern stage, these realities are evaluated in light of Scripture and the Church's magisterial teachings in Laudato Si', promoting a renewed understanding of stewardship, moral responsibility, and the rights of nature. Finally, in the Act stage, the insights gained are translated into concrete educational and ecclesial initiatives, such as integrating ecological values into religious education and community action, that embody the principles of justice, care, and solidarity with both creation and marginalized peoples.

This approach ensures that the study not only analyzes the eco-missionological challenges but also advocates for transformative action toward the equitable treatment of both the Earth and marginalized populations. This paper suggests that eco-missionary duties should include protecting the environment as part of the curriculum on how to be good stewards of God's creations. This includes safeguarding the weaker parts of our society from climate change and other man-made disasters (Buencibello & Aton, 2024; Alves et al., 2023; Catholic Charities USA, 2020).

Finally, the study proposes the *See-Judge-Act-Celebrate-Evaluate* framework as an effective learning process that holistically integrates faith, reason, and action. This approach enables students and other school stakeholders to move beyond mere intellectual understanding of ecological issues toward deeper spiritual and moral engagement. Through this process, learners cultivate enduring habits of ecological awareness, responsibility, and care for creation as an expression of lived faith.

Analysis

SEE: Struggles to 'Right to Life' of the Earth and of the Poor

Pope Francis described the living Earth as crying due to the erroneous attitude and behavior of human beings in their relationship with the planet.

“Praise be to you, my Lord, through our sister, Mother Earth, who sustains and governs us and who produces various fruits with colored flowers and herbs”. This sister now cries out to us because of the harm we have inflicted on her by our irresponsible use and abuse of the goods with which God has endowed her. We have come to see ourselves as her lords and masters, entitled to plunder her at will. The violence present in

our hearts, wounded by sin, is also reflected in the symptoms of sickness evident in the soil, in the water, in the air, and in all forms of life. ... We have forgotten that we ourselves are dust of the Earth (cf. *Genesis 2:7*); our very bodies are made up of her elements; we breathe her air, and we receive life and refreshment from her waters (*Laudato Si'*, par. 1-2).

It is not strange to us that the Earth is facing massive degradation from continued decreases in the supply of natural resources and energy, destruction of the atmosphere and climate change, destruction of natural water resources, loss of biodiversity, and finally, the worsening poverty of people affected by the ecological crisis. We are not surprised by the massive degradation of the Earth, which includes ongoing reductions in energy and natural resource supplies, deterioration of the atmosphere, climate change, depletion of natural water resources, extinction of species, and, lastly, an increase in poverty for those suffering from the ecological catastrophe. Environmental disasters originate from people. According to Pope Francis, the planet's dreadful appearance is due to the dominant technocratic worldview. Pope Francis reminds us of the risks and potential misuse of this immense power while simultaneously acknowledging the benefits of contemporary technology in areas such as information, communication, health, and education. Think about how this century's technological advancements made it possible to develop the atomic bomb, genetic engineering, and chemical weapons used in terrorist attacks. Due to the inherent biases in science and technology, it is crucial to exercise caution when evaluating new technical advancements. In addition to reclaiming the ideals and lofty ambitions lost in our uncontrolled arrogance, we must prioritize constructive and sustainable growth (Pilario, 2017; *Laudato Si'*, par. 106 and 114).

In our attempt to advance human civilization, we often use egoistic "blinders" that keep our eyes overly focused on achieving the most comfortable life. We become unconscious of our surroundings and damage them just to achieve our goals. For instance, to produce electricity, we invented massive nuclear power plants to generate the amount of energy we need. This reminds us of the Chernobyl accident in 1986, when thousands of people were exposed to radiation that eventually caused them to become seriously ill (Aitsi-Selmi & Murray, 2016). It was on April 26, 1986, when an explosion occurred at the Chernobyl (also known as Chornobyl) nuclear power plant, situated approximately 100 km from Kiev (also known as Kyiv) in Ukraine, which was then a constituent republic of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). This incident led to a prolonged reactor fire that lasted for 10 days, resulting in an unprecedented discharge of radioactive substances from the nuclear reactor. The aftermath of this event had detrimental effects on both the general population and the surrounding environment (International Atomic Energy Agency, 2006). This incident made the whole world cautious about nuclear power plant operations.

The Chernobyl incident, along with the Three Mile Island and Fukushima accidents, has engendered skepticism and uncertainty regarding the safety of the Bataan Nuclear Power Plant (BNPP). Consequently, this apprehension ultimately resulted in the closure of the BNPP on April 30, 1986, during the tenure of President Corazon Aquino. The formal justifications centered on fundamental inquiries regarding the validity of the proposal and the integrity of the planning and execution process (Yap, 2021; Joint Forum of the Senate of the Philippines & Ateneo School of Government, 2022). Furthermore, significant biological factors contributing to the decline in biological diversity are the depletion of natural habitats, the introduction of non-native species, excessive exploitation of biodiversity resources, and the

homogenization of species within agricultural practices. The influence of human activity is a common trait among all of these factors (Hens & Boo, 2005).

In our pursuit to facilitate comfort and convenience in everyday living, other sectors of our society need to catch up. These are the poor people in urban slum areas, living in makeshift houses along the railroads, street dwellers, and individuals in far-flung rural areas who are dependent on nature, including farmers, fishermen, and tribal communities. Compared to wealthier households and businesses, low-income households and those headed by women living in severely deteriorated areas, both within and outside urban poor communities, experienced more severe damage and losses (Porio, 2014). Studies also show that anthropocentric alterations to the natural environment, including land-use changes, climate change, and degradation of ecosystem services, are accelerating. These developments are creating five main public health hazards that threaten hundreds of millions of people, including increased exposure to infectious diseases, water and food contamination, natural disasters, and population displacement. Together, they may be humanity's biggest public health concern. We urgently need to understand the dynamics of each of these threats: the complex interplay of factors that generate them, the characteristics of vulnerable populations, and which populations are most at risk (Myers & Patz, 2009).

In the Philippines, the recent exposure of hundreds of alleged "ghost" or non-existent flood-control works implemented by Department of Public Works and Highways (DPWH) offers a stark demonstration of how infrastructural programs, designed to protect the most vulnerable, can instead undermine the "right to life" of both marginalized human communities, non-human beings, and the living Earth in general. Investigations have revealed that out of the approximately 8,000 flood-control projects inspected, 421 were physically non-existent or "ghosts," and many others were substandard or overpriced (Mangaluz, 2025). In one of the cities in Metro Manila, 331 projects worth approximately ₱17 billion were identified as being unaligned with flood-prone zones or mislocated, with many lacking evidence of actual work (Mateo, 2025). These failures amount not simply to financial mismanagement, but to a denial of safety, dignity, and ecological integrity for those most exposed: the poor who live in flood-prone zones, such as rivers, wetlands, watersheds, and the ecosystems that absorb excess floodwaters and sustain life.

From a justice lens, we can draw on the work of *An Environmental Justice Perspective on Ecosystem Services* (Loos et al., 2023), who argue that mainstream ecosystem-services frameworks often neglect power relations, distributional equity, and the recognition of diverse values (Loos et al., 2023). In the Philippines case, flood-control funds were awarded disproportionately to a small number of contractors. Fifteen contractors reportedly getting 20% of the ₱545 billion budget while local governments and rights-holders [communities] were bypassed (Cordero, 2025). This echoes the critique that technical infrastructure alone does not guarantee justice, unless the voices of poor and ecologically vulnerable peoples are heard and addressed, and their capabilities strengthened. Similarly, *Corporate Accountability Towards Species Extinction Protection* (Roberts et al., 2022) demonstrates how accountability can only be meaningfully extended when non-human stakeholders, such as species and ecosystems, are recognized, and governance mechanisms enforce transparency (Roberts et al., 2022). The Philippine flood-control scandal similarly reveals that failing structures degrade both human welfare and ecological resilience. The ghost or substandard works undermine ecosystem capacity to buffer floods, thereby reducing the "right to live" of the Earth as well as its people. Institutional justice further demands accountability. In *Greening Justice: Examining the Interfaces of Criminal, Social and Ecological Justice* (White & Graham, 2015), it emphasizes that "green"

initiatives may become mere reputational instruments if not grounded in justice transformation. In the Philippines, the fact that DPWH officials were not preventively suspended despite *prima facie* evidence of anomalies shows how accountability loops are weak (Cayetano, 2025).

The failures, therefore, are systemic: poor project design coordination with local governments, misallocation of funds, absence of physical verification, contract rigging, and overpayments (Baron, Kabagani, & Angeles, 2025). Therefore, the Philippines flood-control ghost-project scandal reveals the intertwined rights of the poor and the Earth: when infrastructure fails in execution and justice, vulnerable human communities suffer first. They are drowned, displaced, excluded, and ecosystem resilience is eroded, denying the planet's "right to life". To restore justice and accountability, policy reforms must embed distributive, recognitional, and ecological justice, in practice, not just on paper.

According to Pope Francis, there is a lack of awareness of the issues that impact impoverished and marginalized individuals. Although there are billions of people living on Earth, these people make up the vast majority. The issues about them are currently being discussed in international political and economic dialogues. However, there is a prevailing perception that their problems are often given secondary consideration, seemingly as a procedural obligation or as an unintended consequence. Ultimately, individuals frequently find themselves in a disadvantaged position. Due to the concentration of experts, opinion leaders, media platforms, and influential entities inside affluent metropolitan areas, there exists a limited level of direct engagement with the impoverished population and their associated issues. They possess the ability to rationalize and exist at an advanced stage of societal progress and a standard of living that is beyond the means of the majority of the global population. The disintegration of urban areas may potentially foster a decline in physical engagement and encounters, which could result in a diminished sense of moral responsibility and biased evaluations that overlook certain aspects of reality. In contemporary times, it is imperative to acknowledge that an authentic ecological approach necessitates a social dimension (*Laudato Si'*, par. 49).

Discussions

JUDGE/DISCERN: Re-reading Genesis 1:28: From Anthropocentric Justification to Responsible Stewardship

This exegetical reading of Genesis 1:28 provides a helpful key to expanding the appreciation of the creation narrative in teaching and learning practices. According to medieval historian Lynn White Jr., in his 1967 article "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," the Christian anthropocentric view of the natural world was responsible for the modern ecological crisis. In particular, White Jr. found blame in the Genesis creation narratives' portrayal of man and woman as specially made in God's image, with "dominion over" (*radah*) and the obligation to "subdue" (*kabash*) the Earth. This narrative not only validates the exploitation of the Earth but also construes it as "God's will" (White, 1967; Nestor, 2013).

The first chapters (1:1-6:8) of *Bereshit*, translated as "in the beginning" or "at first", popularly known as *Genesis*, contain four major themes. First, God created the heavens, the Earth, all living things, and humans as a *blessing*. Second, it is human responsibility to ensure the survival of everything God has created. The third was the expulsion of Adam and Eve from *Gan Eden*, translated as the Garden of Eden. Lastly, human beings are responsible for one another and the survival of mankind. According to Harvey J. Fields, a lecturer on Jewish tradition and a senior rabbi, Jewish tradition says one God created the world, but humans are "masters" of it, and human decisions

matter. The power of survival or destruction, life or death, is in their hands (Fields, 1990). Furthermore, as Fields highlighted the place of humans in the creation narrative, we argue that it is best to view the power that God has granted humans as a blessing rather than a human right. A blessing that compels us to ponder the goodness of the Creator and to be “masters” over His handiwork with an attitude that is attuned to His. The book of Psalms (8:1–7) invites us to contemplate the mystery and grandeur of creation in comparison to human beings, yet God chose to bestow a blessing upon human beings that they do not deserve. Fields (1990) explains that, unlike ancient stories like *Enuma Elish*, where humans were helpless, God made human beings not as “toys” but as “partners” in shaping life and preserving the world—a manifestation that human beings are stewards of creation. God began by creating human beings in His own image and likeness, endowed with free will and the capacity to exercise their own choices. According to *Sanhedrin* 38a, a tractate of the *Talmud* that discusses laws regulating the courts, human beings had been appointed as “caretakers” of the “palace” called Earth (Fields, 1990). Unlike the analogy of “home” in *Laudato Si’*, a palace is the residence of a king, in which caretakers are employed to look after his abode, including animals and plants. However, it is essential to recognize that in the relationship between God and human beings, caretakers do not imply slaves, but rather partners in shaping life and sustaining the world (Fields, 1990). It means a shared responsibility with God to take care of all creation.

However, the idea that God has a special preference for human beings as caretakers could lead to a grave superiority complex. According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church (par. 342–343), human beings are the summit of the Creator’s work in the hierarchy of creatures; that is, human beings are more valuable than many sparrows and sheep (Luke 12:6–7; Matthew 12:12). It is difficult to deny that such a concept is anthropocentric. In fact, in Genesis 1:28, God told the first humans to fill and subdue [*kabash*] the Earth and have dominion [*radah*] over the animals. *Kabash*, in Hebrew, means “to bring into bondage” or “dominate” (Brown et al., 1977; Collins, 2013). Furthermore, *Kabash*, or *kabas*, also means to “stamp” one’s authority over nature (von Rad, 1972; McKeating, 2015). For example, in the book of Esther, *kabash* is used to mean domination, subduing, enslavement, or even the raping of women (Collins, 2013; Botterweck & Ringgren, 1995). Furthermore, the feminine Hebrew word for “earth” in Genesis 1:28, *erets*, translates to “fill the earth and subdue *her*” (Collins, 2013). In short, according to Norman Habel, “there is nothing gentle about the verb *kabash*” (Habel, 2000; Collins, 2013). *Radah*, or *rada*, in Hebrew, is not far from the meaning of *kabash*. It means having dominion, ruling over, or dominating, and is often translated in Genesis 1:28 as “be masters of the fish of the sea and over the birds... and every living thing crawling on the earth” (Plaut, 1981; Collins, 2013). It also literally means to “tread” and to “trample on” (von Rad, 1972; McKeating, 2015). “Dominating” and “subduing” the Earth are perfect justifications for the exploitation of the environment under the guise of human flourishing and civilization. Pope Francis urgently calls for a new dialogue on how humans influence the planet’s destiny. He acknowledged the need for a discussion regarding environmental issues and their human causes, as they impact all humans. (*Laudato Si’*, par. 14). In short, the planet Earth is at stake due to the exploitative attitudes of humans, and someone should protect it from other humans who are irrationally confident in progress and human abilities (*Laudato Si’*, 19).

Antoinette Collins (2013), a lecturer in Old Testament at Australian Catholic University in Sydney, argues that the interpretation of these words has significantly influenced humanity’s attitude toward the care of the environment, as they can be

used to justify the severe misuse and irresponsible exploitation of our planet. She further argued that the Greek, Aramaic, and Latin translations of Genesis 1:28 reveal a moderation in the meaning and perception of the harsher-sounding original Hebrew phrase. Such moderation is in keeping with the textual context of “blessing” (Genesis 1:28) and with the understanding that human beings are created in the “image and likeness” of God (Genesis 1:26), who is creative, life-giving, and nourishing, rather than destructive and exploitative. This simply means that translation matters, for it needs to be faithful to the reason behind or intention of the original texts.

According to Fr. Cristino R. Pine, OFM, a Filipino Bible exegete, translation is critical because it entails intricacy in deciding the main or subordinate clauses that could change the meaning of the available texts. According to Pine (2018), there is a greater chance of identifying the text’s central theme from the outset when a translation is of high quality. This is precisely the point of Antoinette Collins’ exhuming the intention of the early translations of *kabash* and *radah*. Before the English translations and other vernaculars were available, the Greek, Aramaic, and Latin translations already offered essential insights into interpreting the words “*kabash*” and “*radah*”. In the Greek Septuagint, Genesis 1:28, *kabash* is translated as *katakyrieusate*. Jeremiah 3:14 says, “Come back, disloyal children; it is the Lord [Kyrios] who speaks, for I alone am your master [katakyrieuso]. I will take one from a town and two from a clan and bring you to Zion. I will give you shepherds after my own heart, and these shall feed you on knowledge and discretion.” Collins (2013) argues that *katakyrieo* can also mean “pastoral mastering.” On the other hand, the Greek term *archete* is used to translate *radah* [to have dominion over], which means to regulate or rule over, but without the same violent tone as the Hebrew; it simply describes a less destructive, yet powerful reign (Collins, 2013). This Aramaic text, Targum Pseudo Jonathan, is more creative and open-minded than Targum Onkelos and Targum Neofiti. It states that the Hebrew word *kabash* has two forms: the verb *takaph*, meaning “to seize” or “overpower,” and the noun *tekoph*, which means “strength, power, help, or protection.” The former does not sound temperate, but the latter has an impression of “care” (Collins, 2023). Antoinette Collins finally used the Latin Vulgate as her final textual comparison. The Vulgate uses the Latin term *subiicite* [to place under] for the Hebrew term *kabash* [subdue]. *Subiicite* is related to the root word *subicio* [submit] rather than the similar word *subigo*, which means “subjugation”. On the other hand, the Latin term *dominamini* [to be Lord, to reign, to govern, to rule, to command] is used in the Vulgate to translate *radah* [dominate]. *Dominamini* could also mean ‘Godlikeness’ [From the Latin, *Dominus*, “the Lord”], similar to what is stated in Genesis 1:26, “Then God said: ‘Let us make humankind in our image,... in the image of God He created them; male and female, He created them.’” Therefore, the words *kabash* and *radah* are not meant to allow human beings to lavishly exploit the Earth but to direct and mandate human beings to manifest God in the way they take care of the Earth.

Simply put, human beings should be at the service of all their fellow creations. Collins (2023) advocates encouraging people to see the necessity to “shift from an anthropocentric perspective to planetary awareness.” Fr. Colm McKeating, a Columban missionary and professor of systematic theology, argues that in the Priestly account (P) of creation, God charged human beings with a responsibility to care for everything He had made—to look after everything He created. When God said that humans should “dominate” [to lord over; to be master] over creatures, he did not mean to transfer ownership of creation to humans but rather to assign them a task to complete in the same spirit of loving kindness as that of the Lord and Master [in Latin, *Dominus*; in Greek, *Kyrios*]. McKeating further argues that it in no way makes human

beings superior to creation, but rather places them within nature as responsible for caring for God's handiwork. We call it "stewardship" (McKeating, 2015). Furthermore, it is not accurate to say that the first chapter of Genesis is homocentric, as it is evident that God is the sole actor in the story (McKeating, 2015; McDonagh, 1986). Therefore, responsible stewardship is the teleological and original activity of human beings. In Genesis 2:15, "God took the man and put him into the Garden of Eden to *till it* and to *keep it*." God made humans stewards in the garden, not lords. "*Tilling* refers to cultivating, plowing, or working, while *keeping* means caring, protecting, overseeing, and preserving." (*Laudato Si'*, 2015, par. 67). To become a responsible steward of creation is to be truly human, following the plan of the Creator. Suppose human beings are expected to be responsible for taking care of God's creation. In that case, responsible stewardship is also subject to morality—a matter of common and universal duty for the sake of the common good (*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 1987, par. 34). It also entails that human beings are extensions of nature and cannot subsist without it. In Jewish tradition, every human life is sacred. Each human being must care for one another, for we are guardians or caretakers of each other. According to Fields (1990), Cain murdered his brother, Abel, because he failed to understand that he was his brother's "keeper," or "guardian." This means that responsible stewardship encompasses caring for and protecting not only the Earth, but also for one another. In Genesis 4:10, "Behold, your brother's blood cries out to Me from the ground!" According to Fields (1990), "In the Hebrew, the words *deme [achicha] tzoakim* are plural and may be translated as "[your brother's] *bloods* cry out." The phrase "*bloods* cry out" indicates that Cain killed more than just Abel, for he murdered Abel's descendants. It also implies that Cain is responsible not only for the death of Abel but also for the deaths of his future generations. It was not only the *bloods* of Abel that cried out to God. In Exodus 2:23, during the slavery of the Israelites, "their cry for liberation went up to God; He heard their groaning and was mindful of His covenant." This proves that the cry of the oppressed storms the heavens.

According to Fr. Pine (2018), to "hear both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor," as *Laudato Si'* (par. 49) puts it, we must consider the consequences of our behavior, for we want a successful culture founded on care, compassion, and respect for others, Earth included. Whatever actions we take in the present will surely impact future generations. Fr. Pine emphasized the challenge that Pope Francis poses, which is that the current ecological crisis affects all of us and exhort everyone to act as responsible stewards of creation and of one another, especially the poor (Pine, 2018).

ACT: Earth's Right to Life

The Earth is breathing (Pine, 2018). Thus, we call our planet a biosphere. The Earth is alive! Humans, animals, and plants do not support life on Earth. Instead, Earth sustains these creatures, including humans (Pilario, 2017, p. 156). Hans-Peter Durr, a German physicist, said, "We must not look at nature as an enemy to dominate and overcome, but rather learn again to cooperate with nature. She has four and a half billion years of experience. Ours is considerably shorter." (See DOCAT, 2016, p. 243.) According to Fr. Pine (2018), the Earth has a maternal character. It can nurture its inhabitants. He argues that despite our abuse, the Earth protects us. As uncaring children, she always takes care of us. As she awaits redemption, Mother Earth is the first to observe the Creator's love. Furthermore, while waiting for the universal restoration, humanity experiences God's life and love through our breathing Mother Planet (Pine, 2018; cf. Romans 8:19). Thus, if Earth is alive, it also has the *right to life*. All living things depend on the Earth, so this right must be protected at all costs.

Human beings are not God. Pope Francis reminds us that “Earth was here before us, and it has been given to us... Each community can take from the bounty of the Earth whatever it needs for subsistence, but it also has to protect the Earth and ensure its fruitfulness for the coming generations (*Laudato Si*’, par. 67).” Therefore, environmental responsibility should be legalized and constantly echoed in the educational settings. The international community must establish consistent norms to help states better regulate activities that harm the environment and preserve ecosystems from accidents (John Paul II, 1990).

The fight for Earth’s right to life is humanity’s current eco-missiological mandate. It finds its roots in God’s command to “cultivate and care” for the Earth (Genesis 2:15). Two words need to be clarified first and foremost: “eco” and “missio”. The word “eco” is from the Greek word *oikos*, which simply means “habitat earth,” “house,” or “habitat.” It is where all “eco” words come from, such as economy, ecology, ecumenism, and so forth. In the New Testament, the *oikonomos*, or “householder,” customarily translated as “steward,” is the one who learns the house regulations and protects household members. Likewise, household dwellers are referred to as *oikeioi*, and the early church was described as *oikoi*, or “households of faith” (Rasmussen, 2005). *Missio*, on the other hand, is a Latin word that means “sent off” to do a task or obey a command, usually construed as an evangelical activity (*Ad Gentes*, par. 1 and 6). The reason for the existence of the Church is founded on its missionary nature (*Redemptoris Missio*, par. 1). Together, the terms “eco-missiological” and “eco-missiology” refer to the responsibility of caring for our common home and its inhabitants, as well as adhering to God’s command to cultivate and care for the Earth responsibly. Like the cry of the *bloods* of Abel and the cries of the oppressed Israelites in Egypt, the cry of the Earth and the cry of the poor also storm the heavens for justice. Exposure to pollution, the causes of global warming and climate change, depletion of natural resources such as potable and clean water, and loss of biodiversity like forestry, marine life, and ecosystems—all these slowly murder the Earth and the poor. Pope Francis said, “The human environment and the natural environment deteriorate together; we cannot adequately combat environmental degradation unless we attend to causes related to human and social degradation.” (*Laudato Si*’, par. 48.) Advocating for responsible cultivation and care for Earth Rights is also a fight to defend the rights of the poor to live and enjoy the fruits of the Earth (see Jeremiah 29:11).

Religious Education as an Avenue for Ecological Conversion

In his Declaration on Christian Education, Pope Paul VI talked about the rights of nature, responsible stewardship, and ecological conversion. He also stated that the humanities can help develop not only the physical and intellectual abilities of young people but also their moral values. This will eventually lead to a “mature sense of responsibility in striving endlessly to form their lives properly and in pursuing true freedom” (*Gravissimum Educationis*, no. 1). Indeed, education facilitates human advancement and growth, but if it loses sight of the common good, sense of responsibility, humanity, and morality, it can also be an effective vehicle for humanity’s self-destruction due to the tragic consequences of human activity (*Octogesima Adveniens*, par. 21; *Laudato Si*’, par. 4 & 209). As already argued in this paper, responsible stewardship is also a moral issue, for it is a “common and universal duty for the sake of the common good” (*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 1987, par. 34). When morals and the environment get worse, the popes have always called for a serious change in how we treat the environment (*Laudato Si*’, par. 5; John Paul II, General Audience 2001, par. 4; *Octogesima Adveniens*, par. 21 and 48; *Centessimus Annus*, par. 37; Directory for Catechesis, no. 381).

Conversion means transformation, but in the religious sense, it is the response to the call to “repent” and to “sin no more,” in Greek, *metanoia* [change of heart]. It is a constant and consistent change of habit and lifestyle attuned to God’s plan. It is also a response to live out our vocation as stewards of God’s creation, not as an optional or ancillary aspect of our Christian experience; it is essential to a life of virtue (*Laudato Si*’, par. 217). The formation of habits can be formally facilitated at school through religious education. According to Ismael Ireneo Maningas, a professor at De La Salle University, religious education focuses on the method of teaching faith, theology, and moral action to humanity (Maningas, 2003). In other words, the nature of religious education is pedagogical. However, religious education is not merely a scholastic discipline of handing down information for memorization or instructing students on how to do things rigorously. According to Maria Lucia C. Natividad, an associate professor at Ateneo De Manila University, religious education is theology in practice because it attempts to clarify and strengthen the form of Christian living in the world (Natividad, 2018; Schreiter, 2003). It is about understanding human experience, Christ’s message, life experiences, and, hopefully, maturity in the faith (Natividad, 2018). In simple words, religious education aims for holistic human transformation. Ecological conversion, on the other hand, is the free response of an informed mind.

Therefore, there is a great chance that ecological education in religious education can be an effective avenue for such a *change of heart*. The question is how to integrate ecological education into religious education in a way that leads to ecological conversion. Ecological education is a scientific discussion of data, advocacy-oriented, and comprehensive disaster and risk management education. According to Pope Francis, ecological education must include a critique of socio-economic issues, such as the unlimited desire for development, consumerism, unregulated markets, and individualistic mindsets. Moreover, it should facilitate a more profound understanding of the value of ecological equilibrium—harmony with oneself, others, nature, creatures, and God. Educators need to be knowledgeable about the ethics of ecology and how to teach and learn it, and have a sense of responsibility, solidarity, and compassion for the environment and its marginalized communities for ecological education to be effective and meaningful (*Laudato Si*’, par. 210). Regarding meaningful ecological education in religious education, we can retell the message of the Scripture using the hermeneutic of ecology. We can already teach ecological education to students in grades one through six, ages six to twelve, instead of recounting Creation narratives and biblical stories as fairy tales in the classroom. For instance, rather than focusing solely on the act of eating the forbidden fruit in Genesis 3 as a sin of disobedience, we can also interpret it as a sin driven by selfish desire to possess prohibited things and to consume excessively. This theme can spark discussions on the evils of consumerism, greed, the unjust use of natural resources, poverty, and corruption (Buencibello, 2024, pp. 134-135). In the story of the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, instead of emphasizing punishment for their disobedience, we can also tell that God sent them out from the garden, which He tilled and cultivated by His own hands (Genesis 2:8-9), to teach them how to get food from the fruits of their sweat by cultivating the land by their own hands as well (Genesis 3:17-19) as a consequence to their sin of disobedience and mismanagement of the things under their care.

John Fowler perceives students ages six to twelve as being in the *mythic-literal faith* stage. It is essential to teach students the distinction between myths and their significance in life (Maningas, 2003). Teachers should not end their lessons with *Jonah being eaten by a big fish alone; rather, they should continue the story by*

explaining the meaning and lesson of the story in connection with real life. Kohlberg says that kids this age do not see any value in the rules themselves. They just tell them what feels good and what feels bad (Maningas, 2003). Therefore, it is crucial to teach objective moral codes to foster a good conscience, along with proper facilitation for reflective thinking. In Erikson's *industry and inferiority* stage, the student is focused on the benefits of hard work and success, but tends to punish and make fun of failure (Maningas, 2003). This is also the reason why students laugh at others' faults and praise those who are doing well. In Piaget's *concrete operations* stage, students are fairly adept at employing inductive reasoning, which entails moving from a particular experience to a general principle (Maningas, 2003). For example, when discussing pollution and waste management, their potential references would be their homes.

In simple words, Fowler, Erikson, Piaget, and Kohlberg believe that students at this age level are capable of respecting rules (Maningas, 2003) with a certain level of capacity for reflection and introspection. *Earth rights*, which encompass our planet's intrinsic value as well as its biological, philosophical, and spiritual characteristics, should be included in school curricula. This curriculum should not only address ecological hazards and management but also promote a proper attitude towards understanding the interconnectedness of all things and the dangers posed by irresponsible human decisions that could threaten the biosphere. Religious education can best incorporate anthropology that highlights the mutual and inseparable relationship between human beings, their habitat, and other creatures, in contrast to the anthropocentric view of civilization that subdues and dominates the Earth. Ecological education should also expose students to the dangers of technocracy—the ruling elites, monopolies of power, and economic dictatorships. Politics and economics must immediately engage in an open dialogue at the service of life to advance the common good (*Laudato Si'*, par. 189). Dialogue should not always start from above; it can also be initiated in academic institutions, community levels, homes, local churches, and barangay levels to foster mutual listening and learning. Pope Francis said, "Good education plants seeds when we are young, and these continue to bear fruit throughout life." (*Laudato Si'*, par. 213.)

See-Judge-Act-Celebrate-Evaluate as Learning Framework: A Curricular Proposal

This study supports curriculum developers, educational policy makers, and environment-advocates by showing that religious education can become a site for holistic care of the environment: it demonstrates how extending the notion of "earth rights" into teaching reframes ecological responsibility as integral to faith and mission, thereby urging curricula to incorporate moral, theological, and ecological dimensions (Altmeyer et al., 2021). Moreover, it demonstrates that teacher competencies in environmental and moral education are crucial for translating awareness into action in religious schools (Robina-Ramírez et al., 2020).

A curricular framework built on *See-Judge-Act-Celebrate-Evaluate* can facilitate meaningful catechetical engagement with our ecological crisis (ECCE & CBCP, 2007):

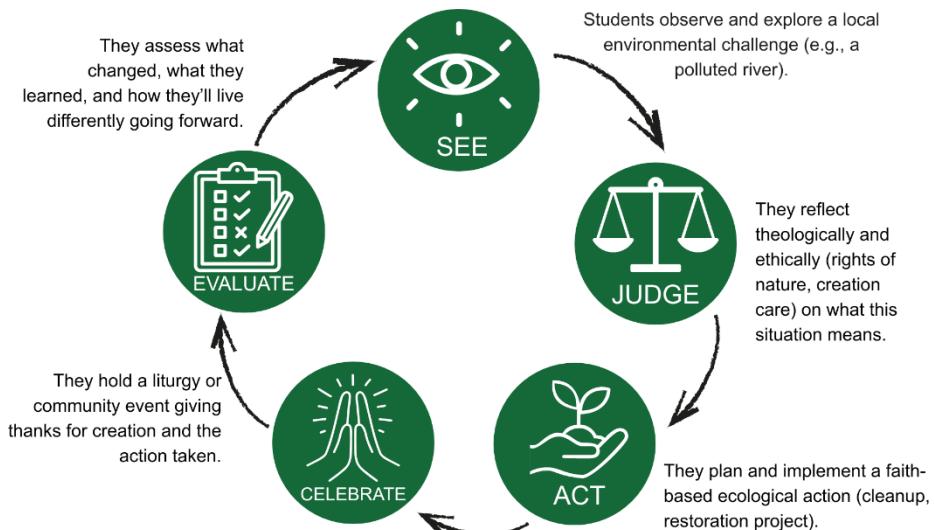


Figure 1. Visual representation of See-Judge-Act-Celebrate-Evaluate as an Ecological process in aid of ecological concern and pedagogical method

The **See-Judge-Act-Celebrate-Evaluate** method, as described in the *National Catechetical Directory for the Philippines* (ECCE & CBCP, 2007, par. 353), is a systematic and dynamic approach to catechesis that guides learners from awareness to transformative action. It begins with “**See**,” where learners observe and analyze real-life situations or issues, in this study’s context, ecological and social realities such as environmental degradation and injustice. “**Judge**” involves theological and moral reflection on these realities in light of Scripture and Church teaching, discerning how faith calls for responsible action. “**Act**” translates this discernment into concrete initiatives promoting stewardship and ecological justice. The inclusion of “**Celebrate**” highlights gratitude and recognition of God’s presence in creation, fostering communal joy and motivation for ongoing commitment. Finally, “**Evaluate**” encourages reflection on the outcomes, learning experiences, and areas for growth, ensuring that ecological awareness leads to sustained conversion and responsible living.

For example, in a Grade 10 Junior High School religious education class, students take a field trip to a local waterway (See). Back in class, they read texts on creation and earth rights, such as *Laudato Si'*, a City Ordinance, or any other laws on water waste management (Judge), then in small groups evaluate local land-use practices, sewage management, and rehabilitation, and propose a restoration campaign (Act). At the campaign’s completion, they hold a service thanking God and creation, and invite community members to join (Celebrate). Finally, students write reflective journals and peer-review what worked, what did not, and how they will sustain new habits (Evaluate). Allow this activity to be done by every batch of Grade 10 students to continue the pastoral cycle. As the new batch commences another field visit to a local waterway, they may revisit the outputs of the prior batches, including their implemented projects and evaluations, so that the new batch can have an informed perspective on the current situations on the ground.

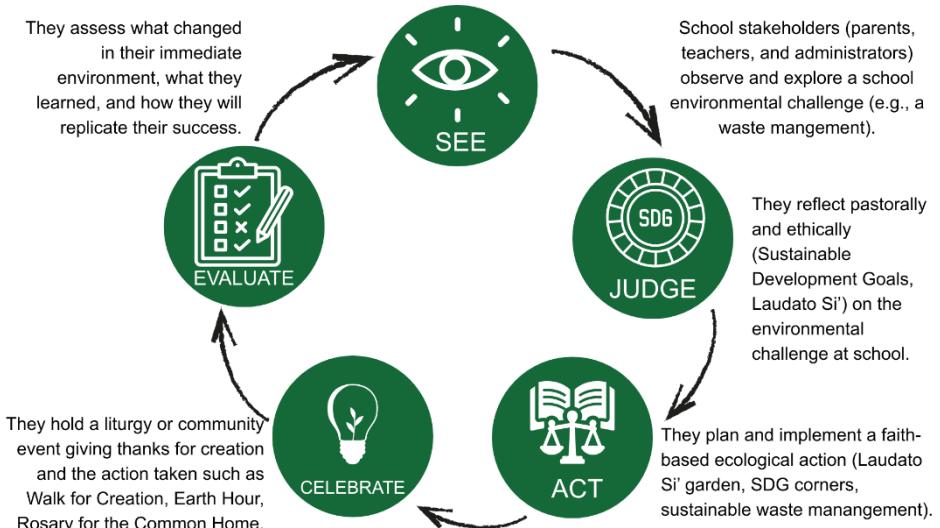


Figure 2. Visual representation of See-Judge-Act-Celebrate-Evaluate as an Eco-missiological process in aid of ecological concern and pastoral method

In relation to the study, this framework serves as an effective **learning process that integrates faith, reason, and action**. It helps students not only understand ecological issues intellectually but also engage spiritually and morally, forming habits of care for creation. By employing *the See-Judge-Act-Celebrate-Evaluate approach*, catechesis and religious education become a participatory and transformative experience that promotes ecological conversion, moral responsibility, and a lived commitment to the **rights of nature and the common good**—core themes of eco-missiological education.

In terms of participatory democracy in the school pastoral setting, the campus ministry can also use *the See-Judge-Act-Celebrate-Evaluate approach as its modus operandi in implementing projects that protect and uphold care for creation in general, and the school environment in particular*. For example, school stakeholders [comprising parents, teachers, administrators, and other members of the school community] begin by identifying and examining a specific environmental concern within the school context, such as ineffective waste management. Through pastoral and ethical reflection grounded in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and Laudato Si', they analyze the issue in light of faith and moral responsibility. Based on this discernment, they design and implement faith-driven ecological initiatives, including the establishment of Laudato Si' gardens, SDG learning corners, and sustainable waste management systems. The process culminates in communal acts of thanksgiving, such as Walks for Creation, Earth Hour observances, or Rosaries for the Common Home, which celebrate the shared commitment to caring for creation. Finally, stakeholders engage in evaluative reflection to measure environmental impact, assess the effectiveness of their actions, and determine strategies for sustaining and expanding these ecological practices within the educational community.

Finally, to embody the principles of justice, care, and solidarity with both creation and marginalized peoples, concrete educational and ecclesial initiatives must be undertaken. In the context of education, religious institutions can integrate ecological theology, environmental ethics, and the rights of nature into religious education curricula at all levels. Lessons grounded in Scripture, Catholic Social Teaching (CST), and local environmental realities can help learners understand

stewardship as an essential expression of discipleship (*Laudato Si'*, pars. 209–215). Catechetical programs may also include eco-centered service-learning activities, such as tree planting, waste management, and ecological restoration, framed as acts of faith and gratitude toward the Creator (Natividad, 2018). In the context of the Church, parishes and dioceses can establish creation care ministries and fortify the ministry on ecology that encourage sustainable practices, ecological advocacy, and direct assistance to communities most affected by environmental degradation (*Laudato Si'*, pars. 211–214). The ongoing formation of teachers, catechists, and pastoral workers in eco-theology and ecological spirituality ensures that those who teach the faith also model simplicity, compassion, and environmental responsibility (Maningas, 2003; Natividad, 2018). Furthermore, local churches and faith-based schools can organize community dialogues and interfaith collaborations addressing environmental and social issues, emphasizing the interconnectedness of all creation and the preferential option for the poor (*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, par. 38). Finally, sustainable parish practices, such as energy conservation, waste reduction, and community gardening, *et cetera*, serve as living witnesses of ecological conversion in action. These initiatives transform both education and ecclesial life into concrete platforms of hope, where care for creation and solidarity with the poor converge as inseparable dimensions of the Church's mission in today's ecological crisis.

Conclusion

We cannot deny that religious education is facing many challenges in the ever-changing contexts of globalization, consumerism, materialism, secularization, pluralism, and postmodernism (Roche, 2008). Our educational efforts will be ineffective and insufficient unless we promote a new way of contemplating humans, life, society, and our relationship with nature. Otherwise, the consumerist paradigm will continue to advance with the assistance of the media and the highly efficient market (*Laudato Si'*, par. 215).

This study has attained a renewed theological and pedagogical understanding of *earth rights* as an essential dimension of religious education and Christian mission. By reinterpreting the biblical mandate to “subdue the earth” through the lens of responsible stewardship, this work clarified that dominion over creation is not a right of ownership but a sacred duty of care (Collins, 2013; McKeating, 2015). Utilizing the See–Discern–Act methodology, the research illuminated how religious education can serve as an effective platform for promoting ecological consciousness and missiological engagement (Holland & Henriot, 1983; Sands, 2018). It demonstrated that ecological conversion, when integrated into faith formation, fosters moral responsibility, compassion for the marginalized, and respect for the intrinsic value of creation (*Sollicitudo rei socialis*, pars. 34 & 38; *Laudato Si'*, pars. 210, 217–219).

The study's contribution lies in establishing a theological framework for an *eco-missiological mandate* – a call for educators and faith communities to integrate ecological justice into their teaching and practice (Rasmussen, 2005; Pine, 2018). It bridges biblical exegesis, moral theology, and pedagogy by proposing an *anthropomorphic empathy and care, or simply empathy*, as guiding principles for cultivating “planetary awareness” among learners (McKeating, 2015). This anthropomorphic narrative draws its roots from the spirituality of St. Francis of Assisi and the Golden Rule, as well as from fables and literary genres. We need to view our planet Earth as an integral part of our identity, a “sister/mother Earth,” and because we originated from its dust, we owe it inviolable respect. Furthermore, it expands the discourse on religious education by positioning it not merely as catechesis but as a

transformative agent that connects spirituality, ethics, and ecology (Natividad, 2018; Maningas, 2003).

The Earth is struggling, and humanity is dying due to the toxic wastes our current civilization lavishly produces. While we await the eschatological new heavens and the new Earth (Revelation 21:1), Jesus taught us to desire the ‘Reign of God’ on Earth as it is in heaven (Matthew 6:9-10; Buencibello, 2024). Ultimately, this research affirms that the care for creation is both a faith imperative and a moral responsibility (*Laudato Si’*, pars. 64, 67, 208-209, 217). It invites religious educators to view the Earth as a living partner in the divine covenant – a “sister/mother” deserving of justice, reverence, and love (*Laudato Si’*, pars. 1-2, 11, 66-67; Pine, 2018). By embedding ecological awareness within the mission of education, the study contributes to forming future generations who see environmental care as integral to discipleship and to the realization of God’s Kingdom in the here and now (*Laudato Si’*, par. 67, 213-215, 217; Buencibello, 2024, p. 132; United Nations, n.d.).

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Original Article

Understanding Human Suffering among Black Nazarene Devotees: A Qualitative Study through the Lens of Edward Schillebeeckx

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Abstract

This study analyzes how devotees of the Black Nazarene perceive human suffering using Edward Schillebeeckx's theology of the method of correlation. The approach of Schillebeeckx has two aspects, namely, negative dialectics and positive sphere of meaning. Through these two moments, the study identifies similarities and differences in the devotees' perception of human suffering. This study employs qualitative research, particularly content analysis. Furthermore, purposive sampling serves as a tool for conducting in-depth interviews with selected devotees, taking into account the duration of their devotion, to gather data. This aims to explore the perception of devotees regarding how they understand and make sense of suffering in the context of faith in God. The results show that devotees perceive suffering as a means of taking part in God's kingdom. Their awareness of other people's suffering, their belief that suffering is a common human experience, and the association of their own suffering with Jesus the Black Nazarene – all of these demonstrate their involvement in the devotion. Devotees find spiritual consolation. This understanding emphasizes the spiritual resilience of the devotees, portraying suffering not simply as an experience but, as Schillebeeckx believes, as a way toward greater spiritual development and a positive moment. It enables individuals to relate their suffering to a broader, divine purpose, developing empathetic and nurturing faith within the community.

Keywords: Black Nazarene Devotion; Human Suffering; Negative Contrast of Experience; Positive Moment

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Introduction

The devotion to the Black Nazarene holds profound significance in the Filipino Catholic community. In January 2024, over 6.5 million devotees attended, transforming Manila's streets into a massive gathering (Parungao et al. 2024). The *Traslacion*, or the Feast of Nuestro Padre Jesus Nazareno, commemorates the transfer of the life-sized statue from Intramuros to its present shrine, Quiapo Church, every 9th of January. This image is a concrete symbol for devotees, especially the poor, offering a relatable image of struggle and hope. In other words, the image of the Black Nazarene symbolizes that he is one with the suffering of the million devotees across the country. The image reminds the devotees of Christ carrying his own cross (cf. John 19:17); this also emphasizes the close connection between his suffering and the human experience of difficulties and resilience (Tallara, 2022).

The annual procession is a spiritual pilgrimage where devotees draw the carriage bearing the image of the Black Nazarene as an act of penance and deep devotion. With this ritual, millions of stories of struggles and healings motivate the people to participate in the *Traslacion*. This image symbolizes a glimpse of hope amidst struggles. Further, answered prayers strengthen devotees' connection to their faith in Jesus. The faith embodies a dynamic manifestation of Christianity, providing a foundation of deep, genuine Christian faith (Manzano, 2022). Manzano believes that this devotion-drawn faith relies on God's salvific promises, ensuring resilience and spiritual growth in times of suffering and even persecution. The foundation of true Christian faith is the centrality upon which devotees build their relationship with the suffering Jesus in the Black Nazarene, anchored in the truth of Christ and His teachings. The devotion symbolizes a deeper truth about human existence: suffering, which can transform into collective resilience when perceived through the lens of faith.

To understand the context of suffering from the devotees to the Black Nazarene, the paper will answer the following questions:

1. How do devotees perceive human suffering?
2. How does the negative contrast of experiences relate to their perception of suffering?
3. How do their perceptions align with Schillebeeckx's ideas on suffering as a means of participating in God's reign?

Framework

The paper employed Edward Schillebeeckx's theology of suffering, particularly the method of correlation (Schillebeeckx, 1974), namely negative dialectic and positive sphere of meaning, as its primary theoretical framework.

The study preferred to utilize Schillebeeckx's method of correlation in the context of human suffering, as it was designed to provide a meaningful and dynamic relationship between two distinct, yet mutually informative, realities: the Christian tradition and human suffering. The method was driven by the negative contrast experience. It began with the negative dialectic, where the focus was not on answers from human perspectives, as they were not representative of humankind as a whole (Schillebeeckx, 1974), but rather on the experience of suffering, which posed a threat to the *humanum*. Then the positive sphere of meaning came from the experience of the meaninglessness (Schillebeeckx, 1974) of one's life; then, the universal pre-understanding of the *humanum* gave rise to the implicit potential and eventual redemption of humanity, providing a perspective in which a feeling of fullness, salvation, and serenity overcame the pointlessness of suffering. It then brought this

question into correlation with the positive sphere of meaning (the promise of God's Kingdom/salvation) found in the Christian tradition.

This framework offered the dynamic structure for interpreting how the devotees' experience of suffering was transformed from meaninglessness into a profound expression of faith and hope within the Filipino cultural and religious context. Schillebeeckx's theological framework set the study to provide insight into the relationship between religious interpretation of human suffering across time and personal devotion.

That is why Schillebeeckx (1994) debunked the notion of a divine mystery that could not be mediated by human experience, arguing that experiences were never isolated acts (such as purely psychological or religious ones). This theological framework enabled the study to contextualize and interpret the devotees' experiences, with a specific focus on the close relationship between individual spirituality and religious interpretations of suffering, as well as how these perceptions evolved over time and with personal devotion.

Methodology

The paper employed qualitative research, specifically phenomenological research, as it described the meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences with a concept or phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). Through a phenomenological design, the paper explored the lived experiences of devotees, particularly their devotion to the suffering Jesus Christ. Further, it analyzed the phenomenon of human suffering based on their personal experiences and obtained a thorough understanding of how they perceived and understood suffering through their faith.

The primary rationale for employing this methodology was its ability to explore the perceptions of human suffering grounded in the devotees' own stories. This allowed the study to gain insights into how personal devotion formed the meaning of suffering within a religious framework over time. By focusing on lived experiences, the research directly aligned with Schillebeeckx's view that human experiences were central to mediating divine mystery.

In addition, this paper utilized some AI assistance, such as Google Gemini and QuillBot, to generate themes and ensure proper grammar.

Significance of the Study

The main significance of the study was to reveal the concrete relationship between human suffering and faith, particularly how Black Nazarene devotees perceived suffering as a participatory way into God's kingdom. This transformed personal and communal suffering into sources of spiritual meaning, resilience, and compassion for others.

Further, by employing qualitative methods such as in-depth interviews, the research gathered the lived experiences of devotees and how suffering was personally and theologically understood within the Filipino Catholic devotional context. Lastly, the research encouraged a broader audience, including non-Catholics, to examine suffering through a hopeful and redemptive lens, highlighting the opportunity for spiritual growth and empathy while being mindful of the risks of romanticizing or trivializing the harsh realities of suffering.

Population and Respondents

This study focused on adult Black Nazarene devotees who actively engaged in religious activities, including the *Traslacion*, the first Friday devotion, and other associated events. Five respondents, each reflecting varying durations of dedication

(2 participants for 1–5 years, 2 participants for 6–10 years, and 1 participant for 11+ years), were chosen by purposive sampling to offer a range of insightful perspectives. Only adult devotees with at least one year of active devotion were included, while those under 18 or not actively practicing were excluded. Since the research study employs a qualitative approach, it involves a range of 5-25 participants (Creswell, 2007).

Interview Questions for Black Nazarene Devotees

1. *Ano ang pagtingin mo sa pagdurusa? (What is your perspective on suffering?)*
2. *Sa palagay mo, nakapagpabago ba ang iyong debosyon sa iyong pananaw tungkol sa pagdurusa? Paki-paliwanag. (Do you think that your devotion has influenced your perspective on suffering? Please explain.)*
3. *Sa palagay mo, ang karanasan sa pagdurusa ay isang uri ng pakikiisa sa Kaharian ng Diyos? Bakit? (Do you think the experience of suffering is a form of unity with the Kingdom of God? Why?)*

Data Collection

Data was gathered through in-depth, semi-structured interviews that explored respondents' perceptions of human suffering, how their devotion influenced these beliefs, and their theological understanding of suffering's relationship to God's kingdom. To protect privacy and promote sincerity in discussing individual experiences and opinions, respondents' identities were strictly secured.

Ethical Considerations

In conducting this study on the perspectives of Black Nazarene devotees regarding human suffering, the researcher upholds the highest ethical standards to ensure the safety, dignity, and rights of all participants. Ethical considerations form an essential foundation of this research, guiding every stage of data collection, handling, and analysis. As the study involves personal experiences, spiritual reflections, and potentially sensitive narratives, it is crucial that participants are fully informed about their role and protected throughout the process.

To guarantee transparency and respect for the respondents' autonomy, a clear explanation of their rights, the purpose of the study, and the measures taken to maintain confidentiality was provided prior to their participation. The statement below was read and presented to all respondents to secure informed consent and ethical clearance.

Informed Consent/Invitation for Devotees

Maraming salamat sa iyong pagsasaalang-alang sa paglahok sa pag-aaral na ito tungkol sa pananaw sa pagdurusa ng tao ng mga deboto ng Itim na Nazareno. Ang iyong paglahok ay nangangailangan ng isang malalimang panayam kung saan maaari mong ibahagi ang iyong mga personal na karanasan at paniniwala. Mangyaring tiyakin na mananatiling ganap na anonymous ang iyong pagkakakilanlan. Tanging ang mananaliksik lamang ang magkakaroon ng pahintulot na malaman ang mga personal na detalye. Ito ay ligtas na itatago at gagamitin lamang para sa mga pang-akademikong layunin. Mayroon kang ganap na karapatan na umatras mula sa panayam o pag-aaral anumang oras nang walang anumang kaparusahan, at maaari kang pumili na hindi sagutin ang anumang tanong na hindi mo nais sagutin. Lubos naming pinahahalagahan ang

iyong malayang paglahok, at ang iyong tapat na mga sagot ay magbibigay ng mahalagang pananaw habang tinitiyak ang iyong privacy at kalayaan.

(Thank you very much for considering your participation in this study regarding the perspective on human suffering held by the devotees of the Black Nazarene. Your cooperation requires an in-depth interview where you can share your personal experiences and beliefs. Please be assured that your personal identity (name, age, home address, and other personal details) will remain completely anonymous. Only the researcher will have authorization to know your personal details, and they will be disposed of three years after the study. This information will be safely stored and used only for academic purposes. You have the full right to withdraw from the interview or the study at any time without any penalty, and you may choose to skip any question you prefer not to answer. We highly value your voluntary participation, and your honest answers will provide valuable insights while ensuring your privacy and freedom.)

The respondents read the statement above for the purpose of obtaining ethical clearance.

Findings

Initial Findings

The responses provided by Black Nazarene devotees who have been active for various years reflect how their religious experiences have changed their perception of suffering. Three respondents, who have been devotees for less than five years, view suffering as a normal and inevitable part of life. Suffering can also be experienced through our surroundings, such as friends, family, etc. However, when suffering is always anchored in the Black Nazarene, it can be a meaningful suffering. With this perspective on suffering, devotees inspire others to view suffering as a path to holiness. This early-stage devotee emphasizes the consoling quality of relating to Christ's suffering. This leads to spiritual consolation.

Table 1. Summary of the Interview and Common Themes

	Question no. 1	Question no. 2	Question no. 3
Respondent 1 (1-5 years)	<p><i>Ang pagdurusa ay isang karanasan ng bawat tao at ito ay hindi matatakasan mabuti man o masamang tao</i></p> <p>(Suffering is a universal human experience, and it is inescapable, whether a person is good or bad.)</p>	<p><i>Nung ako ay sumama sa Traslacion at first Friday mass mas naliwanagan ako na mismong si Jesus ay nagdurusay rin pala nung siya ay pinako sa krus pero dinala nya yun ng may pagsunod sa Diyos. Dito nakita ko na ang pagdurusay ay may kaakibat na ginhawa dahil sasamahan ka ni Hesus."</i></p> <p>(When I joined the Traslacion</p>	<p><i>Depende kung ang pagdurusay ko ay iniaalay ko sa Diyos at sinasamahan ko ng pananampalataya.</i></p> <p>(It depends on whether I offer my suffering to God and accompany it with faith.)</p>

		(procession) and the first Friday Mass, it enlightened me that Jesus himself too suffered when he was nailed to the cross, but he carried it out with obedience to God. Here, I saw that suffering is accompanied by comfort because Jesus will be with you.)	
Respondent 1 (1–5 years)	<p><i>Nuong una ay takot ako sa problema dahil hindi ko alam ang gagawin at kung ang magiging desisyon ko ba ay at tama, ngunit nung nag simula akong maging deboto ng poong itim na Nazareno ay lumakas ang loob kong harapang ito.</i></p> <p>(At first, I was afraid of suffering because I didn't know what to do or if my decision would be aligned. But when I started becoming a devotee of the Black Nazarene, my courage to face them grew stronger.)</p>	<p><i>Malaki ang naitulong sa'kin ng pagdedebosyon sa Nazareno dahil mas tumibay ako at nakikita kong sa Hesus mismo ay sinasamahan ko sa paghihirap dahil kada punta ko sa Quiapo at nakikita ko ang kanyang imahe ay nararamdamang kong kasama ko sya.</i></p> <p>(My devotion to the Black Nazarene has helped me a lot because I became stronger, and I feel that I am with Jesus Himself in my suffering, because every time I go to Quiapo and see His image, I feel that He is with me.)</p>	<p><i>Hindi ko man lubos na nauunawaa ang ibig sabihin ng kaharian ng Diyos, ngunit alam kong ang pagdurusa ko ay daan patungo sa kabutihan at kaligtasan. Sa pagdedebosyon ko ay nagiging inspirasyong din ako sa iba dahil marami akong nahihikayat na mga kaibigan.</i></p> <p>(I may not fully understand what the Kingdom of God means, but I know that my suffering is a path toward goodness and salvation. Through my devotion, I also become an inspiration to others because I encourage many of my friends [to join].)</p>
Respondent 3 (1–5 years)	<p><i>Sa totoo lang sanay na ko sa paghihirap dahil lagi ko naman nararanasan yan sa trabaho, pamilya kapag minsan hindi nagkakaintindihan o sa mga kaibigan, kaya hindi na bago sa'kin yung paghihirap o pagdurusan</i></p>	<p><i>Malaki ang nabago sa pagtingin ko sa paghihirap, nung nagging deboto ako ng itim na Nazareno ay mas lumawak ang pagtingin ko dito, dati sanay na ako sa paghihirap, ngayon mas nagging positibo</i></p>	<p><i>Ang kaharian ang Diyos ay ang kaligtasan dulot ni Hesus, kaya naniniwala akong kapag nakikiisa ako sa frist Friday lalo na sa Traslacion, naniniwala akong nagiging</i></p>

(To be honest, I'm already used to suffering because I always experience it at work, with family when we sometimes don't understand each other, or with friends, so suffering or problems are not new to me.)

ang pagtingin ko dito dahil naniniwala akong may Hesus Nazareno na gumagabay sa'kin. Bukod dun, nakakakrining din ako ng ibang deboto na nagpapatunay na lahat nang pagdurusan nila ay napagtugumpayan dahil kay Hesus Nazareno.

(There was a big shift in my perspective on suffering. When I became a devotee of the Black Nazarene, my perspective on it widened. I used to be just accustomed to hardship; now, my view on it is more positive because I believe that Jesus of Nazareth is guiding me. Besides that, I also hear from other devotees who testify that they overcame all their suffering because of Jesus of Nazareth.)

instrumento ako sa ng kaligtasan hindi lang sa sarili ko pati na rin sa ibang tao. Kaya kahit tatlong taon palang ako sa pagdedebosyon ay ipagpapatuloy ko ito dahil ito ang pamamaraan ko para magpasalamat sa Diyos at maging instrument ni Hesus sa ibang taong nahirapan sa buhay.

(The Kingdom of God is the salvation brought by Jesus, so I believe that when I unite in the First Friday [Mass], especially in the *Traslacion* (procession), I believe I become an instrument of salvation not just for myself but also for other people. That's why even though I have only been devoted for three years, I will continue this because it is my way of thanking God and being an instrument of Jesus for other people who are suffering in life.)

Respondent 4
(6–10 years)

Ang pagdurusua ay Isang bagay na dumating sa Buhay ng Isang tao kung saan ito ay dahilan sa kapabayaan din nito kung kaya't nahahantong sya sa sitwasyong ito

(Suffering is something that comes into a person's life, and it is also due to their own negligence (or carelessness), which leads them to that situation.)

Opo! malaking tulong Ang debosyon lalo't nasa panahon ng pagdurusua dahil nakakatulong ito na harapin ang suliranin sa buhay na may lakas na pananampalataya sa Diyos na tanging makapagbibigay ng pag asa"

(Yes! Devotion is a

Opo! Kung haharapin ng buong puso ang pagdurusua na may kalakip na pananampatalaya ito ang magiging paraan upang mapabilang sa Kaharian Ng Diyos.

(Yes! If one faces suffering wholeheartedly with accompanying faith,

			great help, especially in times of suffering, because it helps one face life's problems with strong faith in God, who is the only one who can provide hope.)	this will be the way to belong to the Kingdom of God.)
Respondent 5 (11+ years)	<p><i>Sa pagdurusako, nakakagaan ng loob, na nakikibahagi pala ako sa mga sakit at dusang dinaranas ni Jesus.</i></p> <p>(In my suffering, it is consoling to know that I am sharing in the suffering and struggles experienced by Jesus.)</p>	<p><i>Nagbabago, sa pagpanaw ng dalawang anak ko nun COVID 19, ang naging consolation ko ay manuod ng misa sa Quiapo sa cellphone ko.</i></p> <p>(It has changed. After the passing of my two children during COVID-19, my consolation became watching the Mass from Quiapo on my cell phone.)</p>	<p><i>Naniniwala ako sapagkat kung mapagtatagumpaya n ko ang mga pagdurusako dto sa lupa, mararanasan ko na ang kaligayahan sa kaharian ng Diyos.</i></p> <p>(I believe that if I can overcome the sufferings here on earth, I will experience happiness in the Kingdom of God.)</p>	

Though Respondent 3 perceives suffering as a personal accountability, the respondent still recognizes the importance of devotion as a source of strength during difficult times. This mid-stage devotee highlights participation in God's kingdom by fully embracing suffering with faith. For the respondent, there is a shift in perspective where religion not only provides comfort but also transforms suffering into a means of salvation.

With more than 11 years of devotion, respondent 5 shows an integration of suffering, faith, and personal loss, perceiving it as a part of Christ's suffering and the journey to God's kingdom. The story of this third respondent shows how sustained devotion can help people better understand suffering as a common experience with Jesus and a source of consolation during difficult times. This implies that the duration of devotion is a crucial consideration for a deeper connection between suffering and faith. This also emphasizes that devotion not only changes perceptions of suffering but also cultivates a sense of communal and spiritual connectedness. Moreover, their growth in faith aligns with Edward Schillebeeckx (1994), who suggests that suffering led to their metanoia, a change in their actions, mindset, and identity as devotees.

The following are the common themes found in the respondents' perceptions of human suffering:

1. Universality of Suffering: Respondents acknowledge that everyone will face suffering, regardless of their ethical principles, societal status, and religion. This theme highlights the universal suffering that all human beings experience.
2. Influence of Devotion: The respondents claim that their devotion to the Black Nazarene significantly influences their positive perspective on

suffering. It often provides consolation and fortitude in the face of difficulties, indicating the transformational potential of devotion.

3. Ritual Participation: Attending First Friday Mass, *Traslacion*, and other churches' participation related to the devotion are examples of rituals that can be used to have a new perspective on suffering. Respondents can give new meaning to their suffering by drawing a connection between their faith and Jesus' own suffering, as reflected in the devotion.
4. Spiritual Participation: According to the respondents, enduring hardship in faith may lead to a deeper sense of belonging to God's kingdom. They believe that struggle can be transformed into an avenue for heavenly connection and that suffering can be a method of achieving spiritual fulfillment.
5. Redemptive Perspective: There is a belief that obtaining genuine happiness in the hereafter can result from enduring suffering on earth. This redemptive perspective aligns with broader Christian theological concepts regarding the relationship between spiritual growth and suffering.
6. Communal and Spiritual Connection: Devotees develop a sense of community through shared suffering and devotion. Their shared faith is strengthened, and their spiritual journeys grow deeper as they endure pain together.

In the Philippine context, devotions, culture, and the human experience are deeply intertwined with the sociocultural foundation of suffering. Therefore, suffering is an inevitable part of life that transcends individual differences. Devotion to the Black Nazarene significantly offers a consoling interpretation of suffering and the transformative power of faith. Devotees find new meaning in their suffering by relating their own struggles to Jesus' suffering through participation in Black Nazarene devotional rituals. This spiritual involvement helps devotees to perceive struggles as a way to belong to God's kingdom. The redemptive perspective is consistent with broader Christian theology, acknowledging that genuine happiness with Christ is achieved after enduring earthly suffering. Communitarily, these themes demonstrate that suffering in the Philippines is not just a personal encounter but also a culturally and spiritually structured event that unites communities and strengthens faith-based resilience.

Furthermore, the resilience of Black Nazarene devotees is deeply rooted in their faith, which transforms suffering from a cause of hopelessness into an avenue for spiritual development and consolation. By connecting their own struggles with Jesus' suffering, they find strength and purpose through devotion and traditions like the First Friday Mass and *Traslacion*, which promote a sense of divine relationship and shared suffering.

In *Catechism for Filipino Catholics*, no. 51 (hereafter cited as CFC), Filipinos are resilient because they yearn for order (kaayusan) amidst chaos. This resilient spirit is further nurtured by the belief that enduring earthly suffering with faith leads to belonging in God's kingdom. This resilience is strengthened by the fellowship of devotees who share in suffering and encourage one another, strengthening both their individual and collective journeys of faith. Resiliency arises as a transformational spiritual practice that strengthens, consoles, and relates Christians in the face of difficulty. As CFC no. 2035 mentioned, "final destiny" is already an active and present reality. Perceiving human suffering as a way of uniting with Jesus' suffering is a way of being with Christ in His second coming. This interpretation connects current

suffering with eventual spiritual fulfillment by highlighting the promise of resurrection and eternal life.

Discussion

Schillebeeckx's Theology of Suffering

Schillebeeckx perceives suffering as a formative and harsh reality that needs theological reflection. The experience of human suffering presents an ongoing challenge to believers who seek to sustain their relationship with God in the face of the tragedies of human history (Ryan, 2024). Therefore, suffering is not merely a secondary concern, but an essential locus where the Christian message becomes intelligible amid the various faces of suffering (Schillebeeckx, 1994). The latter encourages Christians to admit limitations as part of human existence and demands an answer that transcends a mere surface-level solution. However, every answer from different sources resulted in a plurality of positive views, which cannot serve as the basis for a universal claim about the Christian answer (Schillebeeckx, 1974). As a result, the diversity of positive viewpoints cannot be the foundation for a universal Christian assertion, because these fragmented responses, which stem from a variety of human experiences, lack the singular focus and common denominator required to represent the comprehensive, unifying message of Christianity for all humanity.

Schillebeeckx's Theology of Suffering offers a transformative understanding of human suffering. His approach explores the relationship between the harsh reality of suffering and the hope rooted in the Christian faith, offering a sobering yet hopeful framework that resists simplistic explanations of evil and pain in the world.

The theological framework of the method of correlation in Edward Schillebeeckx arises from his theological exploration, particularly in examining the problem, rather than relying on a formula or theory, as theologian John Galvin would mention. That is why Schillebeeckx views suffering as the primary problem and then sees the method of correlation as the steps. Schillebeeckx also develops largely in response to observing the profound injustices and hardships present in the world, which led him to realize that such experiences of suffering must be acknowledged and interpreted within a theological context. He then suggests that negative contrast experiences, situations marked by injustice, oppression, or suffering, do not merely provoke despair but can also inspire a profound sense of protest and the impulse for transformative action. According to Schillebeeckx (1994), the crux of "negative dialectics" lay in the intersection between evil and suffering, as well as critical resistance against anything and everything that threatened the humanum (1994). Schillebeeckx's negative dialectics are thus connected to the survival and future of vulnerable humanity and creation, as they serve as a convincing explanation of a basic human experience. Therefore, part of human existence is suffering. These reflections underscore the conviction that through these experiences, individuals are innately driven to strive for a different reality that aligns more closely with their understanding of a just and flourishing humanity. Consequently, Schillebeeckx integrates these insights into a broader discourse about the spirituality of suffering and the potential for active engagement with these negative realities, framing them as foundational to a faith that seeks to respond positively amidst suffering. To make it clearer, there are two ways in which Schillebeeckx applies the method of correlation in relation to human suffering.

Firstly, the negative moment (negative dialectics), comprising experiences of limitation, suffering, and meaninglessness (Rego, 2006). This means that the negative moment in existential thought comprises experiences characterized by human limitation, suffering, and a pervasive sense of meaninglessness. This first

concept highlights the human condition, where individuals often confront difficulties, leading to feelings of despair and helplessness, especially if not addressed properly. Although suffering may result from a natural disaster, international violence, political injustice, or subtle personal oppression (McManus, 1999). This acknowledges the concept of suffering as part of human existence. Such experiences can arise from various situations, including the bereavement of loved ones, societal pressure, or existential crises that challenge one's worldview. It may be coming from other people or even from the personal consequences of one's actions. Nevertheless, there is also too much unnecessary and inhuman suffering (Rego, 2006). Suffering is part of human existence. Schillebeeckx's understanding of negative dialectics begins with outrage at excessive human suffering and is followed by protest and, eventually, praxis aimed at alleviating and ending the suffering (Moseley, 2014). Within this context, suffering is a fundamental aspect of one's existence. Recognizing these negative moments can serve as a catalyst for personal and communal growth, encouraging individuals to redefine their mission.

Nevertheless, Schillebeeckx emphasizes that these emotional responses are essential for recognizing the dignity of those who suffer and for invoking a collective call to action against oppression. Rego describes this as a contrasting experience of positivity. This is an opportunity to witness another situation that calls for action.

Secondly, a positive sphere of meaning, which comprises experiences of goodness, beauty, and meaning (Rego, 2006). Schillebeeckx (1972) believes that divine salvation can be achieved through individual faith and the addressing of suffering, such as injustice and a lack of freedom. This perspective sees the fight against dehumanization and the denial of freedom as a divine act of salvation.

Schillebeeckx offers a religious perspective on suffering that can be both constructive and meaningful. Negative experiences of contrast are also productive (Rego, 2006). This holds that suffering can be transformed and used to enrich a person in a meaningful way.

Christian claims to salvation are also interrelated to the method of correlation; this facilitates the proclamation of the Christian message (Rego, 2006). This acknowledges the need for divine intervention, which serves as a basis for proclaiming the Christian message of hope and redemption in the midst of suffering. Negative experiences of contrast, such as outrage at excessive human suffering, underscore that there are still limitations in human effort to achieve salvation. As the Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 581 (hereafter cited as CCC) states, the virtue of the saving work of Christ is accomplished once and for all. The Paschal mystery of Christ's cross and resurrection stands at the center of the good news that the apostles and the Church following them are to proclaim to the world. God's saving plan was accomplished "once and for all" by the redemptive death of his Son, Jesus Christ (CCC 571). Thus, by Jesus' sacrifice on the cross, it becomes the head of redeemed humankind (Schillebeeckx, 1963). It is emphasized that salvation is not attainable through any human actions alone; rather, it is a gift from God, as articulated in the doctrines of the Church, that through the Paschal Mystery, people are being saved once and for all. Such experiences deepen the understanding of the transformative nature of salvation through Christ, highlighting His sacrifice as the ultimate response to humanity's suffering. The virtue of the saving work of Christ is accomplished once and for all (CCC no. 1128). Therefore, amidst the reality of suffering and injustices, the Christian message proclaims that true hope and redemption lie in the Paschal Mystery of Jesus. With this, it offers a glimpse of hope for salvation to those who endure suffering in the name of Jesus. As devotees confront life's challenges, they can draw comfort from the assurance that Christ's paschal mystery has addressed the issue of sin and its

consequences, allowing them to forgive themselves and others. This act of divine grace transforms human suffering into a testimony of resilience and hope, emphasizing that despite the trials they may face, they are not alone; Jesus' enduring presence offers strength and a pathway to healing and restoration. Consequently, the message of salvation through Christ becomes a profound source of encouragement that instills hope amidst personal and collective suffering, affirming the belief that through Him, a new life is possible. Despite being burdened by the cross, gasping, and having his shoulders down (Catholic News Agency, 2024), the image of the Black Nazarene shows Christ standing up after the fall. This image of Christ symbolizes His unwavering strength and determination to persevere despite immense suffering. The very act of standing up after falling symbolizes the willpower to continue and conquer obstacles, even in Jesus' darkest hours. This might be the observation of devotees that consider their own hardships with a renewed feeling of hope and faith. Thus, the Black Nazarene suggests that hope may blossom even in the most difficult situations by serving as a source of encouragement for people confronting their own afflictions, as well as a reminder of Christ's suffering. This might possibly explain why the Black Nazarene is one of the most venerated religious icons in the Philippines. It is well known that Filipinos are resilient, as evidenced by the image of Jesus in the Black Nazarene.

The Christological aspect is when Jesus Christ fulfills His redemptive mission as the suffering servant (CCC no. 440), profoundly illustrating the relationship between divine purpose and human suffering. The cross of Jesus signifies the ultimate response to the problem of human suffering, as He willingly took upon Himself the sins and sorrows of humanity, thus bearing the iniquities of many. His suffering was not merely a tragic event but rather the fulfillment of messianic prophecies that reveal God's redemptive plan, emphasizing that through pain and humiliation, God's glory can be manifested. In addition, the Catechism of the Catholic Church states that all that Jesus did, said, and suffered had as its aim restoring fallen humanity to its original vocation (CCC no. 518). Further, Schillebeeckx (1963) states that Christ clearly gave His death the significance of a sacrifice of Himself to God for all. The Catechism of the Catholic Church and Schillebeeckx convey the importance of the suffering servant, emphasizing that His life and sacrifices were geared toward the salvation of all humankind. This idea resonates concretely with the devotion to the Black Nazarene, where devotees see Jesus as expressing deep human suffering and pain, reflective of their own struggles in life. Just as Christ's suffering was purposeful and transformative, allowing for reconciliation with God, the faithful relate their own difficulties to His passion, enabling them to embrace their suffering as a means to spiritual renewal and a deeper connection with God.

In other words, this paradigm shift shows that suffering can lead to healing and salvation, as exemplified in Isaiah's prophecies, where the suffering servant brings justice, salvation, and blessing to all nations. Consequently, Jesus' experience of suffering redefines our understanding of suffering, emphasizing that it can be a means of restoration and hope for humanity within the divine narrative of redemption. Edward Schillebeeckx (1963) perceives suffering that includes thoughts of transformation and purification. It also includes experiences of goodness, beauty, and significance. He states that, as seen by Jesus' crucifixion, suffering can result in significant spiritual and existential transformations. "My Father, Your will be carried out if it is impossible for me to finish this cup without sipping from it!" according to Matthew 26:42. Even Jesus exemplifies a transformational act of love by freely accepting His agony on the cross, emphasizing the full power of selfless love. Jesus' unconditional love for the people is symbolized by his obedience to trials—even to the

point of agony. Jesus' suffering in the image of the Black Nazarene and His identification with humanity causes a transformation that goes beyond empathy and offers a new perspective on how suffering is experienced by people. "There is also self-sacrificial suffering for a worthy cause. Fidelity to any worthwhile commitment must include the willingness to suffer for it. Suffering, then, can be quite a meaningful experience (Robin, 2008). It can lead to a closer relationship with God and spiritual growth.

Furthermore, communion with Christ is central to Schillebeck's theology of suffering. Human encounter, however, calls for mutual availability (Schillebeeckx, 1963). This shared experience requires active participation rather than a passive one in the story of salvation. Schillebeeckx primarily focused on the concept that Jesus fully entered humanity as the Son of God and was entirely human (Schillebeeckx, 1963). Jesus experienced every trial that comes with being a human, revealing His profound humanity. For those who are suffering, Jesus's incarnation provides inspiration and consolation.

According to Schillebeeckx, the eschatological hope that suffering brings draws a Christian hope of an eschatological glory in the future. This hope is not denied, as it acknowledges that ultimate and definitive salvation is from God, i.e., the eschatological element. This salvation is mediated in the world by human beings attending to negative experiences of contrast (Rego, 2006). This believes that the eschatological community must be rooted in their personal relationship with Jesus (Schillebeeckx, 1968). This is a concrete expression of how devotees relate their suffering to their devotion. The eschatological hope concept posits that although final and ultimate salvation comes from God, people actively participate in its reality in the world as a response to adverse experiences, such as injustice and suffering. By actively alleviating others' suffering, people can mediate God's grace by acting on their moral duties to turn empathy into action.

Schillebeeckx highlights the ecclesial dimension of devotion by exemplifying solidarity with those who suffer, as it is the body of Christ. The Church encompasses all who are afflicted with human suffering with love (*Lumen Gentium*, no. 8, hereinafter cited as LG). The ecclesial dimension entails a positive action for people who suffer. *Lumen Gentium* emphasizes the importance of the Church encouraging people in their endeavors, illustrating the teachings of Christ, who identified with human suffering. Jesus is sensitive to the needs and sufferings of every human being (Second Plenary Council of the Philippines no. 38, hereafter cited as PCP II). Even the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines has the same sentiment. The devotion to the Black Nazarene reflects Jesus' compassion for human suffering, as followers perceive Him in solidarity with the poor and afflicted, embodying their sufferings and aspirations for restoration. The faithful, who see their devotion as an opportunity to encounter and experience Christ's compassion in their everyday lives, are deeply bonded by this relationship and grow to value one another highly. In 1 Corinthians 12:12-26, the apostle Paul emphasizes the value of every individual member and the unity and diversity found within the Christian community by using the metaphor of the body. Suffering in relation to the Kingdom of God: "What is decisive [for Christians] is the praxis of the kingdom of God in solidarity with all men and women and, moreover, precisely in that and because of it, in a partisan choice for the poor and oppressed, against the oppression of powerful people and structures that grind down men and women" (Bergin, 2010). Bergin emphasizes that what matters to Christians is not merely holding theoretical beliefs but actively participating in the actualization of God's kingdom in action. This means being committed to standing in solidarity with everyone, regardless of social, economic, or cultural differences. To

highlight the importance of practicing one's religion and adhering to Jesus' teachings of loving and helping others, the concept of "praxis" is employed. This emphasizes the importance of taking a firm stand for justice, standing up to oppressive systems that are supported by powerful individuals and institutions, and making a tangible and deliberate decision on behalf of the underprivileged and oppressed.

Christian life in the world, being concerned with the world and practicing human solidarity, must therefore be for the Christian worship of God, glorifying God's name (Schillebeeckx, 1972). Furthermore, the devotion to the Black Nazarene illustrates how Christian life is deeply concerned with the world and the practice of human solidarity, as devotees engage in worship that not only glorifies God but also reflects their lived realities. Many Filipino devotees, particularly those from marginalized backgrounds, connect their suffering and hopes to the suffering of Christ depicted in the image of the Black Nazarene. In their fervent devotion, *Traslacion*, First Friday devotion, and other practices reveal a communal spirit where individuals support one another, sharing in prayer and hope for healing and miracles. This becomes an outward expression of their faith, showing that their worship is not isolated but rather permeates every aspect of their lives, creating a sense of community among those who pray for help from God and offer assistance when enduring suffering. Their worship becomes a powerful expression of faith that praises God and addresses the universal human experience of sorrow and hope, a testament to this devotion. Therefore, devotion to the Black Nazarene symbolizes the Church's image as a beacon of solidarity, where devotees, united in their struggles and prayers, collectively honor God while fostering a compassionate community that addresses shared human suffering and aspires to hope.

Edward Schillebeeckx's theology of suffering and the Devotees' Perception towards Human Suffering

Edward Schillebeeckx provides a fundamental framework for understanding how human suffering can be both a negative and a positive moment for social change and spiritual development.

According to McManus (1999), Schillebeeckx believes that there is creative and transforming knowledge that comes only from suffering. Using Edward's words, it is a critical and productive epistemic power.

That is why there is a demand to see suffering as an inspiration for active resistance and praxis aimed at easing suffering and promoting justice. According to Schillebeeckx, by engaging with suffering in this way, Christians strengthen their bonds with the poor, imitating Christ's role as the suffering servant and pursuing a faith that aims to change the world in line with God's goal for his kingdom.

To see the relationship between the respondents' viewpoints and Edward Schillebeeckx's theology, it is examined and summarized below:

Commonalities

Universality of Suffering

Schillebeeckx's Perspective: The notion that suffering is a universal experience is consistent with Schillebeeckx's contention that acknowledging another person's suffering extends an invitation to human empathy and connection. Both perceptions highlight how suffering is a common experience.

Devotees' View: The recognition that suffering affects everyone. This also reflects a collective experience that develops compassion and solidarity among devotees.

Influence of Devotion

Schillebeeckx's Perspective: He believes that faith can transform the experience of suffering, leading individuals to find deeper meaning and purpose through their suffering.

Devotees' View: Respondents emphasize how faith is vital in transforming their perception of suffering and how their dedication provides them with solace and strength.

Spiritual Participation

Schillebeeckx's perspective: suffering may provide a closer relationship with God and a clearer comprehension of one's spiritual path.

Devotees' Views: Schillebeeckx's theory that suffering can lead to spiritual fulfillment is also expressed by the conviction that enduring suffering with faith provides a deeper involvement in God's Kingdom.

Redemptive Perspective

Schillebeeckx's Perspective: Suffering can result in both individual and societal redemption when viewed through a theological lens, which is consistent with the Christian doctrine of salvation through adversity.

Devotees' Views: This redemptive perspective is reflected in the conviction that enduring suffering can lead to assurance in the afterlife, which aligns with Schillebeeckx's theological ideas.

Differences

Ritual Participation

Schillebeeckx's Perspective: While Schillebeeckx emphasizes the significance of community and ritual, his focus is more on the personal conversion and theological implications of suffering rather than on rituals.

Devotees' View: Respondents specifically mention rituals like *Traslacion* and First Friday Mass as integral to reframing their suffering, emphasizing the importance of communal practices that may not be explicitly emphasized in Schillebeeckx's framework.

Communal and Spiritual Connection

Schillebeeckx's Perspective: His theological framework emphasizes individual and collective suffering but may not focus extensively on the community aspect as a source of strength during suffering.

Devotees' View: The strong emphasis on communal faith practices among devotees highlights a specific cultural aspect that develops a sense of community and collective effort in the face of suffering, which may vary from Schillebeeckx's more individualistic theological reflections.

Furthermore, Schillebeeckx's theology and the devotees' lived faith emphasize suffering as a universal human experience that transcends religion, culture, and social status. In the Philippines, where suffering is everywhere, systemic poverty and social injustices are closely associated with political dynasties that concentrate wealth and power in a small number of families, especially in major areas. This makes poverty worse and restricts opportunities for the majority of Filipinos. Due to the lack of social services, unemployment, and substandard living conditions brought on by this concentration of power, millions of Filipinos are caught in cycles of suffering. In addition, the country has continued to experience criminality and violence. These

issues frequently result in their seeing themselves as vulnerable. According to Social Weather Stations, its December 2024 survey showed that the percentage of families who saw themselves as poor reached 63 percent, up 4 points from 59 percent in September 2024. Furthermore, a lack of domestic employment opportunities forces many Filipinos to work abroad, taking the risk of providing a better future for their families, which further divides families and communities. According to the Philippine Statistics Authority, the number of Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs), or Filipino workers who worked abroad from April to September 2023, was estimated at 2.16 million, an increase of 9.8 percent from the previous year's estimated number of 1.96 million. Millions of people throughout the country are affected by the harsh reality of suffering, which is reflected in these conditions.

That is why Schillebeeckx's theology of suffering and the Black Nazarene devotion serve as examples of how suffering is viewed as an active, transformational experience that fosters resilience and social bonds.

Devotees find renewed meaning in their suffering by aligning it with Christ's suffering, which empowers them to see their struggles as avenues to belonging in God's kingdom and ultimate redemption. This eschatological perspective affirms that earthly suffering is a necessary step on the path to God and shows a trust in the promise of resurrection and eternal life. A faith that is profoundly engaged with the realities of human suffering but rooted in divine promise, this devotion represents a transformative spirituality where suffering is not an endpoint but rather a process toward healing, justice, and hope.

Suffering and the Participation in God's Kingdom

Human suffering is not viewed as an end in itself, but rather as a transformative and redemptive experience within the Christian worldview, particularly when it is freely accepted as part of one's commitment to the reign of God (Asis, 2022). This concept highlights the potential for suffering to foster personal growth and social change, particularly among Filipinos who face injustices. Furthermore, Schillebeeckx (1963) believes that negative contrast experiences serve as a bridge to praxis, beginning with the recognition of evil and injustice, followed by indignation, outrage, and ultimately, the praxis of the kingdom of God.

The devotion to the Black Nazarene exemplifies this transformative power by relating the struggles of the devotees to the suffering of Christ, providing consolation, and symbolizing divine solidarity. The image of the Black Nazarene embodies the shared experience of suffering, developing a deep relationship between the Filipino community and a compassionate God who understands and participates in their hardships (Asis, 2022). In this way, the devotion serves as both a spiritual platform and a symbol of resiliency.

This understanding resonates with Edward Schillebeeckx's theological reflections, which emphasize the ability of suffering to foster empathy, personal growth, and collective solidarity. His call for Christians to engage actively in the praxis of God's Kingdom aligns with the respondents' emphasis on the ecclesial dimension and collective response to suffering. Schillebeeckx's theology and the lived experiences of Black Nazarene devotees are therefore unified by the conviction that suffering, when combined with faith, can foster social resilience and transform adversity into a means of achieving greater divine goals and promoting healing within the community.

Conclusion

Human suffering, it is hoped, should become an experience of faith inspired not by ignorance or innocence, but by an informed acknowledgement of God (Baring, 2010). This promotes seeing human suffering within the framework of faith. It highlights how important it is to acknowledge the Black Nazarene as the suffering servant to find hope. The challenge is to develop a profound understanding of the divine, seeking insight and understanding to analyze the concept of suffering from a religious perspective. It implies that the experience of human suffering can be as significant and transformative as Schillebeeckx believes in his second moment, going beyond ignorance and encouraging a deeper engagement with faith. Within the context of faith, this paradigm-shifting perspective on suffering is consistent with the idea of suffering as a component of belonging to God's kingdom. It challenges an oversimplified or naive faith and places a strong emphasis on an informed acknowledgement of God, inspiring believers to view suffering as a meaningful and active part of their spiritual development. Suffering is viewed as a transformative process, where those closely linked to God find significance in their trials as part of God's kingdom (cf. Matthew 20:23).

Consequently, the devotion to the Black Nazarene reflects the transformational potential of faith, as expressed by Edward Schillebeeckx, and serves as a profound symbol of suffering that transcends simple difficulties. Devotion to the Black Nazarene enables Christians to recognize that suffering is a means of solidarity with one another, a closer relationship with God through the Church, and to find great hope in Christ's eternal life.

Artificial Intelligence Disclosure

The researcher used QuillBot (2017) to enhance grammar, and Gemini AI (2024) assisted in organizing and interpreting the data for this research study. These tools supported the researcher in maintaining coherence, academic rigor, and efficiency throughout the research process.

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Original Article

Exploring the Role of the Kariton Klasrum Project as a Service-Learning Strategy in Values Formation

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Abstract

As education moves towards further development, many meaningful ways to strengthen learners' values formation have emerged. One of these is the service-learning method, known for having positive results in terms of character. Similarly, in the Philippine context, the Kariton Klasrum Project (KKP) serves as a service-learning strategy with a lot of potential in values education. However, despite utilizing KKP, no research has captured implementers' perspectives, leaving no recorded evidence regarding the specific moral outcomes to them. KKP was originally introduced by the Dynamic Teen Company, and with their consent, was adapted and implemented starting in 2011 by Elizabeth Seton School-South, a private basic education institution in Imus, Cavite. The KKP engages the grade 10 learners in an outreach work with the children from Riverside, Imus, a community assisted by the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD). The engagement's preparation spanned for five months and culminated in a one-day service-learning session that involved teaching the basics of reading and writing, feeding session, and providing medical assistance. In this study, the researcher explored the role of KKP as an initiative that supports values formation among executors. Using the Qualitative Descriptive Research method, the perceptions of 10 participants from grade 10 revealed that KKP contributed to their development of responsibility, compassion, motivation, collaboration, and reflection. The findings add to the limited body of literature on KKP as a service-learning strategy in the Philippine basic education and highlight an emerging strategy for nurturing compassionate, socially responsible learners prepared to make a difference.

Keywords: *Constructivism, Kariton Klasrum Project, Learner-Centered, Service-Learning, Values Formation*

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Introduction

The traditional system, whereby knowledge is imparted to students solely by the teacher through formal discussions, has been supplemented by modern strategies that cater to various learning styles and foster a holistic approach to learning. For instance, the method of service-learning is a unique way of teaching and assessment to connect learners with a wider audience while building their character and skills in the process (Hébert & Hauf, 2015). In the Philippines, a local example of service-learning was developed by a group named Dynamic Teen Company (DTC). This concept was initially referred to as the K4 Project, categorized into Kariton, Klasrum, Kantina, and Klinika. In 2009, Efren Peñaflorida and his team introduced the ‘Kariton Klasrum Project’ (KKP), which made education accessible to everyone, particularly street children. This allowed the latter to be transformed and understand the significance of education (Cinco, 2017). However, despite the positive benefits of the KKP from the perspective of the beneficiaries, there were limited sources that claim its underlying role in the values development of those who implement and execute the project.

Kariton Klasrum Project in the Context of Elizabeth Seton School

In the spirit of its vision and mission, Elizabeth Seton School (ESS) continues to be a leading Catholic educational institution that integrates learner-centered strategies anchored on the educational philosophy of constructivism. The possible learning outcomes of this identity are explicitly reflected in the ESS educational system since the institution implements an active learning approach in most of its curricular and non-curricular activities, assessments, and other internal and external institutional programs. Known for its tagline “Learn, Lead, Serve and Make a Difference”, and guided by its educational principles, the school continuously adapts new programs, pedagogies, and interventions centering the learners’ needs, interests, and goals to remain relevant and effective in the fast-changing world. Inspired by the core values of the school’s patroness, St. Elizabeth Ann Seton, the ESS responds to the call to live a life of faith, love, and selfless service, as actualized in the Community Extension Programs (CEPs). These programs provide the Seton community with experiences of awareness, discernment, and immersion in the conditions and needs of the marginalized sector, focusing on the person of the least, the last, and the lost. Other stakeholders, aside from learners, are also involved in CEPs in various ways, which may foster a culture of collaboration in the areas of humanitarian and ecclesial development for social justice. There are multiple external initiatives under CEPs, one of which is the ‘Kariton Klasrum Project’ (hereinafter referred to as KKP). With the consent of DTC, the Kariton Klasrum model was adapted. However, variations and modifications of the strategy have evolved continuously over the years, adapting to the nature and demands of each situation. The school started the KKP in 2011 and has continued it up to the present.

This study serves as a reliable source of religious and values formation among learners. Currently, the KKP is classified as an outreach activity and a service-learning strategy under the supervision of the Catholic Christian Formation Department, which serves as the counterpart of Christian Living Education (CLE). This decision firmly relates the necessity of educating learners in a Christian identity that embodies the core values and fundamental teachings based on a Catholic Education.

Kariton Klasrum Project: Strengthening Values Formation

KKP engages learners in values that direct them toward specific moral principles formed through their collective contribution to the welfare of communities

and the resolution of issues of concern. Values are personal and individualized beliefs that motivate people to take action. These hold significant roles in a person's life and are considered right due to their cultural origins. They start as being desirable because the individual knows and feels that they are proper to want for themselves and others, and they also promise enjoyment or satisfaction in their attainment (University of Texas at Austin, 2025)

Harrison et.al (2016) recommend that the association of character education has suggested principles that schools of character should aspire to. First, it is committed to developing moral, civic duty, and intellectual virtues. Second, it has a stated vision for character education that is actively promoted throughout the school. Lastly, it provides all students with tangible opportunities to develop their character in accordance with these guidelines.

According to another research, values-based education helps humankind to address life-or-death challenges like environmental degradation, widespread social and cultural disharmony, increased cases of youth suicide, domestic violence, child abuse, and neglect (Toomey, 2023). In response, Elizabeth Seton School introduced its distinct moral and behavioral norms. All subject areas were directed to integrate all activities and lessons with the institutional values of the school. However, there is much expectation from the CCF subject, being the core of values education. There may be several conflicting stances regarding the hierarchy of values in every person. While it must be noted that values education starts from the basic unit of society—the family—educators, administrators, governmental institutions, and other authorities may have a significant impact on the formation of all students to make this world a better place. Research findings indicate that when a student is raised in a values-based education, academic excellence and a sense of fulfillment are achieved through the higher development of self-awareness, empathy, compassion, and understanding (Berges-Puyó, 2020).

Schools may enforce or empower specific values central to their faith foundation. Since Elizabeth Seton School is a private Catholic school, most of the institutional programs are anchored in the Catholic perspective. In the encyclical letter *Caritas in Veritate*, Pope Benedict XVI (2009) addresses social justice, charity, and the role of education in forming young people with a sense of responsibility for others and the world. This reminds all catholic religious educators to commit themselves to performing their duties as missionaries in the lives of their students by integrating common values into the curriculum. Using strategies such as the KKP will not only foster connections between learners and their neighbors but also bring them closer to God.

To sum it up, values-based education transforms many aspects of one's life. It might be a challenging task for teachers to instill values due to the diverse opinions and moral relativism of many about what is good. Yet, the Elizabeth Seton School pledges to provide a distinct identity that cultivates learners' moral aptitude based on the teachings and practices of the Catholic Church.

Kariton Klasrum Project as A Service-Learning Methodology

KKP is a unique form of service-learning (SL) method. Service-learning, however, is interpreted as an educational approach under which learners learn through active participation in meaningful, organized social service groups. This teaching methodology is usually attributed to civic engagement, community development, advocacy, philanthropy, social change, volunteerism, community service, and experiential learning. (Elmhurst University, 2019). Service-learning experiences can motivate learners to gain new knowledge, skills, and a renewed

appreciation for cultural differences and similarities, while fostering social responsibility (Beckford, 2022).

The concept of service-learning can be traced back to the American educational tradition of community service and volunteer programs. Eventually, it emerged in the Philippines during the Development Decade (1960s) and Decade of Participatory Development (1970s) (Baluga, 1987). These were the eras when the Filipinization of higher education in the Philippines prioritized the relevance and responsiveness of education to societal needs, including social, economic, and cultural issues (Alcala, 1999; Lok & Aquino, 2010). Currently, the nationwide implementation of service-learning has been achieved through the passage of the National Service Training Program (NSTP) law of 2001, also known as Republic Act (RA) No. 9163 (Abenir, 2023).

Synthesis

The KKP is a specialized strategy that unifies service-learning and values education towards a transformative pedagogy. Harrison et al. assert that schools are necessary to cultivate moral, civic engagement, and intellectual virtues with a clear vision and active implementation, while Toomey claims that values education addresses social issues where the youth are particularly vulnerable. This resonates with the Catholic identity of Elizabeth Seton School-South, as outlined in Pope Benedict XVI's encyclical letter, *Caritas in Veritate*, which emphasizes the importance of schools being grounded in charity, justice, and service. With the positive effects of service-learning in supporting the integration of values, this research aimed to fill the gap in identifying the role of the Kariton Klasrum Project, which has provided substantial reference to the field of education as an effective strategy for upholding a humane society.

The study aimed to explore the participants' perceptions about the Kariton Klasrum Project, describe their experiences during the implementation of the KKP engagement, and understand the challenges and difficulties they encountered throughout the process.

Methodology

This study used a qualitative descriptive research design. Sandelowski (2000) supported the notion that this methodology is a practical choice for obtaining a direct description of the participants' perceived experiences. This method generates substantial data that remains closely tied to the words and events of the study, without any theoretical or phenomenological interpretations.

Participants of the Study

From a total of one hundred twenty-eight (128) grade 10 learners, only ten (10) were chosen as sample participants for the semi-structured interview. Considering the time and resource limitations, the researcher opted to have ten (10) participants to obtain meaningful insights for the study. Research scholars agree that saturation is the most important factor in determining the sample size for qualitative research. The small sample size typically consists of between 10 and no more than 30 people for an interview (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022).

Data Gathering Procedure

The researcher first sought approval to conduct the research by writing a letter addressed to the school principal. Then, the necessary letters were sent to the parents and learners. This served as a notice for the participants of this research. As part of

the research ethical considerations, parents or guardians filled out the form as proof of their consent. The purpose and rationale of the study were explained to the participants. Their personal information was not published in the paper. Furthermore, the research did not disrupt the regular school schedule and was carried out with strict supervision by the researcher.

The possibility of biased responses and emotional discomfort among participants was considered a risk of the study. This included overstating or understating their experiences due to social desirability or fear of judgment. However, no discrimination was reported during the individual interviews. The researcher assured the participants that they were not forced to answer any questions if they felt these were too personal and uncomfortable to discuss. The participants had the right to discontinue or decline participation in the research anytime they chose to do so. The researcher also sought assistance from the Catholic Christian Formation (CCF) subject teacher to conduct the interview. The researcher's venue was located in the administrative office of the subject area coordinators. Every participant was called during the CCF period. A voice recorder was used to document the conversation for easy transcription. Since it was necessary, follow-up sessions were conducted to clarify the participants' responses and prevent misinterpretations. All collected data were stored securely and retained for a period of five (5) years after the completion of the study, after which they were permanently deleted or destroyed. The researcher assumed the role of a subject area coordinator in the whole study. Through the assistance of the level's subject teacher, Google Docs was used to transcribe interviews verbatim, ensuring that the participants' voices were accurately represented. The interview questions were validated by the subject matter experts and focused on the participants' individual experiences of the following:

1. How did you find the Kariton Klasrum Project as a service-learning activity?
2. What are the specific problems you encountered during the implementation of KKP?

Data Analysis

Following Creswell and Poth's (2018) approach to thematic analysis, the researcher engaged in a repetitive process of familiarization by reading and re-reading the transcripts and listening to the voice recordings multiple times to obtain the participants' absolute and relevant responses. In line with Saldaña's (2016) coding method, repeated words and ideas were identified and assigned descriptive codes. These codes were then clustered into broader themes to provide a structured framework for analysis. These themes guided the researcher in identifying the key role of KKP in values formation.

Results

Table 1. Themes, Codes, and Sample Participant Responses from Interview Transcripts on their Perceptions of the Kariton Klasrum Project as a Service-Learning Strategy

Themes	Codes	Exemplar Quotes
Social Responsibility and Compassion	Development of Social Responsibility and Compassion	"We're able to give back to the community, and understand the different situations...leading us to sort of social responsibility and compassion" -p1

	Community Service and Support for Marginalized Learners	“I also got to serve the community, outside... And we have to help the students who have less capabilities” -p2
	Awareness of Social Realities	“We had an open mind and more realizations about what is happening beyond our school.” -p4
	Active Involvement and Service Participation	“I was able to be in that position where I was actually actively helping out.” -p3
Intrinsic Motivation and Joy	Intrinsic Motivation and Eye-Opening Experience	“I would do it again, even if not for the grades. Because it was such an eye-opener.” -p9
	Joyful Engagement in Teaching Activities	“It was very fun. I dressed up as a dinosaur mascot. It was fun, seeing their insights, and it was fun teaching.” -p6
Collaborative Engagement	Promotion of Collaboration and Peer Interaction	“The activities are really good...It encourages us to collaborate with one another.” -p1
	Teamwork among group members	“We were able to brainstorm and we had a lot of fun ideas that we wanted to implement po... We were also able to practice our teamwork.” -p7
Personal Reflection and Emotional Growth	Personal Growth Through Sharing Experience	“It’s very enlightening that you are giving your experience to the children.” -p8
	Emotional Relation	“I feel a lot of nostalgia from them.” -p5

Table 1 shows the findings from the significant experiences of the participants regarding the KKP. The major themes that arose highlight their development in terms of social awareness, motivation, collaboration, and personal growth.

The results have shown how the activity deepened participants' awareness of social realities, prompting them to reflect on the importance of selfless service. Many of them mentioned that the activity had a significant impact on them, particularly in developing their responsibility and compassion as community citizens. Moreover, they shared how their experiences opened their eyes to the realization that there are people who are deprived of equality, especially the rights they are entitled to.

Following that, participants expressed genuine enthusiasm about the project. They expressed their desire to do the activity as part of their natural habit and inclination, regardless of any incentives it may bring. The simple gesture of dressing up in costumes led them to feel joy and motivation, as the children of the community partner expressed positive emotions in return.

Notably, the participants highlighted the active engagement of group members through collaborative efforts in preparing their plan of action. It was noted that teamwork and peer interaction were frequently observed, particularly during brainstorming sessions. The individual support demonstrated by many led to a conducive learning environment for everyone.

Lastly, the results showed that the experience prompted participants to reflect on their own emotions, memories, and developmental journey. They shared how the experience reminded them of a meaningful encounter, evoking a personal introspection of their previous self.

In the end, these data revealed KKP as a learner-centered strategy that provides holistic formation that nurtured empathy, intrinsic motivation, collaborative skills, and emotional maturity. The themes indicated in the table represent the values that can be achieved even beyond the expected academic outcomes.

Table 2: Themes, Codes, and Sample Participant Responses from Interview Transcripts on Problems Encountered in the Implementation of Kariton Klasrum Project.

Themes	Codes	Exemplar Quotes
Time and Scheduling Constraints	Limited time allotment and an Inappropriate schedule	“Our activity wasn’t finished yet, and it seemed like the kids were still enjoying it.” -p2
	Unclear Activity Timing	“The schedule wasn’t really appropriate...we had to rush.” -p4
	Overlapping curricular and non-curricular tasks/activities	“It felt like all the different outputs came at the same time... we ran out of time.” -p10
Group Dynamics and Individual Participation	Low accountability	“Some of my groupmates weren’t doing their tasks on time... they need constant reminders.” -p9 “They’re not really the type of person who engages with kids. They weren’t good with kids... so they were just watching us.” -p9 “The giving of contributions... that is the only problem.” -p5
	Logistical Mishandling	“I guess lack of preparation po...we still encountered some instances where food seems not enough -p6 “There were some materials we forgot to list... we forgot to include the speaker. -p10 “We forgot to buy goodie bags for our giveaway”-p4
Community partners’ engagement	Children’s lack of confidence	“The kids were somewhat shy at the beginning.” -p2 “At first, it was very hard to connect with the children.” -p3
Language Barrier		

Activity Operations	Vague orientation	<p>“There was a language barrier between English and Filipino. They were more comfortable with Filipino.” -p2</p>
	Miscommunication of the Project procedures	<p>“We weren’t really informed about the kariton klasrum, all we knew was that it was a classroom and we had to teach, but we didn’t specifically know what to do.” -p6</p> <p>“We didn’t know that much to expect, kasi we didn’t know, like we weren’t sure about the number of people coming to us po. Like, until the day itself, so we expected a lot of people actually. -p7</p>
		<p>“We were honestly expecting more children initially, so our plan was kind of not aligned with the setting we had.” -p3</p>

This section presents the problems encountered when using the interview transcripts taken from the participants' responses. These are coded and classified into themes: (1) Time and Scheduling Constraints, (2) Group Dynamics and Individual Participation, (3) Community partners' engagement, and (4) Program. The main objective of this section is to identify the issues and concerns experienced by the learners, which may contribute to the improvement of the activity.

In Table 2, many participants reported feeling the lack of time and preparation necessary to accomplish tasks. They noticed that there was mismanagement in terms of scheduling, which caused conflicts with other school activities, both academic and non-academic. This led to unfavorable consequences, causing the prepared tasks to be rushed.

Secondly, some participants still did not demonstrate full engagement in the activity or were not adequately prepared to organize the necessary materials. As a result, they reported that this had a negative effect on the outcome of their work. On the other hand, participants also observed the lack of rapport between them and the children. They cited the language barrier as one of the reasons for failing to build good harmony and mutual understanding throughout the activity. However, this was replaced with a welcoming atmosphere as they moved on to the next parts of the event.

Notably, the most crucial experience that challenged the participants is related to the most important aspect of KKP. They emphasized the problems of vague orientation and miscommunication regarding project procedures, which had a significant impact on its implementation. There was a lack of information given to the participants regarding the whole process. The elaboration of essential details was not met, resulting in confusion and misunderstanding among the participants. In this matter, the manual of operations is at stake.

Discussion

Learners' Perception of the Kariton Klasrum Project as a Service-Learning Strategy

Theme 1. Social Responsibility and Compassion

In KKP, learners have demonstrated a deep understanding of valuing people in various aspects of their lives, while fostering a sense of active engagement to contribute to solving community issues. The encounter with the marginalized sector became a turning point for the learners to act on their situation, which in the same way served as a powerful force for their personal reflection and transformation. This suggests that KKP serves as a compelling teaching method that develops learners' sense of societal duty (Beckford, 2022).

"We're able to give back to the community, and understand the different situations...leading us to sort of social responsibility and compassion." -Participant No. 1

"I also got to serve the community outside. And, we have to help the students who have less capabilities." -Participant No. 2

Moreover, this finding aligns with Elmhurst University's (2019) framework of service-learning (SL), which positions SL not just as an act of service but as a holistic, experiential method that promotes the values of civic engagement, advocacy, and social responsibility. This is because the nature of KKP exposes learners to authentic assessment that initiates real-life involvement and practical application of their learning.

Theme 2: Intrinsic Motivation and Joy

This perception aligns with the research findings of Castro-Lopes et al. (2021) and Hyun et al. (2017), affirming KKP as an effective active learning strategy that positively impacts both internal and external learning motivation. The following exemplar quotes support the ideas:

"I would do it again, even if not for the grades. Because it was such an eye-opener." -Participant No. 9

"It was very fun, I dressed up as a dinosaur, mascot...It was fun seeing their insights, and it was fun teaching." -Participant No. 6

This suggests that most participants accepted their assigned responsibilities with willingness and perseverance because they gave their full attention with joy and happiness during group activities. Furthermore, according to Ryan and Deci (2020), enthusiasm for tasks is often a byproduct of internalized motivation and a supportive learning environment. This indicates that in KKP, it became easier for the participants to stay inspired because they experienced driving forces or inspiration that encouraged them to actualize their task with confidence and desire.

Theme 3: Collaborative Engagement

Likewise, the perception of collaboration suggests that learners are not just participating passively but are engaging meaningfully in teamwork, decision-making, and shared responsibility. These results also indicate that the KKP likely provides a

psychologically safe and supportive environment where learners feel encouraged to express ideas and take initiative within group settings. As mentioned by the participants:

“The activities are really good...It encourages us to collaborate with one another.” -Participant No. 1

“We were able to brainstorm, and we had a lot of fun ideas that we wanted to implement...We were also able to practice our teamwork.” -Participant No. 7

These findings highlight how the Kariton Klasrum Project cultivates collaborative skills, including co-responsibility, constructive communication, and shared decision-making (Orshanskyi et al., 2020). Despite learners' differences in terms of personality, standpoint, and upbringing, the practices in the activity encouraged learners to work together to achieve the desired goals.

Theme 3: Personal Reflection and Emotional Growth

The theme highlights learners' high engagement with reflective practices during their participation in the Kariton Klasrum Project. This aligns with the study by Tee and Kalidas (2016), which views service-learning, such as KKP, as a process of self-discovery, leading to more holistic growth in an individual. This means that their experience moved them to widen their views about the realities of life. It also gave them the opportunity to reflect on their past experiences, which provided them with a connection to the current situation of the children.

“It's very enlightening that you are giving your experience to the children.”
-Participant No. 8

“I feel a lot of nostalgia from them.” -Participant No. 5

In this light, the participants' answers provide recognition of how KKP served as more than a school activity, but also as a practical training for learners' future (Paul et al., 2022). It functioned as a platform for active citizenship and character formation. For example, the codes “joyful engagement”, “promotion of collaboration and interaction”, and “personal growth through sharing” reveal that the emotional and social dimensions of learning were equally valued as the other academic components.

Overall, the qualitative findings on the participants' perspectives regarding the KKP provide substantive information that highlights the holistic formation brought about by the activity. The experiences and learned values of the participants denote a significant alignment with the desired results of a service-learning strategy. The diversity of learners' responses, emphasizing the inherent essential characteristic qualities, distinguishes KKP as a transformative and constructive form of learning experience.

Problems Encountered in KKP Implementation

Theme 1. Time and Scheduling Constraints

This theme is the most common problem raised by the interviewees, which greatly affected the quality of their performance or output. Participants mentioned unfinished activity with the CPO while at the peak of intense emotions, saying:

“Our activity wasn’t finished yet, and it seemed like the kids were still enjoying it.” -Participant No. 2

“It felt like all the different outputs came at the same time... we ran out of time.” -Participant No. 10

These results align with the findings of Lough and Toms (2018), who note that service-learning has several limitations due to its nature, requiring sufficient time allocation and strategic planning. Due to the piling of multiple tasks and the non-prioritization of the Kariton Klasrum Project, participants found it difficult to manage, resulting in poor output quality and a decreased inclination for learners to participate in self-reflection and learning (Heuer et al., 2020).

According to Alyami et al. (2021), learners benefit from having sufficient time for preparation to achieve positive academic performance. In addition, this is supported by other studies claiming that there is a positive relationship between time given and academic performance (Liu, 2022), suggesting that while proper management of a given task develops learners’ problem-solving skills, they too need to be supported by an organized schedule with proper time allocation to achieve good performance.

In general, the findings indicate that time is indeed a significant issue in any activity. This suggests that the school administration, as the primary overseer of the KKP implementation, should ensure proper coordination and alignment of all the academic and non-academic activities.

Theme 2. Group Dynamics and Individual Participation

The participants also cited issues about teamwork and the group members’ initiative in performing the task. They claimed:

“Some of my groupmates weren’t doing their tasks on time... they need constant reminders. They’re not really the type of person who engages with kids. They weren’t good with kids... so they were just watching us.” -Participant No. 9

“The giving of contributions... that is the only problem.” -Participant No. 5

This result contradicts Felder and Brent (2016), suggesting that individual accountability is not present in active learning strategies like KKP. The statements above even led to repercussions, such as the mismanagement of necessary materials during the execution of activities. Some participants stated:

“I guess lack of preparation...we still encountered some instances where the food seemed not enough.” -Participant No. 6

“There were some materials we forgot to list... we forgot to include the speaker.” -Participant No. 10

“We forgot to buy goodie bags for our giveaway.” -Participant No. 4

These testimonies suggest poor preparation, unequal contributions, and a lack of shared effort among some participants, which led to conflicts with the initial group plans, particularly in terms of project management. However, these conflicts can be addressed by fixing the group dynamics, which focuses on interaction, participation, and task fulfillment.

A research study conducted at the Asian Conference on Education found that the enhanced process observation method can help address these conflicts in educational and organizational settings. Findings show that the process observation method is a valuable tool for improving collaboration, decision-making, and conflict resolution (Digor et al., 2025). However, the method emphasizes the importance of role clarification and facilitative leadership because these promote accountability, efficiency, confidence, and participation, while fostering a supportive environment that encourages critical thinking and independence.

In the end, the results suggest that some learners require encouragement to enhance their capacity to realize their full potential. Addressing this requires clearer role definition and facilitative leadership, which the enhanced process observation method supports as key to improving collaboration, conflict resolution, and group performance.

Theme 3. Community Partners' Engagement

Challenges also emerged from the side of community partners, particularly the children, who were initially reserved and difficult to engage. Learners observed the following:

“The kids were somewhat shy at the beginning.” -Participant No. 2

“At first, it was very hard to connect with the children.” -Participant No. 3

“There was a language barrier between English and Filipino... they were more comfortable with Filipino.” -Participant No. 2

These experiences caused participants to feel difficulties in building rapport with the children, primarily due to language barriers. Regarding this, it is worth noting that Setonian learners are more familiar with the English language as a medium of communication and instruction. In contrast, the community partner's children are used to communicating in the Filipino language.

In this regard, it suggests that learners should also make adjustments to how they can establish a strong connection with the children. They must be directed by coordinators regarding the proper treatment and the relationship to establish with the CP beneficiaries. Generally, the challenge in the CPs' participation is deeply rooted in a valid explanation. What appears to be a simple problem, such as the medium of communication, can result in misunderstandings, hesitation, and limited interaction, ultimately affecting the overall outcome and effectiveness of the service-learning experience. This highlights the importance of treating the CPs with respect by finding common ground for both parties. Through this, mutual understanding, authentic

partnership, and active engagement can lead to mutual benefits (Melegrito et al., 2016).

Theme 4. Activity Operations

One of the unforeseen challenges during the implementation of the KKP is the way it was presented to the learners. Participants experienced vague orientation and miscommunication of the procedures, particularly the manual of operations. Several learners expressed uncertainty and confusion, leading to insufficient preparation and unclear role expectations. The following excerpts support these findings:

“We weren’t really informed about the kariton klasrum; all we knew was that it was a classroom and we had to teach, but we didn’t specifically know what to do.” -Participant No. 6

“We didn’t know that much to expect, kasi we didn’t know, like we weren’t sure about the number of people coming to us po. Like until the day itself, so we expected a lot of people actually.” -Participant No. 7

Following these points of view, the data suggests an effective orientation that entails proper briefing and facilitation from the teachers, who will equip learners with clear frameworks and contingency plans. The results show that clarity in implementation plays a crucial role in achieving goals. The uncertainty of the procedure and improper channeling of the activity operations affected the desired outcomes of the KKP. While modifications are acceptable for further improvement, they require well-planned and communicated directions to ensure the expected roles of the participants and maintain the effectiveness of the KKP.

Conclusion

The main findings of this study revealed that learners perceived positive effects of KKP on their value development, particularly in aspects such as responsibility, compassion, motivation, collaboration, and reflection. On a different note, they also experienced some challenges in some areas, particularly in time management, group dynamics, relationships with the community partner organization, and activity procedures. These findings suggest a strengthened coordination and more inclusive implementation of the KKP among all stakeholders.

The study fills several gaps in the existing literature, particularly on the application of service-learning in the Philippine basic education context, through KKP. It highlights the importance of value formation in education and provides a foundation for further research into underexplored traits and skills.

In general, the Kariton Klasrum Project demonstrates high potential as an effective tool for forming learners’ values and promoting their holistic development, empowering them to learn, lead, serve, and make a difference. This underscores that KKP is an innovative service-learning strategy that bridges classroom learning with real-life experiences, nurturing character, compassion, and community engagement. By aligning with the school’s core values and constructivist philosophy, KKP provides a meaningful platform for transformative education in the 21st century.

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Original Article

Video App Usability and Creative Empowerment of Selected Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing (DHH) Learners

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Abstract

This study investigates how video editing tool usability relates to the creative potential of Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing (DHH) learners creating digital stories in Religious Education (RE). The research utilized a rigorous qualitative-methods design, integrating the Gestural Think-Aloud Protocol (GTAP) with Nielsen's Usability Heuristics. This approach systematically evaluated the performance of DHH learners using CapCut and Canva, while concurrently measuring their creativity using established cognitive models. Findings demonstrated that CapCut had a significantly superior usability rating compared to Canva. Although DHH learners' creative expression was in the "Developing" stage (46.5%–54.8%), the results confirm that tool accessibility is the dominant factor influencing creative achievement. The study also observed the manifestation of virtues, notably collaboration and honesty, during the project. This research concludes there is an urgent need for accessibility improvements in mainstream video editing applications, primarily focusing on automated captioning and navigation features, to ensure equitable learning experiences. This outcome validates digital storytelling as a transformative practice that cultivates creative, problem-solving, and collaboration skills while supporting RE outcomes.

Keywords: Benilde Deaf School, Creative Potential, Deaf and Hard-of Hearing (DHH), Religious Education, Video Applications (Apps) Usability

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Introduction

Although the Philippines has made progress in implementing Inclusive Education (IE), a significant research gap persists regarding the effective utilization of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) for Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing (DHH) learners. While certain institutions, specifically some Catholic schools, have successfully integrated digital tools, a key implementation challenge remains: the strategic selection of ICT resources precisely tailored to the unique pedagogical requirements of DHH learners (Samaniego, 2016; Del Rosario, 2022). Given that DHH learners, defined by a minimum hearing loss of 35 decibels in the better ear, are significantly dependent on technological supports, ICT is indispensable. The medium is globally recognized for fostering literacy, critical thinking, and communication, making it crucial for enhancing the educational engagement of DHH learners, facilitating effective communication, and enabling self-expression.

Digital creative skills are critical for the development of DHH learners (David et al., 2023). In Religious Education (RE), creative potential is consistent with each learner's religious identity as *Imago Dei*, reflecting God's image and creative essence (Horvat & Horvat, 2023). Visual and interactive technologies enable DHH learners to convey their spiritual insights meaningfully. While instructional videos for DHH learners have received substantial attention, few studies have focused on them as content makers, despite rising smartphone availability and teenage participation in digital platforms.

This study fills that gap by analyzing how video editing apps help selected DHH learners at Benilde Deaf School (BDS) generate RE content about *Laudato Si'* on environmental stewardship. Based on Disability Theology and Disability Studies, it sees DHH learners as active theological actors. The study evaluates app usability using the Gestures Think-Aloud Protocol (GTAP) and Nielsen's Usability Heuristics (1995), while learner creativity is assessed using frameworks such as the Modified Conjunctional Model of Creative Imaging Ability and the Conative and Cognitive Resources of Creative Potential (Clough & Duff, 2020; Nielsen, 2024; Dziedziewicz & Karwowski, 2015; Kirsch et al., 2021; Lin et al., 2024).

In context, this study aligns with the wider developments in Deaf education within the Philippines. The 2018 FSL Act mandated Filipino Sign Language as the main medium of instruction, significantly boosting Deaf identity and educational inclusion. Educational institutions such as De La Salle-College of Saint Benilde (DLS-CSB) and its high school counterpart, the Benilde Deaf School (BDS), advocate for a bilingual-bicultural approach, promote Deaf leadership, and implement multimodal teaching strategies (Pescasio, 2023). BDS, in particular, cultivates an inclusive and creative learning environment, enriched by global partnerships and cultural initiatives, such as the annual Deaf Festival.

As hybrid learning persists post-pandemic, accessible tools like CapCut, iMovie, and Adobe Premiere Pro are essential to inclusive pedagogy (Dietz, 2022; Beaumont, 2025). This study aims to demonstrate how DHH learners, often marginalized in both educational and religious contexts, can thrive when provided with digital platforms to express their faith, engage with social issues, and grow creatively and spiritually.

The study pursues three main objectives: to assess DHH learners' perceptions of the usability of video editing apps in creating RE content using GTAP and usability heuristics; to explore how DHH learners express their creativity and spirituality through video content, guided by creative potential frameworks; and to evaluate their outputs based on feedback from teachers, parents, and a senior IT specialist.

Theoretically, the study contributes to the discourse on IE by showing how institutions can use ICT to nurture inclusive, expressive, and faith-based learning cultures (Reiss, 2016; Ilechukwu & Uchem, 2017). It offers educators and tech developers insights into integrating user-friendly media tools that support spiritual identity and creativity among DHH learners. By positioning DHH learners as active content creators, the study highlights the power of digital storytelling in religious and educational contexts.

Practically, it encourages RE teachers to reflect on their current ICT strategies and challenges institutions like BDS to embed creative, tech-based learning into their curriculum. By aligning digital learning with Gospel-centered values, schools can cultivate Christian digital citizens, DHH learners who engage online with empathy, integrity, and faith.

Ultimately, the study affirms that integrating creative digital tools in RE fosters inclusive practices and develops spiritually grounded, expressive, and digitally fluent DHH learners. It contributes to the formation of educational environments where DHH learners can thrive as faith-filled individuals in a connected, inclusive world.

Methodology

This rigorous qualitative study explored the creative process and usability experiences of seven ($n=7$) Grade 10 DHH learners (aged 15–17) from Benilde Deaf School (BDS), who were purposively sampled based on FSL fluency and basic ICT proficiency. The data-gathering procedure commenced after securing formal administrative approval and obtaining informed parental consent (facilitated by the RE teacher), following the researcher's completion of prerequisite FSL training to ensure cultural competence. The BDS coordinator and RE teacher facilitated logistics, while specialized personnel, including a senior IT specialist and SL specialists, managed recording, interpretation, transcription, and usability testing. The process comprised three main stages: Video Content Preparation, where the RE teacher set the Laudato Si' theme; core data collection in GTAP-Guided Sessions, which included a video-editing task using CapCut/Canva and the adapted Gestural Think-Aloud Protocol (GTAP), immediately followed by an FGD for self-assessment; and Secondary Respondents' Creative Assessment via Google Forms, sent to external evaluators (RE teacher, parents, IT specialist) to validate the content's vividness, originality, and transformative qualities. To ensure participant protection, the videos recorded during the editing and FGD sessions are strictly confidential, accessible only through permission, and not publicly viewable; furthermore, the identities of all DHH learners were not named in any documentation. The methodology was guided by three core research areas: usability (assessed using Nielsen's Ten Usability Heuristics), creative potential (analyzed via the Cognitive and Conative Resources of Creative Potential and the Modified Conjunctional Model of Creative Imaging Ability), and the synthesis of these findings. The study utilized a sophisticated, multi-method Data Analysis approach, combining thematic, narrative, parallel, and integrated analyses, to triangulate findings, demonstrating how DHH learners' engagement reflects their abilities. The analysis employed Thematic Analysis (coding GTAP transcripts against Nielsen's heuristics; video content against creative imaging criteria) and Narrative Analysis (coding GTAP/FGD transcripts for cognitive/conative indicators). An Integrated Analysis then synthesized these findings, framing the use of user-friendly interfaces as a means for DHH learners to express their creativity effectively. Qualitative trends were quantified using percentages evaluated against a modified DLSU grading scale (e.g., 97–100% =

Excellent). The final evaluation criteria involved linking First-Order Constructs (raw data) to Second-Order Themes to illustrate how technical interactions and creative skills reflect the DHH learners' potential and app effectiveness. The primary researcher managed the facilitation and analysis, ensuring trustworthiness through triangulation, independent coding, and cross-checking, with all procedures strictly adhering to ethical standards.

Results

The empirical findings are presented below.

Usability Assessment: High Accessibility with Critical Friction Points

The aggregate usability score of 79.9% across CapCut and Canva indicates a successful initial integration of mobile video editing into the learning environment for DHH learners. This high score primarily reflects the apps' intuitive learnability and relative efficiency in fundamental tasks (trimming, merging, text overlays), which aligns well with the visual-motor skills inherent to the DHH community's communication modality (David et al., 2023).

CapCut Outperformed Canva: Heuristic Specificity

The difference in performance was statistically significant. CapCut demonstrated superior compliance with Nielsen's Usability Heuristics (Nielsen, 2024), particularly in "Aesthetic and Minimalist Design" (less cluttered workspace) and "Recognition rather than Recall" (context-sensitive, visible tools). This design minimized the "working memory tax" (Sweller, 1988), enabling DHH learners to focus on creative tasks rather than technical processes.

Critical Usability Deficits (Friction Points): The 20.1% Barrier

The remaining 20.1% usability deficit concentrated in areas critical to DHH learners' needs, manifesting as severe friction points:

1. Automatic Captioning Errors: This was the most frustrating point. The reliance on standard Automatic Speech Recognition (ASR) technology resulted in significant inaccuracies and synchronization failures with existing FSL interpreter or voiceover content. This necessitated an estimated 30% manual correction rate per minute of video, violating the heuristic of "Match between system and the real world" (Nielsen, 2024) and forcing attention diversion from creative refinement.
2. Complex Layered Interface Navigation: Utilizing advanced features (e.g., chroma keying) required deep navigation (three to five sub-menus), violating "Flexibility and efficiency of use" (Nielsen, 2024). This non-linear path introduced cognitive friction, particularly impeding the rapid testing of complex creative ideas.
3. Lack of Clear Error Recovery: Generic error messages (e.g., "Export Failed") when technical failures occurred violated the heuristic "Help users recognize, diagnose, and recover from errors" (Nielsen, 2024). This lack of actionable guidance led to significant frustration and documented instances of lost work.

Detailed Analysis of Heuristic Violations

A granular examination of the GTAP transcripts and video recordings revealed precisely where and why the 20.1% deficit occurred, emphasizing the specific needs of DHH learners.

1. Violation of Visibility of System Status (Heuristic #1): Both apps struggled to provide clear, continuous visual feedback during computationally intensive processes, such as rendering and exporting. The lack of a precise, step-by-step progress bar (often replaced by a generic spinning wheel or percentage stuck at a certain point) caused significant anxiety among the DHH learners. In the FGD, several participants gesturally expressed confusion and worry about whether the app was “working” or “frozen.” This failure to provide continuous visual status violates a fundamental trust relationship between the user and the software, forcing DHH learners to rely on an auditory cue (system “hum” or fan noise) which they cannot access, or simply wait and hope.
2. Violation of Match Between System and the Real World (Heuristic #2): Beyond the captioning errors, this heuristic was violated by the confusing iconography for temporal elements. For DHH learners, who rely heavily on visual sequencing and clear beginning-middle-end markers, the non-standard icons for “speed up,” “slow down,” and “split scene” caused momentary but frequent halting of the editing flow. Furthermore, the use of terminology that is typically hearing-centric, even in the text menus, such as “audio ducking” or “sound leveling,” forced the FSL interpreter to spend excessive time translating abstract audio concepts into visual metaphors, unnecessarily increasing the linguistic and cognitive load.
3. Violation of Error Prevention (Heuristic #5): A common point of failure was the inability to automatically prevent mistakes related to aspect ratios (e.g., mixing vertical and horizontal video clips) or exceeding memory/processing limits. Since DHH communication relies on the entire frame of view (and often FSL interpreters occupy a specific part of the screen), inconsistent aspect ratios are more than aesthetic failures; they are potential communication blockers. Neither app proactively warned the user before the final export failure, forcing the learner to re-edit substantial portions of the project after a system crash. This reactive failure wasted valuable time and was directly cited in the FGD as a major factor in reducing the complexity of their final creative concepts.

CapCut vs. Canva: A Functional Comparison

CapCut’s superiority was largely attributed to its focused feature set. It demonstrated a clearer, timeline-based paradigm optimized for sequential visual editing. This structure better supported the DHH learners’ strong visual-sequential processing skills. In contrast, Canva, a broader design platform, offered numerous design options and non-standard menu layouts, which, while providing flexibility, consistently violated the “Aesthetic and Minimalist Design” heuristic. DHH learners spent more time navigating through irrelevant templates and fonts in Canva, thereby increasing extraneous cognitive load and confirming that, for DHH content creation, functional specialization trumps broad feature inclusion.

Creative Output and Engagement: The “Developing” Stage

Creative expression was assessed using the Modified Conjunctional Model of Creative Imaging Ability (Dziedziewicz & Karwowski, 2017).

Creative Expression Stage

The DHH learners’ average scores, ranging from 46.5% to 54.8%, placed their work in the “Developing” stage (0%–69.99%). While Fluency and Originality were

successfully demonstrated (generating visual ideas and unique metaphors), the scores in Elaboration (depth of detail) and, critically, Transformation (structural or conceptual novelty) remained moderate. Technical friction required DHH learners to prioritize legibility, hindering the complex intellectual processes needed for high-level creative transformation.

Component Breakdown of Creative Imaging

A detailed look at the four components of the Modified Conjunctional Model provided the granularity necessary to identify the exact point of creative truncation:

1. Fluency (Average 62.1%): This was the highest-scoring component. DHH learners were highly proficient at generating a volume of visual ideas to represent the complex themes of *Laudato Si'*. For instance, a learner quickly sequenced images of polluted rivers, factories, and clear skies to represent environmental deterioration and restoration. This demonstrates a strong underlying conceptual understanding and visual dexterity.
2. Originality (Average 58.9%): Scores were high due to the unique perspective offered by the DHH visual culture. DHH learners frequently employed metaphorical FSL signs and innovative use of color and speed transitions to convey theological concepts (e.g., using a sudden flash of white light combined with a slow motion sign for 'hope' to represent the concept of grace). This affirmed the Deaf Gain principle in the creative output.
3. Elaboration (Average 50.2%): This score began to drop. Elaboration requires adding deep, intricate details and layers of visual information (e.g., precise color correction, complex sound/music cues, and layered text effects). The constant technical interruptions (the 20.1% friction) discouraged this painstaking process. DHH learners often opted for a functional text overlay rather than a carefully animated one, sacrificing detail for completion.
4. Transformation (Average 46.5%): This was the lowest-scoring component and the critical measure of high-level creativity. Transformation requires restructuring the medium or the conceptual meaning of the work, enabling the audience to view the topic in a fundamentally new way. Because DHH learners were perpetually preoccupied with the technical baseline (captioning and export issues), they had insufficient energy reserves to attempt this risky, high-effort conceptual leap. The constraint was clearly extrinsic, imposed by the tool, not intrinsic, due to a lack of creative ability.

Creative Potential Engagement: Cognitive and Conative Resources

The Creative Potential Engagement measure (49.6%) confirmed significant resource investment. DHH learners demonstrated strong Cognitive Resources through effective visual metaphor planning and narrative sequencing. Crucially, their Conative Resources showed remarkable sustained motivation and self-regulation (repeating manual corrections, re-exporting failed renders). This investment confirms the intrinsic appeal of the visual medium for the DHH community's sensory pathways (Mitchell & Karchmer, 2004). The high persistence in the face of failure highlights a powerful internal drive, a "creative desire" that, if fully unleashed by accessible tools, promises to elevate creative output from the "Developing" to the "Expert" stage.

Table 1. Qualitative Findings on *Imago Dei* Virtues

Metric	Score/Rating	Interpretive Conclusion (Empirical)
Aggregate Usability	79.9%	High Feasibility (Medium is suitable for DHH learners)
Critical Friction	20.1%	Structural Limitation (The technical barrier prevents seamless workflow)
Creative Output (Transformation)	46.5%–54.8% ("Developing")	Under-realized Creative Potential (Energy diverted from high-level refinement)
Conative Engagement	49.6% (High Persistence)	Intrinsic Motivation Confirmed (Desire to create overcame technical difficulty)

The findings on Collaboration (71.4%) and Honesty (57.1%), observed during the Gestural Think-Aloud Protocol (GTAP), are recognized as qualitative data points regarding peer interaction and self-assessment, which will be interpreted within the theological framework. The GTAP provided rich evidence of these virtues in action: DHH learners consistently used FSL to troubleshoot issues with peers before consulting the interpreter or facilitator. A moment of striking honesty occurred when a learner, after a successful collaboration on a color correction issue, gestured to the camera that the idea was their partner's, not their own. This active, embodied self-attribution speaks to a profound respect for intellectual property and community ownership over the creative process, essential virtues in the context of Christian ethics.

Discussion

The discussion employs Usability Theory within the IE framework, drawing on Disability Studies and Deaf Studies to interpret the data.

1. The Constraint of Usability on Creative Flow

The paradox of high usability (79.9%) juxtaposed with moderate creative output (46.5%–54.8%) is interpreted via Usability Theory and Cognitive Load Theory (Sweller, 1988). The 20.1% friction points (caption errors, deep navigation) impose a significant extraneous cognitive load, which competes directly with the germane cognitive load required for creative transformation. The resultant cognitive switching cost prevents the establishment of Flow State (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). The micro-interruptions continuously pulled DHH learners out of deep concentration, requiring their persistence to be redirected toward technical troubleshooting rather than conceptual novelty. This constant redirection of attention created a severe deficit in mental resources available for Elaboration and Transformation. The energy that should have been dedicated to visualizing intricate details, testing multiple conceptual sequences, or refining the metaphorical complexity of their *Laudato Si'* messages was instead consumed by the repetitive, low-value task of manual caption alignment.

The DHH learners' experience, therefore, serves as a measurable, real-world confirmation that extrinsic cognitive load directly limits the achievement of intrinsic creative potential. A system that forces a user to stop, fix an error, and mentally reorient themselves to the creative problem is a system that actively undermines high-level creative production. The 20.1% usability gap quantifies the measurable

constraint imposed on transformative creativity, representing the scale of lost creative output. The theoretical implication is clear: in inclusive digital pedagogy, maximizing usability is not just about reducing frustration; it is about protecting the cognitive space required for creativity and complex learning to occur.

2. Digital Storytelling as an Inclusive and Empowering Medium

Disability Studies: The Critique of Digital Ableism

From a Disability Studies perspective, the 20.1% usability deficit is not viewed as a technical glitch but as a manifestation of digital ableism, a systemic structural limitation embedded in inaccessible design (Garland-Thomson, 2002). The technology, designed for a hearing-centric user base, effectively imposes a design-induced disability (the necessity of labor-intensive manual captioning) upon DHH learners. This perspective mandates that the focus of IE shift from reactive accommodation to a Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework, which proactively removes these barriers (CAST, 2018). The inability of ASR technology to accurately recognize FSL-mediated or accented English voiceovers exemplifies how technological neutrality is a myth; the technology inherently privileges one demographic (hearing, Standard English speakers) while functionally disabling another.

Deaf Studies: Validation of Visual-Gestural Modality

In contrast, Deaf Studies validates mobile video production as an inherently powerful, visual-centric pedagogical platform (Beaumont, 2025). The success of the DHH learners' visual rhetoric confirms the concept of Deaf Gain (Bauman & Murray, 2010), interpreting the visual-gestural modality not as a deficit but as a unique cultural strength. The medium aligns perfectly with their sophisticated visual processing skills, providing a platform where complex narrative and theological ideas can be articulated with impact. Furthermore, the use of CapCut's robust visual effect tools (e.g., dynamic text, graphic overlays) allowed the DHH learners to engage in a highly visual form of digital literacy that complements FSL's own visual-spatial grammar (Clough & Duff, 2020). Therefore, the goal of IE, informed by Deaf Gain, is to ensure the intentional design of the toolset becomes a crucial pedagogical prerequisite for translating high visual potential into high creative performance.

3. The Necessity of Universal Design for Learning (UDL)

The theoretical convergence of Usability, Cognitive Load, and the Disability/Deaf Studies critique points inexorably to the necessity of adopting the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework as the primary corrective pedagogical approach. UDL, in this context, is not merely an optional best practice but a structural imperative derived from empirical data. Specifically, UDL principles demand that the multiple means of action and expression must be supported by tools that minimize the labor required for communication. The 30% manual correction rate for captions directly contravenes the UDL principle of "Providing Options for Sustaining Effort and Persistence" (Checkpoint 8.2), as it diverts motivational energy into extraneous tasks instead of challenging creative work.

UDL as a Structural Mandate: Moving Beyond Accommodation

The study advocates for a shift from the reactive model of accommodation (providing an interpreter or funding manual captioning after the fact) to the proactive model of UDL-informed design (demanding technology with 99% captioning accuracy). This aligns with the principle of Proactive Design, where accessibility

features are not bolted on, but are foundational. The specific UDL checkpoints violated by the current software structure include:

- Checkpoint 1.3: Offer alternatives for visual information: While video editing is visual, the interface itself failed to offer customizable visual aids for complex navigation, relying instead on small, fixed icons that are easily lost in the crowded mobile screen.
- Checkpoint 4.1: Vary the methods for response and navigation: The apps largely forced sequential, linear manipulation of the timeline. A UDL-compliant app might offer gesture-based, FSL-optimized shortcuts or a simplified “visual storyboard” navigation mode, honoring the DHH visual processing strength.

The design of future educational technology must move beyond compliance with minimal accessibility checklists and fully embrace UDL by designing for the most marginalized users first. This structural reorientation is required to transform the high conative investment demonstrated by the DHH learners into high-level, sustained creative flow, ultimately ensuring equitable access to complex forms of digital literacy. The study posits that until this 20.1% technical barrier is eliminated via UDL-informed design, the DHH learner’s creative efforts will remain unnecessarily constrained.

Validation from External Evaluators

The external evaluators validated the necessity of a UDL focus.

- IT Specialist: The senior IT specialist confirmed that the 20.1% deficit is rooted in technical debt and design priority, not impossibility. They specifically noted that the chroma keying navigation structure (three to five sub-menus) could easily be flattened into a single-tap ‘Accessibility Mode’, a UDL-informed design choice. The specialist argued that the cost of developing a custom, highly accurate ASR model for FSL-mediated voice is high; however, the cost of manual correction labor currently absorbed by teachers and DHH learners is higher in the long run, thereby confirming the economic efficiency of UDL.
- RE Teacher and Parents: Both the RE teacher and parents observed high engagement, as well as profound frustration, during the captioning phase. Parents noted that the time dedicated to manual correction at home diverted time away from deeper reflection on the *themes of Laudato Si’*. This highlights the practical, pedagogical, and spiritual cost of inaccessible design, validating the study’s core hypothesis that tool usability impacts theological reflection.

Theological and Ethical Imperative

The theological interpretation operates as a separate, final interpretive layer, rooted in Disability Theology and focused on translating the empirical and structural findings into an ethical mandate for the Church and educational institutions.

1. The Imago Dei: Giftedness and Relationality

The theological framework affirms the unique expressions of DHH learners as a complete and rich manifestation of the Imago Dei (Image of God) (Yong, 2010, 2011). Their visual-spatial pathways are not deficits but charisms (spiritual gifts) that

contribute uniquely to the Body of Christ. Their creative works are interpreted as spiritual utterances that demonstrate intrinsic dignity (Yong, 2010).

DHH Visual Charisms and the Triune God

The DHH learners' superior performance in Fluency and Originality confirms their visual intelligence as a theological gift. The diversity of bodies, minds, and communication modalities reflects the diverse creativity of God (Yong, 2011). The high creative output, even in the Developing stage, is a testament to the DHH community's unique ability to articulate abstract faith concepts through concrete visual metaphor. This visual testimony enriches the collective imagination of the Church, particularly within the Deaf Gain framework.

The empirical findings of the GTAP, the high scores in Collaboration (71.4%) and Honesty (57.1%), are key theological data. These relational virtues reflect the nature of the Triune God as a community of perfect relationship (*communio*). The DHH learners, through their cooperative struggle against technical limitations, inadvertently mirrored the relational *Imago Dei*. By engaging in mutual emotional support and peer-led troubleshooting, they demonstrated the interdependence and relationality that underpins the Christian doctrine of communion (Del Rosario, 2022). The DHH community's resilience thus serves as a spiritual witness, offering a model of profound relationality that is vital for the collective spiritual maturity of the Church. The technological struggle, although externally imposed, became the crucible for the formation of virtue.

2. Structural Injustice and the Imperative for Wholeness (Shalom)

The commitment to resolving the 20.1% usability deficits is clarified as a profound theological imperative (Volpe, 2024). The remaining technical barriers are interpreted as forms of structural injustice that obstruct the DHH learners' full flourishing (*shalom*). *Shalom* is defined here as holistic well-being and justice that allows every creature to reach its God-given potential. The unusable technology, by diverting creative energy, actively hinders this flourishing and constitutes a form of exclusion. Disability Theology clarifies that the Church's obligation extends beyond spiritual teaching to confronting all forms of structural exclusion, including those embedded in pedagogical technology.

Policy Implications of Shalom

Achieving *shalom* for DHH learners in digital spaces requires not only individual compassion but also systemic change. This calls for educational institutions, particularly faith-based ones like De La Salle, to adopt ethical ICT procurement policies. These policies must mandate that the selection and budgeting for educational software prioritize UDL compliance and measurable usability for DHH learners over market popularity or low cost.

By demanding and ensuring truly accessible tools, the Church affirms DHH learners as essential, fully functioning members whose unique visual, cognitive, and communicative contributions are vital to the collective body's spiritual and intellectual growth. The elimination of the 20.1% friction point is therefore an act of restorative justice that models radical, inclusive hospitality, ensuring that the technology itself becomes an extension of the teacher's faith-based commitment to equity.

Conclusion

This qualitative research, guided by the Gestural Think-Aloud Protocol (GTAP) and frameworks from Usability, Creativity, and Disability/Deaf Studies, confirmed that the creative empowerment of DHH learners in RE digital storytelling is fundamentally constrained by tool accessibility. “The study confirmed a functional paradox: high usability (79.9%) coexists with moderate creative output (46.5%–54.8%), demonstrating that the 20.1% gap, driven by captioning errors and complex navigation, creates cognitive switching costs that inhibit creative flow and the full deployment of creative resources.” Framed by Disability Studies, this technical barrier represents a design-imposed disability, underscoring that intentional, inclusive design is a pedagogical necessity validated by Deaf Studies for its alignment with the DHH visual-gestural modality.

Consequently, the study recommends prioritizing usability fixes for captioning and navigation to eliminate cognitive load and integrating reflective dialogue to nurture the theological virtues (e.g., Collaboration, Honesty) already manifested by DHH learners. Ultimately, the empirical need for accessible design is viewed as a theological imperative, an act of justice, affirming DHH visual output as a valid expression of intrinsic dignity (Imago Dei), thereby establishing the implementation of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) as a fundamental priority for IE. However, limitations regarding the study’s reliance on only two apps and contextual variance in observed virtues necessitate future Longitudinal Studies on creative development, Comparative Studies on ICT tools, and Policy Development research to institutionalize UDL budgeting.

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About the Journal

Hitik: International Journal of Catechists and Religious Educators is the official international journal publication of the Religious Educators Association of the Philippines (REAP), Inc. It is an open access journal that publishes research journal articles bi-annually. Articles published in this journal undergo a double-blind peer review process and typically come from the research papers presented at the annual National Conference on Catechesis and Religious Education organized by DLSU and REAP inc. and submissions from catechists, theologians, and religious educators of different faith traditions. The journal considers the diversity of faith traditions in the Asian region and the world in general. In response to this plural condition, we welcome interdisciplinary studies and critical essays to advance understanding of the relevant and emerging issues in catechesis and religious education.

Aim and Scope

Being an internationally peer-reviewed journal, Hitik: International Journal of Catechists and Religious Educators adopts the double-blind review process wherein the reviewer/s and the author/s do not know each other's identity.

Aim

Hitik: International Journal of Catechists and Religious Educators is dedicated to the promotion of knowledge through high-quality research publication in various disciplines. It adheres to the policy that all articles contained therein must meet the rigors of an independent double-blind peer-reviewing system and editing to ensure that the publication possesses scientific and academic merit in the field of catechesis and religious education of diverse faith beliefs.

Scope

Hitik: International Journal of Catechists and Religious Educators welcomes submission of quality research articles in any of the following academic domains:

- ❖ Synod and synodality
- ❖ Doing Catechesis
- ❖ Religious Education
- ❖ Religion and youth, women, and Persons with Disabilities (PWDs) Study
- ❖ Basic Ecclesial Communities (BECs) and Family Catechesis
- ❖ Religion and Politics
- ❖ Ecumenism and Interreligious Dialogue
- ❖ Biblical Exegesis
- ❖ Popular Devotions and Inculturation
- ❖ Doing Filipino Theology
- ❖ Empowering Marginalized Communities
- ❖ Laudato Si and Care for the Environment
- ❖ Indigenous People and their beliefs
- ❖ Sustainability
- ❖ Promotion of Social Justice
- ❖ New Evangelization
- ❖ Missiology



The Religious Educators Association of the Philippines (REAP) was founded in 2011 by faculty members of TRED / DLSU with the intention of creating a professional organization of Religious Educators in the Philippines. It was launched at the 1st National Conference on Catechesis and Religious Education (NCCRE) on April 27, 2012, where there are seventy (70) participants of the conference who joined the organization.

It was incorporated and registered at the Securities and Exchange Commission on March 16, 2015, with the name Religious Educators Association of the Philippines (REAP) Inc. It was granted its Certificate of Registration with the Bureau of Internal Revenue of the Republic of the Philippines on July 26, 2016.

The purposes for which the association is incorporated are:

- To promote interdisciplinary and inter-professional dialogue among religious educators from different schools and universities working in the field of spirituality, ethics, philosophy, values and religious education and theology.
- To create opportunities for exploring and advancing the interconnected practices of scholarship, research, teaching and leadership in faith communities and academic institutions.
- To serve as a venue for both local and international conferences, seminars, publications and other activities which will improve in schools and universities the quality of teaching and research in the field of religious education.
- To foster harmonious and closer relationships among graduate students, faculty and administrators of various institutions or religious education.