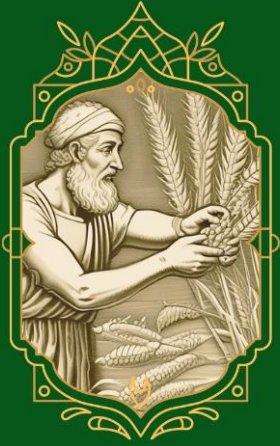


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Volume 3 Issue 1

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This journal issue presents a diverse collection of scholarly articles that explore contemporary themes in theology, religious education, spirituality, culture, ethics, mental health, ecology, and mission. Drawing from interdisciplinary and contextual perspectives, the issue highlights how faith traditions engage with real-world concerns such as hospitality, catechesis, ecological responsibility, interreligious dialogue, ethical communication, youth formation, and social transformation. The articles reflect both local and global experiences, offering insights rooted in Filipino, Asian, and international contexts while contributing to ongoing conversations in theology and religious studies.

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Foreword

It is an honor to announce the release of Volume 3, Issue 1 (June 2026) of *Hitik: International Journal of Catechists and Religious Educators*. This issue reaffirms our dedication to promoting scholarship in catechesis and religious education. It provides a platform for meaningful reflection on the challenges and opportunities that faith communities encounter today.

The articles in this issue highlight the diversity and depth of contemporary research in catechesis, religious education, theology, and pastoral ministry. The topics covered include a wide array of themes, such as cultural exegesis and hospitality, faith formation among students, mental health in catechetical teaching, interreligious dialogue, and ethical communication in the digital age. Additionally, there is a focus on ecological responsibility inspired by *Laudato Si'*, missionary witness, contextual and liberation theologies, and service-learning as a pedagogy of care. The Church of the Poor, as expressed in Basic Ecclesial Communities, is also discussed. Together, these contributions highlight the ongoing significance of catechesis and religious education in shaping individuals and communities capable of effectively addressing the complex realities of today's world.

This issue features international contributions that expand the journal's scope and perspective. By examining theological and pastoral realities from diverse cultural contexts, these studies encourage meaningful dialogue and emphasize the shared mission of catechesis and religious education. Key concerns addressed include ecological awareness, mental health, intercultural understanding, ethical communication, and leadership development. These studies highlight that religious education is not just about transferring knowledge; it is a transformative process that nurtures faith, character, responsibility, and a commitment to the common good.

This issue is presented to readers with heartfelt gratitude to the authors, peer reviewers, the editorial team, and institutional partners, whose dedication and collaboration have made this publication possible. It is hoped that the insights shared in these articles will inspire further research, promote meaningful dialogue, and strengthen the commitment to the essential ministry of catechesis and religious education in diverse communities and global society.

Prof. Dr. Arvin D. Eballo

Editorial Board Member

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

Professor, Institute of Religion

University of Santo Tomas, Manila, Philippines

Message from the Editor

I am pleased to present this issue, which gathers twelve diverse yet deeply interconnected contributions from Filipino and international researchers across Asia. At first glance, the articles span cultural exegesis, pedagogical frameworks, theological reflection, ecological responsibility, and missionary witness. Yet together they converge on a compelling theme: religious education as a practice of hospitality, care, and transformation in a time of shifting identities and global crises.

Across these pages, readers will encounter explorations of how faith traditions engage culture and its people —whether through food and fellowship, ethical speech, or inculturated theology. They will see how pedagogy shapes attitudes toward help-seeking, service, and ecological responsibility, and how frameworks like JEEPGY or service-learning as a pedagogy of care can reframe classroom practice. They will also find voices that remind us of the Church’s mission to stand with the poor, to cross borders in solidarity, and to nurture youth spirituality amid secularization and digital disruption.

The insights offered here bind together a vision of religious education that is not merely mechanical or instructional but transformative: attentive to culture, responsive to crises, and committed to forming communities of care. May this issue inspire educators, scholars, and pastoral leaders to continue weaving faith, justice, and dialogue into the fabric of our shared educational mission.

Prof. Dr. Rito V. Baring

Editor-in-Chief

*Professor, Department of Theology and Religious Education
De La Salle University, Manila, Philippines*

CONTENTS

FROM THE EDITORS

Foreword	iii
Message from the Editor	iv

ARTICLES

<i>Mekeni Abe, tara mangan! (Welcome Friend, let's eat!): A Kapampangan Cultural Exegesis on Meal Fellowship and Hospitality</i>	1
<i>Bonnadelbert Antonio, Jocelyn Masbang, & Rowena Sibal</i>	
Extent of Practice of the JEEPGY Framework among the Grade 12 Students in Selected Diocesan Catholic Schools in Western Visayas	27
<i>Daniel Fernando, Rev. Fr. Eric L. Legada, & Sr. Ma. Rosini P. Escarilla</i>	
Faith and Mental Health: A Mixed-Methods Study on How Catechetical Teaching Shapes Students' Help-Seeking Attitudes	46
<i>Edgar R. Lumandas, Fremativo A. Vergara, & Evan P. Taja-on</i>	
From Beauty to Holiness and Panata: An Interreligious Reading of Iḥsān (إحسان) and Kalos (καλός)	64
<i>Paul Mark Andres</i>	
From Gossip to Grace: Understanding Marites Culture through Catholic Doctrine and the Formation of Ethical Speech	78
<i>Jonald De Leon</i>	
Ecological Responsibility and the Action Gap Among College Students Anchored on the Laudato Si' Framework	91
<i>Fremativo A. Vergara & Evan P. Taja-on</i>	
Serving Beyond Borders: The Missionary Witness of Sr. Conchita Cruz, SSPS and its Impact on the Church in Flores, Indonesia	106
<i>Sr. Herlina Hadia, SSPS</i>	
Toward an Authentic Indian Theology: Inculturation, Liberation, and the Cry of the Poor in the Light of Dilexi te	120
<i>Sebastian Mathew Mittathanickal</i>	
Perspectives of Senior High School Students on Religious Education at Saint Mary's University	132
<i>Charles Ron Capin, John Carlo Armando, Lady Valen Charon Dela Peña, Harold Padilla, Pedelina Bulligan, Arnold Viller Villanoza, & Dan Del Rosario</i>	
Reframing Service-Learning (SL) as a Pedagogy of Care (PoC): Toward a Humane Framework for Religious and Theological Education	153
<i>Paulo Antonio Aton, Joenel Buencibello, Elmgay Valeriano, & Gracita Perez</i>	

The Church of the Poor in the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines (PCP II): Its Concrete Expression in Basic Ecclesial Communities	174
<i>Maria Lourdes Antonio & Fred Jr. Antonio</i>	
The Pedagogy of Encounter as Via Pulchritudinis: Humanizing 21st-Century Teaching-Learning through Education 5.0 and the Global Compact on Education	191
<i>Ericka Mae B. Cunanan, Allan A. Basas, & Joseph Renus F. Galang</i>	



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Original Article

Mekeni Abe, tara mangan! (Welcome Friend, let's eat!): A Kapampangan Cultural Exegesis on Meal Fellowship and Hospitality

Bonnadelbert A. Antonio , Jocelyn H. Masbang , & Rowena B. Sibal

Holy Angel University, Pampanga, Philippines

Correspondence: bantonio@hau.edu.ph

Abstract

*This research examines meal fellowship as a gesture of inclusion, emphasizing its cultural expressions within Filipino society, particularly Kapampangan culture. It investigates the interrelationship between food culture, hospitality, and the values of inclusion and accommodation, highlighting how shared meals function as meaningful social and relational practices. Central to the study is the exploration of indigenous Kapampangan categories that embody these values, especially as manifested in Kapampangan gastronomy and the distinctive concept of *abe*, understood as a culturally grounded expression of welcoming and relational openness toward others.*

Employing de Mesa's cultural exegesis, the research analyzes the cultural and religious significance of food-sharing practices and their implications for understanding inclusion and accommodation from a Kapampangan perspective. This approach enables a critical reading of local cultural symbols and practices in dialogue with Judeo-Christian Tradition and current Church teachings. The analysis is anchored in Jesus' practice of table fellowship, interpreted as an inclusive act that creates 'space' for befriending those considered "unwelcome" or "uninvited." Through this lens, meal fellowship emerges as both a cultural and theological resource for fostering inclusive relationships and communities.

*Therefore, this study argues that the Kapampangan concept of *abe*, expressed through meal fellowship, constitutes an indigenous theology of inclusion that resonates deeply with Jesus' table fellowship and Eucharistic living. Overall, the study contributes to theological, cultural, and educational discourse by highlighting the transformative potential of meal fellowship as a lived expression of inclusion rooted in Kapampangan culture.*

Keywords: Accommodation, Fellowship, Friendship, Hospitality, Inclusivity

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Introduction

Hospitality and shared meals have long been recognized as essential dimensions of human interaction across cultures and societies (Heo & Kim, 2024; Šimočková et al., 2022). Beyond sustenance, the practice of sharing food fosters community, belonging, and mutual understanding, cultivating empathy and strengthening interpersonal bonds. The act of "breaking bread" together serves as a primary means through which individuals forge meaningful relationships and build trust. In a contemporary context increasingly shaped by technology and diminished face-to-face interaction, the enduring significance of hospitality and meal sharing warrants sustained scholarly attention. By inviting others to the table, individuals engage in dialogue, exchange ideas, and create shared memories that promote cultural appreciation, acceptance, and tolerance. Consequently, hospitality and shared meals play a vital role in nurturing social connections, advancing cultural exchange, and fostering inclusivity across various spheres of life, including education, the workplace, and broader social interactions. Meal sharing connects people and strengthens relationships (Wallace et al., 2020), functions as a language that transcends borders and cultures (Singh, 2023) and serves as a reminder of humanity's inherent interdependence (The Connection, 2024).

Within the Christian tradition, the practice of meal sharing assumes a profound theological dimension, particularly in the ministry of Jesus. Numerous accounts of Jesus sharing meals with marginalized members of society reveal an intentionally inclusive posture that challenged prevailing social and religious hierarchies. His table fellowship with sinners, tax collectors, and social outcasts underscores His compassion, radical hospitality, and salvific concern for all. These meals functioned not merely as social gatherings but as transformative spaces of acceptance and restoration. As Parihala (2021) argues, Jesus' table fellowship constitutes an invitation to create a "space" for befriending the "unwelcome" and the "uninvited," thereby embodying a praxis of inclusion rooted in divine love.

Against this backdrop, the concept of meal fellowship as a gesture of inclusion presents a compelling area for inquiry, particularly within diverse cultural contexts such as the Filipino setting and, more specifically, Kapampangan culture. This study explores the intricate relationships among food culture, hospitality, and the values of inclusion and accommodation, seeking to identify indigenous categories that embody these principles. Particular attention is given to Kapampangan gastronomy and the concept of *abe* as an expression of welcoming and embracing others. By examining the cultural and religious dimensions of shared meals, this research offers insights into how inclusion and accommodation are understood and practiced from a Kapampangan perspective. The study contributes to the advancement of inclusive values within a religious framework and seeks to inform efforts to resist discrimination and exclusion, especially of those on the margins of society. It argues that the Kapampangan concept of *abe*, expressed through meal fellowship, constitutes an indigenous theology of inclusion that resonates deeply with Jesus' table fellowship and Eucharistic living.

Food Culture and Hospitality of Filipinos

Food and culture are deeply intertwined realities (Aguilar, 2005). As Aguilar observed, "food and culture ... are intimately related and mutually constitutive" (p. 2), underscoring the extent to which cuisine is embedded within specific cultural

contexts. In the Philippines, food functions not merely as sustenance but as a powerful expression of the nation's history, layered influences, and communal orientation. Filipino cuisine reflects a rich fusion of indigenous traditions and external influences shaped by centuries of Spanish, American, and Japanese encounters (Valencia, 2016).

A defining feature of Filipino food culture is its emphasis on communal eating, which embodies the values of hospitality, generosity, and relational closeness. The practice of *salosalo* (eating together) reinforces social bonds among family, friends, and guests, while common greetings such as "*Kumain ka na ba?*" ("Have you eaten yet?") signify care, concern, and the sharing of one's blessings (Penafuerte, 2020). Among Kapampangan, this hospitality is expressed in the invitation "*Tara mangan*" ("Let's eat"), extended even to strangers. Similarly, the tradition of the boodle fight, where food is shared on banana leaves and eaten by hand, symbolically affirms equality, solidarity, and togetherness.

Food also occupies a central place in Filipino celebrations and rituals (de Villa et al., 2022). Social gatherings- from fiestas and birthdays to weddings and religious observances- are marked by the preparation and sharing of traditional dishes such as *adobo*, *sinigang*, *lechon*, and *lumpia*. These meals do more than satisfy physical hunger – they connect participants to collective memory, cultural heritage, and shared identity. In this sense, food functions as a primary medium of welcome and belonging. Moreover, Filipino cuisine remains closely linked to agricultural practices, relying on locally sourced ingredients that reflect respect for the land, environmental consciousness, and sustainable living. Studies on Filipino food practices further indicate that shared meals function as vehicles for intergenerational transmission of values, memory, and identity, reinforcing communal belonging across generations (Leuterio & Vargas, 2021).

Ultimately, food in Filipino culture transcends nourishment; it entails the consumption of history, tradition, and community. It serves as a potent symbol of Filipino identity and a source of cultural pride (Mulder, 2013). Through the sharing of meals, Filipinos affirm relationships, celebrate their heritage, and sustain their cultural legacy. As Penafuerte (2020) aptly noted, "food brings people with a lot of differences together and thus becomes a social lubricant" (para. 3), highlighting its role as a unifying social force. de Mesa (2016) further emphasized that Filipino table fellowship embodies *kagandahang-loob* ("gracious and winsome self," p. 5), affirming its centrality in everyday life and relational ethics.

Kapampangan Concept of 'abe' and its Inclusive Undercurrent

The term *kapwa* is generally regarded as the Filipino concept of "neighbor" among lowland Filipinos (de Mesa, 2016; Mercado, 1975; Miranda, 1988). Kapampangan people employ the word '*abe*' as a related term. The Austronesian Comparative Dictionary (n.d.) defines the noun *abe* as "friend" or "companion," with its verbal form connoting "to accompany" or "to stay together" (<https://acd.cild.org/languages/291>). Classical Kapampangan lexicographical sources likewise affirm the relational depth of *abe* as denoting companionship and shared belonging within the community (Turla, 1999). The term is translated in Tagalog as *kasama* or *kaibigan* (Tagaloglang.com, 2024).

Inclusion, Equality, and Meal Fellowship

The notion of inclusion is generally understood as a process that ensures the meaningful participation of all individuals in social, educational, and community life, regardless of differences. Ainscow, Booth, and Dyson (2006) conjecture inclusion as the continuous recognition and removal of barriers to participation, emphasizing that

inclusion extends beyond physical access to a sense of belonging and active engagement. This perspective aligns with UNESCO's (1994) Salamanca Statement, which frames inclusion as a rights-based approach that upholds diversity as a resource rather than a challenge.

Some scholars argue that genuine inclusion requires systemic change rather than isolated interventions. Slee (2011) critiques performative inclusion practices that fail to address structural inequities, highlighting the need for transformative policies and institutional cultures. Empirical studies support this view, showing that inclusive practices are most effective when supported by institutional commitment and community involvement (Forlin, 2010; Artiles, 2011). Collectively, the literature suggests that inclusion is relational and participatory, rooted in social practices that affirm dignity and mutual recognition.

Equality is a foundational concept closely tied to inclusion, though researchers distinguish between formal equality and substantive equality. Rawls' (1971) theory of justice introduces the principle of fair equality of opportunity, arguing that social and institutional arrangements should benefit the least advantaged members of society. Expanding this view, Sen (1992) proposes the capability approach, emphasizing individuals' real freedoms to achieve valued ways of living rather than mere equal distribution of resources.

Young (1990) critiques universalist notions of equality that overlook group-based differences, arguing that true equality requires recognition of social, cultural, and structural inequalities. Applied research reinforces these theoretical insights, particularly in education and community settings. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD] (2012) findings indicate that equitable systems intentionally allocate resources and support to marginalized groups to achieve comparable outcomes. Thus, equality is increasingly understood as equity-oriented and relational, focusing on justice, access, and participation rather than sameness.

Theological and Ethical Perspectives on Meal Fellowship

Meal table fellowship has been examined across disciplines as a powerful social practice that shapes inclusion and exclusion. Douglas (1966) explains that food practices symbolize social boundaries, determining who belongs and who does not. Similarly, Fisch (2015) highlights how shared meals historically function as sites where social hierarchies are either reinforced or challenged.

In sociological research, commensality, or eating together, has been shown to foster social bonds, trust, and mutual recognition (Sobal & Nelson, 2003). Kaufmann (2010) further argues that shared meals operate as informal mechanisms of social inclusion by creating spaces for interaction across differences. These studies emphasize that meal table fellowship is not a neutral activity but a socially meaningful practice that can cultivate belonging.

Within theological scholarship, meal table fellowship is often portrayed as a radical practice of inclusion and equality. Wright (2012) and Brueggemann (2001) highlight how Jesus' practice of eating with social outcasts disrupted cultural norms and symbolized an alternative social order rooted in justice and hospitality. These practices challenged purity systems and economic hierarchies, redefining community around shared dignity rather than status.

Baker (2015) widens this insight into contemporary faith communities, demonstrating how shared meals serve as embodied practices of welcome, particularly for marginalized individuals. From this perspective, meal table fellowship becomes an ethical action that enacts inclusion and equality rather than merely advocating for them. Such embodied practices of inclusion reflect the Church's

broader ethical call to move beyond abstract affirmations of equality toward concrete actions of welcome, solidarity, and shared life (Boyle, 2020).

Table Fellowship in the Bible

The Gospels narrate how Jesus restored people through preaching, healing, and casting out demons. The Gospel of Luke, however, distinctly emphasizes Jesus' table fellowship and highlights His actions that created acceptance among the people but rejection among the leaders of Israel (Brown, 2024). Luke's Gospel provides numerous accounts of Jesus sharing meals with people from diverse backgrounds. These meals were frequently interpreted as a symbol of acceptance, reconciliation, and the establishment of a new community centered on Jesus.

One example of Jesus' table fellowship is found in Luke 5:27-32 (New Revised Standard Version [NRSV], 1993), where Jesus dines with tax collectors and sinners. When the Pharisees criticized him for eating with such individuals, Jesus responded, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance" (Luke 5:31-32). An analysis of Jesus' public ministry confirms this pattern; He was often either a guest or a host at meals and did not discriminate against His table companions. He ate and drank not only with religious people but, significantly, with the poor, outcasts, tax collectors, and those considered sinners. This practice scandalized the Pharisees, leading Jesus to be labeled a glutton, a drunkard, and a friend of sinners. Jesus' table fellowship was not merely a social act; it served as the symbol of communion, unity, sharing, and friendship that characterized the Kingdom of God that Jesus proclaimed. It was His way for creating a culture of inclusion, a way of ensuring people belonged and were not marginalized (Meijers, 2019).

Jesus' table fellowship fundamentally challenged the societal norms and religious expectations of His time. By sharing meals with those considered outcasts or marginalized, Jesus demonstrated His mission to reach all people, regardless of their social status or perceived righteousness. Picardal (2023) noted that Jesus' actions conveyed a message of love, forgiveness, and reconciliation, inviting people to turn away from sin and embrace the Kingdom of God.

Furthermore, Jesus' table fellowship foreshadows the Eucharistic meal, which is central to the Catholic faith (Catechism of the Catholic Church [CCC], 1994, para. 1407; de Mesa & Cacho, 2012; Foley, 2023, 2024). Biblical scholarship further underscores that early Christian understandings of the Eucharist were inseparable from practices of table fellowship, hospitality, and communal sharing (Velankani, 2012).

At the Last Supper, Jesus shared a meal with his disciples, instituting the Eucharist as a sacrament of his presence and sacrifice. This sacred meal continues to be celebrated, uniting believers in communion with Christ and one another. Jesus commanded, "do this in remembrance of me" (Lk. 22:19). When Christians gather around the altar, Jesus' table fellowship with people is spiritually recreated. This bond of friendship strengthens and inspires the community to become more zealous in discipleship (de Mesa & Cacho, 2012). This practice of eating with socially stigmatized individuals aligns with Blomberg's (2009) observation that Jesus' table fellowship functioned as a deliberate enactment of grace, signaling forgiveness, restored dignity, and the reconstitution of community beyond purity boundaries.

The Eucharist

Traditionally, the Last Supper served as the primary reference point for understanding the Eucharist. However, Foley (2024) argued that Jesus' overall meal

fellowship with people provides a more comprehensive basis. The table ministry of Jesus, particularly with the "unwelcomed," ostracized, "sidelined," and those in the "peripheries" – individuals frequently denied "space" in society – offers a superior perspective of the Eucharistic meal. This understanding parallels contemporary theological reflections that describe everyday shared meals as an "Eucharist of the ordinary," where communion, gratitude, and mutual care are enacted in daily life beyond liturgical settings (O'Shaughnessy, 2020).

The Last Supper narratives, in contrast, mark only a limited aspect of the developing Eucharistic tradition (Foley, 2024). This ubiquitous table ministry highlights the core of Eucharistic living as being primarily about reconciliation, inclusivity, and mission, signifying a close connection between God and humanity (Angiola, 2021). Conversely, Meng (2023) conjectured that the Eucharist as communion is a "relationship of mutual participation between Christ and the faithful, a relationship that suggests 'giving' and receiving" (p. 2). Similarly, Feenstra (2017) noted that the Eucharist is a remembrance that makes Christ's sacrifice present to enable participants to live "a spirit-empowered life of discipleship" (para. 4). Pope John Paul II (2003) emphasized that the Eucharist builds the Church as a "communion" rooted in Christ's self-giving love, forming believers into a community of shared life and mutual responsibility.

In its Greek origin, the word Eucharist (*eucharistia*) signifies gratitude—suggesting that the assembly is a gathering in gratefulness to God's benevolence, embodied in Jesus (de Mesa & Cacho, 2012). Pilario (2023) characterizes the Eucharist as "a shared meal and a shared life" (para. 5), connoting a simple communal human meal. God's enduring love persists through the various manifestations of His presence in Christian life and festivities. Christians publicly proclaim God's benevolence with humility when they convene to honor God's union with them.

de Mesa and Cacho (2012) noted that Filipinos frequently show appreciation to individuals by acknowledging their graciousness, which stems from the individual's kindness. The Eucharist also serves as a celebration of gratitude for God's generosity and action, enabling the Christian community to cultivate solidarity and common concern. This understanding resonates with the Catechism for Filipino Catholics, which presents the Eucharist as both a sacramental celebration and a way of life that calls Filipino Christians to communion, solidarity, and concern for the poor within concrete cultural contexts (Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines [CBCP], 2005).

Intersection of Inclusion, Equality, and Meal Table Fellowship

The literature increasingly recognizes meal table fellowship as a concrete intersection of inclusion and equality. Wilk (2006) illustrates how everyday food practices can either reproduce inequality or create opportunities for solidarity, depending on how power and access are negotiated. Paxson (2010) similarly shows that food-sharing practices reflect broader social values and can become tools for community-building when intentionally inclusive.

Collectively, these studies suggest that meal table fellowship functions as both a symbolic and practical expression of inclusion and equality. Shared meals provide relational spaces where differences are acknowledged, hierarchies are softened, and communal belonging is experienced. However, the literature also reveals a gap in empirical research explicitly linking meal table fellowship to structured inclusion outcomes, indicating a need for further study.

Synthesis

For Filipinos, food is more than a means of sustenance; it is a way of bonding with people and sharing one's blessings. Food reflects the values, traditions, and history of a community. Table fellowship among Filipinos is a channel for showing 'kagandahang loob' (winsome goodness) and is therefore a significant part of Filipino everyday life. Jesus used 'meal sharing' as a medium for connecting to people. The meals He shared with different individuals, especially the underprivileged, were a manifestation of His esteemed attitude and gesture toward inclusion.

The reviewed literature establishes that inclusion and equality are relational, justice-oriented concepts that require intentional practices to be realized. Meal table fellowship emerges as a significant yet underexplored practice through which inclusion and equality can be embodied in everyday community life. While theoretical and theological perspectives strongly affirm its transformative potential, there remains limited empirical research examining meal table fellowship as a systematic approach to fostering inclusion and equality. This gap underscores the relevance of the present study.

Conceptual Framework

The study explores the vibrant food culture and hospitality of the Kapampangan in relation to Jesus' inclusive gesture of sharing meals with people from all levels of society. The research further examines the concept of '*abe*,' a Kapampangan term for "friend" or "companion" suggesting the Kapampangan's inherent friendly and hospitable culture. Moreover, the rich and diverse food culture of the Kapampangan implies an underlying inclusive ethos.

Employing de Mesa's cultural exegesis, the research analyzes the cultural and religious significance of food-sharing practices and their implications for understanding inclusion and accommodation from a Kapampangan perspective. This approach enables a critical reading of local cultural symbols and practices in dialogue with Judeo-Christian Tradition and current Church teachings. The analysis is anchored in Jesus' practice of table fellowship, interpreted as an inclusive act that creates 'space' for befriending those considered "unwelcome" or "uninvited." Through this lens, meal fellowship emerges as both a cultural and theological resource for fostering inclusive relationships and communities. Figure 1 presents the conceptual diagram of the study.

de Mesa's Thematic Cultural Exegesis (TCE) is defined as "the systematic process of bringing into explicit awareness and orderly categorization (i.e., to thematize) the implicit cultural meanings arising from a tradition of experiences that are embodied in specific cultural elements or aspects within the framework of culture as an integrated system" (de Mesa, 2016, p. 104). Cultural exegesis constitutes an interpretive activity conducted from a given perspective or context. Interpretation, which starts with dynamic equivalence translation, is always aimed at understanding from a particular standpoint (de Mesa, 2016). TCE is a cultural analysis intended to make the implicit cultural meanings embodied in specific cultural elements understandable or meaningful. de Mesa posited that the complexity of any culture necessitates drawing out aspects or dimensions of cultural elements related to the issue, concern, or question requiring a Christian response. Without this thematic approach, the researcher might be overwhelmed by a profusion of data. A productive way to organize data, therefore, is through thematization or categorization into themes or aspects. The themes drawn from the culture can serve as points of departure for cultural analysis. According to de Mesa (2016), "themes from the culture may revolve around important aspects of the indigenous worldview" (p. 109).

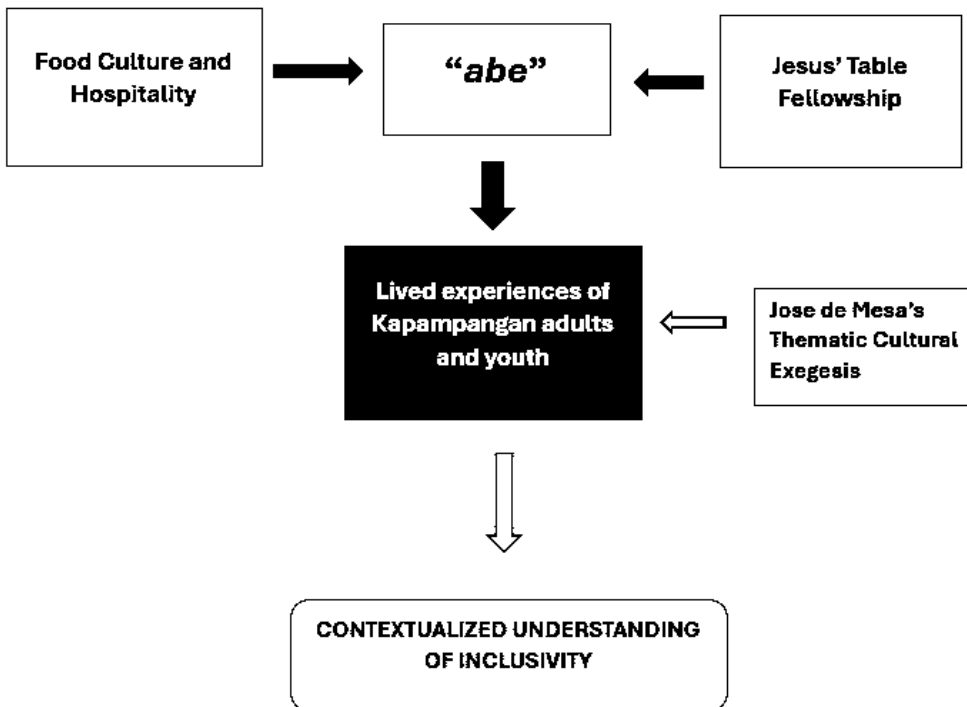


Figure 1. Conceptual diagram of the study

However, the issue, concern, or question dictates the particular theme or set of themes to be used. The starting themes may lead to further analysis, revealing a new theme, a combination of themes, further explanation, modification, or even relinquishment of the theme in favor of something more appropriate. Thus, TCE is considered an ongoing task within the inculturation process (de Mesa, 2016). The cultural analysis focused on themes and cultural elements related to the issues of inclusivity and hospitality in the Kapampangan culture and the concept of *abe*, seeking to generate an appropriate Christian response. A respectful stance toward the culture guided the researchers to identify the positive resources and potential of the culture, leading to the discovery of aspects or elements of the local culture relevant to the situation. At this stage, de Mesa (2016) recommended that a cultural analysis is essential. The central issue addressed is how meal sharing and inclusivity are understood in the common language and practices of the Kapampangan people. The cultural exegesis also delved into the intricate use of *abe* in conversations among Kapampangan individuals. The determination of this core issue directed the researchers' attention to the relevant cultural aspects. Specifically, the term *abe* was examined using linguistic analysis and was made to interact with existing Western and/or Church teachings on inclusivity and accommodation. Using culture as a source for interpretation, the study sought to discover the cultural relevance of Church or Western teachings regarding inclusion and meal sharing. This respectful and critical dialogue was intended to bring out the strengths of each pole, extracting the meaning embedded in the culture while making the objective meaning relevant to the culture encountering it.

At the final stage of the analytical process, a tentative faith interpretation emerged from the dialectical interaction of the two poles. This interpretation was

considered tentative, as de Mesa conjectured, because no one can claim a definitive answer to the issue under hermeneutical reflection. The culturally intelligible interpretation resulted from the mutual dialogue between the culture and the current Church teachings on inclusivity.

Objectives of the Study

The current research attempted to explore the relationship between the intricate food culture and hospitality of the Kapampangan and the inclusive attitude of Jesus Christ towards outcasts, which is evident in his table fellowship with them. Specifically, the study sought to answer the following questions:

1. How were the values of meal sharing and hospitality interpreted by Kapampangan adults and youth?
2. How was the concept of '*abe*' explained in the culture of the Kapampangan? In what way was this related to inclusivity?
3. In what way was the table fellowship of Jesus with the outcasts interpreted in the culture of the Kapampangan?

Significance of the Study

With the increasing awareness and promotion of equality and diversity in society, people are becoming sensitive to discrimination and oppression. The study is significant because it supports the advocacy in advancing inclusivity in society. Using the Kapampangan culture as a lens, the study intends to contribute by culturally understanding the notion of inclusivity and accommodation. With Jesus Christ as model, the study pursues to further the preferment of inclusion in society from a cultural perspective. In this regard, the study complements recent scholarship on inclusion in Catholic educational contexts, which emphasizes the importance of culturally resonant practices of welcome and belonging in translating Church teachings into lived institutional realities (Bonfiglio & Kroh, 2020).

Methodology

Research Design

The study employs a qualitative research approach using a phenomenological design to examine the flamboyant food culture and hospitality of the Kapampangan people in relation to Jesus' table fellowship. Phenomenology seeks to describe and interpret how individuals experience a particular event or phenomenon (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). In this study, selected Kapampangan adults and youth participated in in-depth interviews to explore their worldviews and lived experiences concerning food culture, hospitality, and the Kapampangan concept of *abe*. This phenomenological orientation aligns with descriptive approaches that aim to articulate participants' lived meanings as they are experienced, prior to theoretical abstraction or normative judgment (Jackson et al., 2018).

Philosophical Underpinning

The study hinges on Jose de Mesa's Inculturated Model of doing theology. This paradigm focuses on the cultural approach to doing theology - where culture is a starting point and is made to interact with Scripture and Tradition. A cultural approach to local experiences, according to de Mesa (2016; 2003), has, at least, become recognized as a legitimate and fruitful way of doing theology. This approach is underpinned by 'Hermeneutics of Appreciation' philosophy. In line with de Mesa (2016), a hermeneutics of appreciation does not render a culture under investigation

as ‘inferior’ nor is it subjected to ‘suspicion’ (as opposed to Ricoeur’s hermeneutics of suspicion). While hermeneutics of suspicion seeks to unmask power, ideology, or domination within texts and cultures (Felski, 2011), de Mesa’s hermeneutics of appreciation foregrounds a posture of respect that allows the positive moral and theological resources of culture to emerge. Culture here becomes a target and mutual yet critically dialogues with the Judeo-Christian Tradition (JCT) and current Church teachings.

de Mesa (2003) argues that to understand culture from within is to explore language, which is its ‘closest door.’ The community’s language is an opulent source of getting into the depths of the people’s psyche, particularly their shared experiences and worldviews (Bowe, 1998). de Mesa’s Hermeneutics of Appreciation recognizes both the positive and the negative aspects of culture, which are subjected to thematic exegesis. The culture that is being explored is appreciated and not held in suspicion, since it is through the culture or experiences of the people that the Good News of Jesus Christ becomes more relevant and meaningful. The culture does not replace the Gospel but, in its mutual interaction with JCT, is positively transformed. People, therefore, as argued by de Mesa, “are forced to re-think and re-evaluate their presently held models of interpretations” (2016, p. 104).

The schematic description of doing theology as inculturation begins with the issues, questions, and concerns of people. de Mesa lays out the methodological procedure of hermeneutics of appreciation. The positive resources of the culture have to be emphasized to interpret both the situation and the Faith tradition. Consistent with de Mesa (2003) emphasizing the schematic nature of the procedures' explanation is important to highlight the inherent possibilities. A careful analysis of both the culture and JCT will provide a clearer and more inclusive understanding.

de Mesa highlights three significant stages in his theological process:

1. First Stage: Issues, questions, and concerns
2. Second Stage: Respectful and critical correlation between culture and Judeo-Christian Tradition
3. Third Stage: New tentative faith interpretation

In the first stage (issues, questions, and concerns), attention is drawn into the situation that is confronted with. This, de Mesa posits is the starting point in doing theology, i.e., the culture that is being brought into reflection and analysis. It is imperative to bear in mind the foci of both cultural and social analyses in figuring out the real issue, question, and concern. The study at hand is an attempt to explore the food culture and hospitality of the Kapampangan and their concept of ‘*abe*.’ A respectful stance towards the culture induces one to the positive resources and potential of the culture. This leads to discovering those aspects or elements of the indigenous culture which have or can have bearing on the situation. The determination of the issue, question, or concern to be dealt with calls one’s attention, directs, alerts, and sensitizes the relevant aspects or elements of the culture. At this stage, de Mesa recommends that a cultural analysis is essential. The transition from the first to the second stage happens when the aspects or elements of the culture which are relevant to the issue, question or concern, call and direct one’s attention and alert and sensitize the aspects or elements of the Judeo-Christian Tradition which have a bearing on both the issue, question, or concern and the culture.

The second stage is the actual respectful and critical correlating of the cultural aspects in question with the Judeo-Christian Tradition. Using the relevant aspects of the culture as source we are able to discern and discover the riches and strengths of the Judeo-Christian Tradition in relation to the context. In line with de Mesa, the relevance of the Faith to the here and now is implicit in the cultural context to which

the Faith is experienced. Culture reveals the significance of the faith- making it more meaningful and relevant. In this cultural interpretation of the Tradition the meaning of the gospel in the understanding of the people is deepened, particularly in understanding the notion of inclusivity as taught by Jesus Christ, and as understood by the Kapampangan. The biblical teaching on ‘meal fellowship’ can be understood from the indigenous experience of the Filipino, particularly of the Kapampangan people. How the Kapampangan use of the local term in ordinary speech or in conversations, in literature, and dealings with people will reveal the relevance of the Christian Faith for the local people.

de Mesa theorized that culture takes a critical posture towards Tradition. It does not only allow one to discover the riches and strengths of this tradition. Within the process, culture as a source gives the capacity to recognize and confront the limitations or weaknesses of the present cultural and historical quintessence of this Tradition. For that reason, de Mesa conjectured that in this mutual interaction, change is not only on the side of the culture nor criticism only from the side of Tradition (de Mesa, 2016; 2003;). This respectful engagement with culture resonates with Smith’s (1999) call for decolonizing methodologies that privilege indigenous knowledge systems and local epistemologies rather than imposing external interpretive frameworks.

In the second stage of the theological process, the Tradition, i.e., Judeo-Christian Tradition or JCT becomes the basis for interpreting the culture. This allows us to discover the riches and the strengths of the culture and indeed is a way of augmenting the cultural identity of the people. The culture is not only the source but also becomes the focus of the respectful and critical stance of the Tradition when the tradition is used as source to construe the relevant cultural aspects. This Tradition, which according to de Mesa, is the Tradition of the experiences inclusivity must be appropriated culturally, and this can only be done through the continuous interaction or dialogue with the culture itself.

The result of the interaction between culture and Judeo-Christian Tradition is the ‘New tentative faith interpretation.’ This is now the third stage in the theological process. As the two poles (Culture and Tradition) interact, a new tentative faith interpretation emerges. The issues, questions, and concerns which triggered the theological process are now addressed- resulting to a new tentative faith interpretation. At this stage there is now ‘a culturally intelligible theological interpretation.’ The new theological reflection is tentative, according to de Mesa because there is no definitive answer as regards the issues, questions, and concerns being addressed. The continuous dialogue with the situation requires an on-going theological reflection. The process then is unremitting since even the tentative result could easily be the achievement of already many dynamic interactions between the poles (de Mesa, 2016).

de Mesa (2003) noted that, “a genuinely inculturated theology arises from life and is geared towards the enrichment of life” (p.158). This implies that the theological reflection should hopefully have an impact on the actual situation- wherein the goal is to enrich the culture that is being interpreted using the Judeo-Christian Tradition as a source for the interpretation. However, de Mesa reminds us that the task and responsibility of inculturation is not conducted by theologians alone, it is a collaborative advocacy of the local church and the community.

At this stage of the process the new tentative theological reflection resulting from the interaction between the two poles can utilize the resources of both culture and Tradition in addressing the “imperatives” arising from the situation by ‘shedding light’ on it and critically but respectfully confronting it.

Participants and Setting

The target respondents for the study are adults (ages 40 and above) and youth (ages 18 – 30 years old) from selected towns in Pampanga. They were inquired of their knowledge and experiences of Kapampangan food culture and hospitality and their notions of '*abe*,' a term which connotes 'friend' or 'companion.' The research participants were probed of their perceptions about inclusivity, their experiences of discrimination, and how these experiences may be understood in the context of the Kapampangan culture. The youth respondents are ages 18 – 30 years old (National Youth Commission, NYC, RA 8044, Section 2).

The respondents were selected using purposive sampling technique. Around 10 Kapampangan (five adults [ages 40 and above] and five youth [18-30 years old]) coming from selected towns in Pampanga were recruited as participants in the study. The respondents were subjected to an in-depth interview to extract their notions of meal sharing and their concept of '*abe*.' Data from the interview were collated and thematized and were made to interact with current Church teachings on inclusivity and accommodation. The qualitative insights from the sources (interview and relevant literature) were analyzed using Jose de Mesa's thematic cultural exegesis (TCE). The resulting 'new faith interpretation' was utilized in re-appropriating the concept of inclusivity using Jesus Christ as model for the Kapampangan audience.

Instrument

This study utilized a self-created semi-structured interview guide developed by the researchers to elicit a comprehensive description from the participants regarding their perspectives on meal sharing and their understanding of '*abe*.' To ensure the validity of the tools, a pilot test was conducted before gathering data. A one-on-one in-depth interview is preferred to facilitate open conversation and acquire deeper insights and understanding from the participants regarding their views on meal sharing and the concept of '*abe*'. This approach also allows for uncovering the participants' authentic thoughts without the influence of group dynamics present in focus group discussions.

Data Collection

Data were gathered through individual in-depth interviews during which participants were inquired about their availability. This ensures that the interviews were scheduled at a time convenient for them. All participants were given information about the study's purpose, their voluntary involvement, and the confidentiality of their responses. Moreover, they have the option to withdraw from the interview at any point if they feel it is necessary, in line with ethical research practices, without causing any disruption to the study. Overall, the data collection process prioritized the careful acquisition of reliable and valid data for the analysis and interpretation of findings.

Data Analysis

The qualitative data that were drawn from the in-depth interview of selected Kapampangan adults and youth were content analyzed using de Mesa's TCE as an analytical framework. Data that were collected from the lived experiences and worldviews of the respondents were thematized and were subjected to a cultural exegesis. Hermeneutical analysis, as employed in this study, enables a dialogical movement between lived experience and interpretive meaning, consistent with qualitative traditions that treat understanding as relational and contextually situated (McCaffrey et al., 2012). de Mesa's TCE follows a three-stage process (Please refer to

Conceptual Framework and Philosophical Underpinning) in analyzing the thematized responses, which are made to interact or dialogue with JCT and current teachings of the Catholic Church on inclusivity and meal fellowship. The issues, questions, and concerns which triggered the theological process are now addressed- resulting to a new tentative faith interpretation. At this stage there is now ‘a culturally intelligible theological interpretation.’ At this stage of the process the new tentative theological reflection resulting from the interaction between the two poles can utilize the resources of both culture and Tradition in addressing the “imperatives” arising from the situation by ‘shedding light’ on it and critically but respectfully confronting it.

Establishing Trustworthiness

The study followed the four trustworthiness criteria as defined by Lincoln and Guba (1985, in Nowell et al., 2017) to guarantee the strength of data analysis obtained from the individual in-depth interview. These criteria consist of: (a) credibility, which pertains to the trustworthiness of the study's findings; (b) dependability, indicating the stability and trustworthiness of the results; (c) confirmability, guaranteeing that the analysis relies only on the participants' testimonies and not on the researchers' biased views; and (d) transferability, ensuring that the research findings can be relevant to various settings, will be upheld throughout the study.

Ethical Considerations

In the entire research processes, it is the utmost priority of the researchers to secure the participants confidentiality and anonymity to avoid ethical transgression. To protect participants' privacy and confidentiality, the researchers will follow the Data Privacy Act of 2012. The researchers will safeguard the privacy and confidentiality of the research participants using informed consent prior to data collection that clearly outlines the purpose and method of the study. All data provided by the participants were treated with utmost confidentiality, responses of the participants were given codes or pseudonyms instead of using their real names in the research materials to ascertain anonymity. Data collected were stored in a protected electronic file to prevent breaches of confidentiality. Participation in the study is purely voluntary, and no coercion was made for the respondents to participate. The researchers informed the participants that they can withdraw anytime during the duration of the study. Any changes to the research protocols that may impact the confidentiality were communicated promptly to the participants. This commitment to ethical standard will ascertain protection of the rights and well-being of the research subjects and at the same time enhances the validity of the research findings.

Results and Discussions

This section presents and discusses the study's findings by exploring how shared food carries cultural and religious meaning within the Kapampangan context, and how these meanings shape practices of inclusion and accommodation. The results show that sharing meals is more than a social activity- it also serves as a deeply theological expression of hospitality, solidarity, and belonging, especially for those at the margins of society. Central to this is the Kapampangan concept of *abe*, which comes to life through the act of eating together. This idea functions as an indigenous theology of inclusion that echoes Jesus' own table fellowship and Eucharistic way of life, offering a culturally grounded lens for understanding what it means to build an inclusive community.

Some adult and youth respondents (Table 1, N=10) from Pampanga, Philippines were recruited to participate in an in-depth interview. Table 1 shows the

distribution of the participants in terms of age, gender, marital status, and religious affiliation.

The respondents come from age groups 18-30 years old for the youth and 40 years old and above for the adult participants. The youth respondents are all single while adults are mostly married (F=8, 30%). In terms of gender, the informants are mostly male (60%) for the adults while 50% for the youth. The youth respondents are all Catholics (100%) while seven (70%) of adult participants are Catholic. The other three remaining respondents belonged to other religious affiliations (Baptist F=1, Born Again F=1, Spiritual F=1).

Table 1. Profile of the Respondents (N=10)

Variable	Category	Adult		Youth	
		f	%	f	%
Gender	Male	6	60	5	50
	Female	4	40	5	50
Marital Status	Single	2	20	10	100
	Married	8	80	0	0
Religious Affiliation	Roman Catholic	7	70	10	100
	Baptist	1	10	0	0
	Born Again	1	10	0	0
	Spiritual	1	10	0	0
Age Group	18-30 years old			5	50
	40 years old and above	5	50		

How Kapampangan people express their hospitality

The respondents were queried about their perceptions regarding Kapampangan expressions of hospitality. Table 2 below shows the results of their responses.

In Table 2, both adults and youth informants responded the ‘sharing of food’ or ‘meal sharing’ as a predominant Kapampangan expression of hospitality. Two adult respondents shared that when a guest is received in typical Kapampangan households, the guest is usually brought directly to the kitchen and is offered food. Another adult informant said that most old Kapampangan houses have bigger kitchen than the sala or ‘receiving room,’ which is an indication that Kapampangan people spend most of their family gatherings in the kitchen through meal fellowships. Food here appears as a way of bonding relationships.

Table 2. Kapampangan Expressions of Hospitality

Question	Responses	
How do Kapampangan express their hospitality	Adults	Youth
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Through sharing of food (F=5) • Bringing the invited guest/s directly to the kitchen instead to the sala; receive more their guests in the kitchen (F=2). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Through preparing and sharing of delicious food (F=5) • Meal sharing (F=5)

Kapampangan understanding of ‘Abe’

The research participants were inquired about their understanding of the Kapampangan concept of ‘abe.’ Table 3 below indicates the results of their responses.

Table 3. Kapampangan Understanding of ‘Abe’

Question	Responses	
	Adults	Youth
What is your personal understanding of the term ‘abe?’	<p><i>Abe</i> means:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Friend (F=5) • Companion (<i>kasama</i>) (F=5) • Shared inner self (more than just an ‘other’) (F=1) 	<p><i>Abe</i> means:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Friend (F=5) • Someone who values you (F=2) • Not an ‘other’ (F=1)

Majority of the respondents identified ‘abe’ with friend or companion. An adult informant shared that *abe* is a ‘shared inner self’ who is more than just an ‘other’ person, while a youth respondent shares the same understanding of ‘abe’ as being not an ‘other’ (*hindi siya iba*).

Connotations of ‘Mekeni *abe, tara mangan!*’ (Welcome friend, let’s eat!)

The Kapampangan sentence, ‘*Mekeni *abe, tara mangan!**,’ which means ‘Welcome friend, let’s eat!’ was inquired of its connotation among the respondents. Table 4 below indicates their responses.

Table 4. Connotations of ‘*Mekeni *abe, tara mangan!**’ (Welcome friend, let’s eat!)

Question	Responses	
	Adults	Youth
What is your personal understanding of ‘ <i>Mekeni <i>abe, tara mangan!</i></i> ’?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A way of welcoming people (F=5) • Inviting people to eat is an expressing of hospitality and accommodation (F=5) • An invitation to forge a meaningful and healthy relationship (F=3) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It shows how welcoming and friendly Kapampangan people are (F=4) • A warm and friendly invitation (F=5) • A special way of inviting people, including strangers (F=3)

Among adults, ‘*Mekeni *abe, tara mangan!**’ connotes a way of inviting and welcoming people (F=5). Three of the adult respondents said that this Kapampangan sentence implies an invitation to forge a healthy and meaningful relationship. Conversely, the youth informants said that the sentence indicates how friendly and welcoming Kapampangan people are (F4). All (F=5) youth respondents said that it is a warm and friendly way of welcoming people. About three (F=3, 60%) youth informants noted that ‘*Mekeni *abe!**’ connotes also inviting strangers.

How Kapampangan food culture related to table fellowship

The respondents were further asked about the relationship between Kapampangan food culture and table fellowship. Table 5 presents a summary of their responses.

Table 5. Relationship between Kapampangan food culture and table fellowship

Question	Responses	
	Adults	Youth
How is Kapampangan food culture related to table fellowship?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A means of sharing one’s blessings to others (F=5) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a means of giving connection and the sense of love and comfort to those who are involved (F=5).

-
- Food is a way of binding relationships in the Kapampangan sense (F=3)
 - Food culture is more than just about culinary but a way of bonding people (f=5)
 - food becomes an occasion not just for a gastronomic experience but a sharing of meal and table fellowship. It's not just about taking in food but nourishing relationships and connections. (F=3)
 - A way of showing care (F=5)
 - Food for the Kapampangan is not just a means for sustenance but a way of connecting with others (F=5)
 - It is the Kapampangan way of sharing their blessings (F=3).
-

The qualitative findings indicate a strong thematic convergence between adult and youth participants regarding the relationship between Kapampangan food culture and table fellowship. Among adults, the most frequently cited themes (F=5) emphasize food as a means of sharing one's blessings and as a practice that goes beyond culinary experience to foster social bonding and communal relationships, suggesting a view of meals as relational rather than merely functional. Related responses (F=3) further describe food as an occasion for binding relationships and nurturing interpersonal connections through shared meals. Youth responses similarly reflect high-frequency themes (F=5) that frame food as a source of connection, care, love, and comfort, highlighting its role in cultivating relational intimacy and belonging. Further youth responses (F=3) highlight food as a way of sharing blessings, mirroring adult perspectives. Taken together, these recurring themes across age groups indicate that table fellowship in Kapampangan culture operates as a deeply relational practice rooted in generosity, care, and mutual connection, reflecting a shared cultural logic that affirms inclusion and communal solidarity.

The Concept of 'Abe' in Context: A Cultural Exegesis

Following de Mesa's method, the exegetical process begins with determination of the issue, concern, and question to be dealt with. At this stage, the lived experiences of selected adult and youth respondents regarding the concept of *abe* in relation to food culture and hospitality, and table fellowship are explored and analyzed.

Stage 1: Determination of the issue, concern, question

Some Kapampangan adults and youth were asked to share their personal experiences and understandings of the concept of *abe*, particularly in relation to Kapampangan food culture and hospitality. Adult participants commonly described *abe* as meaning "friend" or "companion" (see Table 3). Among the youth informants, *abe* was articulated as referring to "someone who gives you value" and not an "other" (see Table 3). Similar to the adults, the youth participants also associated *abe* with the notion of "friend."

Across the interviews, respondents consistently expressed that being addressed as *abe* signifies inclusion rather than exclusion. Participants explained that the term conveys that one is not regarded as a stranger or an insignificant person, but rather as a "fellow human being" (*kaparang tau*). Both adult and youth participants emphasized that *abe* denotes a person who is treated as a companion. One adult participant described *abe* as implying a "shared self," rather than simply an "other." In this sense, when *abe* is used as a form of greeting within the Kapampangan context,

it positions the addressee as *kayabe*—someone recognized as belonging to the family or the broader community.

According to the *Austronesian Comparative Dictionary*, *abe* is a Kapampangan term that signifies “companion,” “friend,” or “spouse.” When used as a verb, it conveys the meanings “to live or stay together” and/or “to accompany.” These definitions are echoed in the works of Forman (2019), Samson (2011), and Bergano (2007). A related term derived from *abe* is *pamakiyabe*, which refers to “the skill of making and keeping friends” (Forman, 2019, p. 16). As demonstrated in everyday speech, the layered meanings of *abe* emerge most clearly when the term is used in conversation. Table 6 illustrates selected examples of *abe* as it appears in participants’ narratives.

Table 6. Usage of Abe in Conversations

Kapampangan	Tagalog	English
<i>Abe abe bang mas matibe!</i>	<i>Sama sama para mas matibay!</i>	Together we become stronger!
<i>Abe abe, saup saup bang mibangun tamu!</i>	<i>Sama sama, tulong tulong para tayo ay makabangon!</i>	Let us help each other so that we can rise up together!
<i>Eka magmalun abe ko!</i>	<i>Huwag kang malungot kaibigan ko</i>	Don’t lose heart my friend!
<i>Mekeni abe ko malaus ka!</i>	<i>Halika kaibigan ko, tuloy ka!</i>	Come here my friend, you’re welcome!

The richness of *abe* as an inclusive concept becomes most evident in its everyday usage, particularly in conversational contexts. For example, the expression “*Abe abe, saup saup bang mibangun tamu!*” (“Let us help one another so that we may rise together”) conveys *abe* as referring to everyone rather than to a specific individual or group. In this sense, the term is neither gendered nor exclusive; instead, it is inherently inclusive and culturally sensitive. Within the Kapampangan worldview, *abe* signifies the active involvement of all in the pursuit of a shared goal. In another common usage, “*Mekeni abe ko, malaus ka!*” (“Come here, my friend, you’re welcome”), *abe* denotes a person who is not treated as an “other” but as a friend—someone already considered part of the family or community. To address someone as *abe* is to position them not as an outsider but as a *kasama* (companion or fellow member). As reflected in the responses of both adult and youth participants (see Table 4), being addressed as *abe* is widely understood as a cordial and welcoming gesture, especially toward newcomers. Moreover, an adult informant (see Table 3) described *abe* as a “shared inner self,” suggesting that the act of greeting involves an intentional sharing of one’s self with another. This layered understanding highlights *abe* not merely as a term of address, but as a relational practice that embodies hospitality, mutual recognition, and inclusive belonging.

***Abe*, food, and table fellowship**

Both adult and youth respondents (see Table 4) described the use of *abe* in meal invitations as a common and meaningful practice among Kapampangan people, particularly in rural areas. In participants’ lived experience, expressions such as “*Mekeni abe, tara mangan!*” (Come, friend, let’s eat!) were not simply procedural invitations but embodied acts of welcome that affirmed belonging and relational closeness. Being invited to dine with the term *abe* was experienced as a profound expression of Kapampangan hospitality, one that positions the addressee within a shared lifeworld rather than as an outsider. This resonates with phenomenological insights that understand shared meals not merely as acts of consumption, but as relational encounters that create and sustain social bonds (see Fischler, 2011; Lund & Mair, 2021).

As shown in Table 5, adult respondents described Kapampangan food culture as a way of bringing people together, where meal sharing and table fellowship nurture meaningful interpersonal connections. Such accounts align with research in the social sciences that conceptualizes commensality (the practice of eating together) as a culturally salient way of establishing social communion, shared identity, and group cohesion (Lund & Mair, 2021). Similarly, youth informants emphasized that food culture in Pampanga functions as an expression of kindness and care, highlighting how sharing food becomes a tangible experience of connecting with others and sharing one's blessings. In this way, eating together with *abe* exemplifies how everyday practices of hospitality are experienced as deeply relational and intersubjective within Kapampangan culture.

Stage 2: Respectful and critical correlation between culture and Current Church Teachings and Western Notions

Using relevant aspects of the culture as source we are able to discern and discover the richness and strengths of the Judeo-Christian Tradition in relation to the local context. At this stage the issue, concern, or question is made to interact, mutually and critically, with current Catholic Church and Biblical teachings on inclusion and table fellowship. Furthermore, select Western notions on inclusion and diversity are investigated and brought into dialogue with the Kapampangan notion of inclusivity, food culture, and the concept of *abe*.

The closest door to any culture is through a community's language (Karpiuk, 2018; de Mesa, 2016). A community's linguistic landscape provides access to the depth of the people's attitudes, values, and aspirations. The concept of *abe* in the Kapampangan spoken language, which expresses a welcoming attitude toward people, manifests the Kapampangan indigenous culture of inclusion and hospitality. The term's existence in the language reveals the people's values and attitudes about treating people – including strangers, as friends. The study's informants cited the use of the term in referring to 'fellow human' (*kaparang tau*) as the essential meaning of *abe* (see Table 3). Moreover, the term is addressed not only to fellow Kapampangan but to everyone, including visitors to the province. Therefore, there is no indication of 'othering' in *abe*. The Ethics Centre (2020) defines 'othering' as "turning fellow humans into abstract entities we can distance ourselves from or treat as less-than-human" (para. 5). Within *abe* the 'other' person is not treated as an 'other' but a person to whom oneself is shared, and therefore a '*kapwa*' (fellow human) not merely a neighbor. Miranda (in Keh, 2020) argued that the Western concept of neighbor is not synonymous with the Filipino concept of *kapwa* because someone considered a neighbor in the Filipino sense is not regarded as an "other" in the Western sense. *Kapwa* is therefore not an outsider (Miranda, 1992, as cited in Keh, 2020, p. 102).

In the Jewish culture, the term for neighbor is '*re'a*' which connotes 'anyone who is a fellow human and who is created by God' (Friedman, 2024). Contrary to the arguments of various biblical interpreters, Friedman (2024), a professor of Jewish Studies at the University of Georgia and Katzin Professor of Jewish Civilization Emeritus at the University of California, San Diego, USA, contended that the term *re'a* does not refer only to "fellow Jew or Israelite." In fact, *re'a* even includes "aliens" or "foreigners" who are non-Jews. *Re'a* first appears in the Bible in the story of the Tower of Babylon, the origin narrative of various languages and nations where every human being on the planet is involved: "And they said each to his *re'a* ..." (Genesis 11:3). In this context, there are no group distinctions; the term refers to all people.

Conversely, in one instance in the New Testament, particularly in the Gospel of Luke, a Samaritan was unfortunately not treated as *re'a* but as an outsider by the

Jewish audience. This parable of the Good Samaritan demonstrates the command to love one's neighbor by showing compassion and mercy to a wounded person, regardless of differences. This parable is referenced in the Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC 1932), which highlights the call to love beyond social and cultural boundaries. Several accounts of Jesus sharing meals with people from diverse backgrounds are found in Luke. These meals were often seen as a symbol of acceptance, reconciliation, and the establishment of a new community centered around Jesus. Brown (2024) noted that the Gospel of Luke distinctly emphasizes Jesus' table fellowship, highlighting actions that created acceptance among the people and rejection among the leaders of Israel. One example is found in Luke 5:27-32 (New Revised Standard Version [NRSV], 1993), where Jesus ate with tax collectors and sinners who were typically despised in Jewish society and not treated as *re'a*. According to Parihala (2021), the conflict between the affluent and the impoverished, the powerful and the vulnerable, and the rulers and the marginalized formed the main backdrop of Luke's Gospel (Lk 4:18-19). Picardal (2023) argued that Jesus' table fellowship with the "unwelcome" was not solely due to his enjoyment of food, drink, and celebration. It denoted unity, sharing, and friendship that outlined the kingdom of God that Jesus aimed to proclaim and establish.

Exclusion and discrimination often emanate from a misconception of freedom, which frequently violates the freedom of others. This vision aligns with Pope Paul VI's insistence that authentic freedom must mature into solidarity, recognizing every person as a brother or sister rather than a rival or threat (Paul VI, 1971). Pope Paul VI emphasized that the mistaken understanding of freedom, which commonly manifests as a demand for independence by resisting the freedom of others, should evolve into its truest human essence: to engage and dedicate itself to fostering dynamic and experiential solidarity (*Octogesima Adveniens*, para. 47). Pope Francis, in his apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium* (Joy of the Gospel), renounced "an economy of exclusion" which turns human beings into commodities that can be discarded (*Evangelii Gaudium*, para. 53). He urged Catholic Christians to relinquish a culture that excludes "others" and instead highlight and develop a culture of inclusion that accommodates fellow humans. The commandment to love one's neighbor is a cornerstone of Christian ethics and is intrinsically linked to the concept of inclusion- fostering among Catholic Christians the extension of love and compassion to all individuals, promoting an inclusive environment where everyone is welcomed and valued.

The Kapampangan culture for welcoming people through *abe* mutually interacts with the Church's teaching on inclusion since both (*abe* and the Church's concept of neighbor) pursue the person as a subject whose dignity is inherent and not an object of usefulness. The Church teaches that people can engage in the shared humanity of others, and as a result, every individual can be considered as neighbor (Pope John Paul II in *Dignitas Infinita*, 2024, para. 26). Similarly, Pope Francis exhorted that an encounter of another human person in love is an encounter of God (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 272). Consequently, the Church emphasizes and upholds the "dignity of every human person, regardless of their physical, mental, cultural, social, and religious characteristics" (*Dignitas Infinita*, para. 66). This teaching is evident in the Kapampangan concept of *abe* which connotes the pursuit of another person as a 'fellow' human and as 'co-equal' in dignity. *Abe* is inclusive, cordial, and hospitable. It is a Kapampangan way of expressing kindness and generosity. '*Mekeni abe*' (Come my friend) is an invitation to share one's humanity with a fellow human which considers the 'other' person as a member of the family or community and not a stranger nor an outsider. Although the Western concept of neighbor does not fully

capture the essential meaning of *abe*, it still depicts the intention of regarding the 'other' as a human being who is created by God and whose dignity is shared.

The richness and 'inclusive' connotation of the Kapampangan concept of *abe* and the Church's incessant advocacy for the promotion and protection of human dignity mutually interrelate. This reciprocal yet critical dialogue between the Kapampangan food culture and the concept of *abe* takes the analysis into the next stage of the cultural exegesis: New Tentative Faith Interpretation.

Stage 3: New Tentative Faith Interpretation

At this point in the cultural analysis, a new exploratory faith interpretation emerges from the dialectical engagement of the two poles. The interpretation is tentative as no conclusive response can be provided to the problem, inquiry, or matter being subjected to a hermeneutical process (de Mesa, 2016). The culturally comprehensible understanding arises from the reciprocal conversation between culture and current Church doctrines on inclusivity and hospitality. This leads to the central question for this stage: How can a culturally intelligible theological interpretation of inclusion be possible, arising from the mutual and critical dialogue between the Kapampangan culture of *abe* and the Judeo-Christian understanding of inclusion and "neighbor"?

According to the British Broadcasting Corporation [BBC] Travel (2021) Filipinos are famous for their warm and welcoming hospitality and are even considered as one of the world's friendliest countries (Pineda, 2025; Greenfield, 2012). In the Philippines, hospitality is a core element of the culture, where visitors are welcomed as friends and are treated as family (Pineda, 2025). Genosa (2024) explained that Filipinos have a natural attitude for making people feel at home. *Tuloy po kayo!* (Welcome!) is a common greeting when one is invited to a Filipino house. Despite belonging to 'a third-world country' and often having limited financial resources, Filipinos still generously share with their 'neighbor' (fellow Filipino or foreigner). Mendoza (2023) found that customer service provided by Filipinos is hinged on the values of hospitality, positive attitudes, and a sincere desire to accommodate others.

As Filipinos, Kapampangan people also exhibit the values of inclusion and hospitality (Manlapaz et al., 1994). This particular trait of the Kapampangan is recognized by other regions in the country, particularly those in the Visayas (Ubaldo, 2014). The term '*abe*' is a concrete example of how one may get into the depths of the Kapampangan psyche. The existence of the term in the Kapampangan language manifests the people's inherent value for hospitality and in accommodating people, particularly those who visit the province. As cited by the study's informants (see Tables 2 & 4), Kapampangan express their hospitality through food by inviting the guest/s '*Mekeni abe, tara mangan!* (Welcome friend, let's eat!). More than just a mere gastronomic experience, Kapampangan share food as an expression of kindness, care, and generosity. They articulate their way of welcoming people through meal sharing and fellowship. This gesture, particularly the Kapampangan, parallels Jesus' table fellowship with people from various social classes. Through meal sharing, coupled with the greeting of *abe*, Kapampangan exhibit the values of hospitality and inclusion as taught by Jesus in the gospels. It is the Kapampangan's modest way of participating in creating 'space' for befriending the 'unwelcome' and the 'un-invited.' *Abe* becomes a potential 'tool' for advocating equality and inclusion in society. Through *abe*, every person is regarded as a 'human being' whose self and dignity are shared with fellow *abe*. When every person is treated as *abe*, they are regarded not as

an outsider but as a family / community member, i.e., a neighbor who should be loved and cared for.

This new tentative faith interpretation of inclusion, through *abe* as neighbor, offers valuable material for educating young people on inclusivity, friendship, and hospitality. Jesus' command to 'love our neighbor as we love ourselves' may be culturally interpreted using the Kapampangan understanding of hospitality, food culture, and through the concept of *abe* as neighbor.

Conclusion

The study explored the vibrant food culture of the Kapampangan people and their rich, distinctive concept of *abe*. Kapampangan people express their hospitality through the sharing of food and by welcoming and treating guests as part of the family or community. For them, food culture transcends mere culinary or gastronomic experience- it serves as a means of sharing one's blessings with fellow *abe*, thereby fostering and nourishing relationships and connections. It becomes an expression of love and comfort, especially toward the least, the last, and the lost.

The Kapampangan concept of *abe* refers to a friend, a companion, someone who gives value to your being, or even a shared inner self. In this sense, *abe* is not perceived as an "other," but as a fellow human being whose dignity is equally shared with others.

Mekeni abe, tara mangan! ("Come, friend, let's eat!") is both an invitation and an expression of hospitality and warmth. It reflects the Kapampangan spirit of inclusivity and serves as an impetus for building meaningful and harmonious relationships. Thus, *abe* embodies a friendly and heartfelt way of welcoming people, especially visitors to the province.

Western notions of the "other" and the "neighbor" do not fully capture the Filipino concept of *kapwa*, much less the Kapampangan notion of *abe*. In both *kapwa* and *abe*, the neighbor is not regarded as "other," but as a fellow human being- a person among persons. Although the Jewish concept of *re'a* originally referred to every person as a neighbor, in the New Testament context, most non-Jews such as Samaritans and Gentiles were still considered "others." By contrast, within *kapwa* and *abe*, all people are viewed as co-equal in dignity. Consequently, Jesus' meal fellowship with outcasts may be culturally interpreted and rearticulated through the Kapampangan concept of *abe*. This cultural and religious understanding of food-sharing provides a meaningful framework for reinterpreting inclusion and hospitality from a Kapampangan perspective, grounded in Jesus' table fellowship.

This research has consequently argued that the Kapampangan concept of *abe*, expressed through meal fellowship, constitutes an indigenous theology of inclusion that resonates deeply with Jesus' table fellowship and Eucharistic living. Overall, the study contributes to theological, cultural, and educational discourse by highlighting the transformative potential of meal fellowship as a lived expression of inclusion rooted in Kapampangan culture.

Declaration on the Use of AI

The researchers utilized ChatGPT, Grammarly, and Quill Bot for grammar check, paraphrasing, and refinement of sentences and paragraphs.

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About the Authors

Bonnadelbert A. Antonio is an Associate Professor of Theology at Holy Angel University in Angeles City, Philippines, where he has taught since 1997. He earned his undergraduate degree in Philosophy from St. Anthony Mary Claret College of Philosophy, a Master of Arts in Education from the University of Asia and the Pacific, and a doctoral degree in Education with a specialization in Religious Education and Values Education from De La Salle University in Manila. His scholarly work is featured in several peer-reviewed publications, including: *Hitik: International Journal of Catechists and Religious Educators (REAP)*; *The International Journal of Environmental Sustainability (Common Ground Research Networks)*; *International Journal of Research Studies in Education (Consortia Academia)*; *Intersections: Gender and Sexuality in Asia and the Pacific (Australian National University)*; and the *Journal of Empirical Theology (Brill)*. His diverse research interests include Contextual Theology, Moral Theology, Feminist Theology, Biblical Studies and Hermeneutics, Axiology and Existential Phenomenology, as well as Environmental Studies.

Jocelyn H. Masbang is an Associate Professor of Christian Living Education at Holy Angel University, Angeles City, Philippines, where she also serves as Chairperson of the Christian Education Department. She holds a doctorate in Educational Management (with Distinction) and a master's degree in Guidance and Counseling. Her research interests include Catholic education, marriage and family life, Filipino values, and youth formation. She has published in international refereed journals, including *The International Journal of Interdisciplinary Cultural Studies*. She is a licensed professional teacher and an active member of the Religious Educators' Association of the Philippines.

Rowena B. Sibal is an Assistant Professor of Theology at Holy Angel University, where she also serves as the Head of the Identity and Character Formation Office and Campus Ministry. In this role, she leads initiatives centered on Christian education, character formation, and ministry programs that support both the university community and its broader religious mission. She earned her bachelor's degree in Elementary Education from Holy Angel University and completed the academic requirements for a Master of Arts in Values Education at the Philippine Normal University. She also holds a Master of Arts in Theological Studies from the University of the Assumption and has completed 36 units toward a Doctor of Philosophy in Educational Management.



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Original Article

Extent of Practice of the JEEPGY Framework among the Grade 12 Students in Selected Diocesan Catholic Schools in Western Visayas

Daniel S. Fernando , Rev. Fr. Eric L. Legada , & Sr. Ma. Rosini P. Escarilla 

St. Anthony's College, San Jose de Buenavista, Antique, Philippines

Correspondence: dfernando@sac.edu.ph

Abstract

This study assessed the extent of practice of the JEEPGY framework among Grade 12 students in selected Diocesan Catholic schools in Western Visayas during the 2025-2026 school year. Additionally, it examined the significant differences in the extent of JEEPGY practice based on the demographic variables. It employed a descriptive-comparative research design. It consisted of 271 stratified randomly selected Grade 12 students. In gathering the data, a validated and reliability-tested 47-item researcher-made questionnaire was utilized, employing a five-point Likert scale. In analyzing the data, descriptive and comparative statistics were employed. Specifically, mean, standard deviation, Mann–Whitney U test, and Kruskal–Wallis H test were used. Lastly, the entire process of this study adhered to research ethical guidelines. Overall, the extent of practice of JEEPGY was rated as great. Meanwhile, gender equality had the highest overall rating of the other dimensions and was interpreted as very great. All the demographic variables were rated as great. In addition, significant differences were found across academic strands. It revealed that Accountancy, Business, and Management (ABM) students had significantly lower practice. Lastly, this study underscores that the selected Diocesan Catholic schools in Western Visayas are successful in implementing the framework as encouraged by the CEAP. The very great extent in the gender equality domain suggests that schools are effectively fostering an inclusive and respectful learning environment. Hence, it is encouraged to continuously integrate the framework into all school activities and curricula to maintain the great extent of practice of JEEPGY.

Keywords: Diocesan Catholic Schools, JEEPGY, Practice, Quantitative, Western Visayas

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Introduction

Global challenges such as climate change, war, inequality, poverty, and disempowerment continue to persist, which affect the vulnerable people and low-income countries (Department of Economic, 2020). With this, the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) call for integrated education across the globe that promotes sustainable lifestyles, human rights, peace, gender equality, and ecological responsibility (Westheimer, 2020). Countries are encouraged to embed these goals into their curricula and policies by 2030 to foster responsible, empowered students (Öztemur et al., 2024). Hence, aligning these initiatives with education systems produces broad benefits by stimulating economic growth through skilled workforces, strengthening social cohesion through inclusive learning, and reducing environmental risks through sustainability curricula (Owuondo, 2023). Such alignments also equip students worldwide to drive social transformation and ecological sustainability (Assefa, 2024).

In some Asian countries, climate change and climate-related disasters are increasingly threatening education by displacing communities and damaging school infrastructure (Islam & Khan, 2020). These risks disproportionately affect marginalized and vulnerable populations. It also undermines continuity of learning and long-term development (Hoffmann & Blecha, 2020). In fact, many governments in the region have begun reforming curricula and education policies to integrate the Sustainable Development Goals; however, gaps remain, especially in foundational literacy, numeracy, and equality of opportunity (ESCAP, 2018). Given these persistent and intersecting challenges, Oo et al. (2025) noted that there is an urgent need for education frameworks in Asia that embed sustainability and climate resilience to prepare learners for a volatile, interconnected world.

In the Philippines, public schools are steadily aligning with the Sustainable Development Goals through various reforms and policy initiatives, particularly of the Department of Education (DepEd) (Balagtas et al., 2025). The Department of Education highlighted that programs such as the Alternative Learning System, the Indigenous Peoples Education Program, the Digital Rise initiative, and the Last Mile Schools initiative support national efforts, including the SDGs (Reyes et al., 2019). In addition, DepEd strengthened this alignment through DepEd Order 24, series of 2022, which adopted the Basic Education Development Plan 2030 to guide long-term improvements in access, quality, and equity in basic education (DepEd, 2022). The said agency also renewed its focus on global citizenship and sustainable development by expanding professional development programs that promote transformative education and awareness of the Sustainable Development Goals among Filipino teachers (Mitra, 2025). Hence, these efforts show that public schools in the Philippines are working to integrate sustainability into basic education in response to growing national and global challenges.

Diocesan Catholic schools in the Philippines uphold a mission of faith and holistic development. These schools advance this commitment through the JEEPGY framework developed by the Catholic Educational Association of the Philippines (CEAP, 2018). This framework focuses on justice, ecological integrity, engaged citizenship, poverty reduction, gender equality, and youth empowerment. It serves as a guide to Catholic schools in forming students who embody Gospel values while responding to pressing social and environmental concerns (Isidoro-Romero, 2020).

The framework strongly complements the goals of sustainable development since it promotes social responsibility, care for creation, respect for human dignity, and active participation in community building (Rosales, 2024). By integrating this framework in school programs and student activities, Diocesan Catholic schools align their educational mission with national and global efforts (Isidoro-Romero, 2020).

Meanwhile, Diocesan Catholic schools continue to face numerous challenges that underscore the need to assess how effectively students are implementing the JEEPGY framework. Many schools observe gaps in students' awareness and application of social justice principles, ecological responsibility, and active participation in community life (Rañin, 2025; Fernando & Bual, 2024; Acero et al., 2025). Concerns have also been raised regarding the limited involvement of Catholic students in poverty outreach programs and declining engagement in youth leadership initiatives (Rañin, 2025). These challenges suggest that, while JEEPGY is embedded in school programs and curricula, its actual practice among students may vary due to differences in implementation and formation experiences. Thus, understanding the extent of JEEPGY practice is essential to ensure that Catholic education continues to respond meaningfully to social and environmental challenges in local communities.

Research Gaps

Various studies have mentioned the JEEPGY framework of the Catholic Educational Association of the Philippines (CEAP) in their discussions of Catholic education and value formation. Gozum et al. (2023) examined how peace education in the Philippines promotes unity and interreligious understanding from a Catholic perspective, highlighting the framework's relevance in fostering justice and peace. Similarly, Francisco and Flores (2024) examined how the integration of *Laudato Si'* in Christian faith formation encourages ecological awareness and social responsibility, which are consistent with the principles of the framework. Additionally, Isidoro-Romero (2020) discussed the mission of Catholic educational institutions to promote evangelization and moral development, noting the importance of frameworks such as JEEPGY in achieving holistic formation. Moreover, Rosales (2024) focused on developing a climate-sensitive religious education curriculum that reflects environmental and ethical values aligned with the framework. Furthermore, Celestial (2025) examined the initiatives of faith-based organizations in religious education and community engagement, and also referenced the framework. A study explored the extent of the pillars of transformative education, or the JEEPGY (Labrador, 2023). However, these studies discussed JEEPGY as a guiding concept within Catholic education and did not measure or assess the extent to which students practice its principles. [A2.1]This is the gap that the present study filled in.

Objective of the Study

This study assessed the extent of practice of justice and peace, ecological integrity, engaged citizenship, poverty reduction, gender equality, and youth empowerment (JEEPGY) among the Grade 12 students in selected Diocesan Catholic schools in Western Visayas during the academic year 2025-2026 when taken as a whole and grouped according to sex, strand, religion, membership in any organization, and family structure. Additionally, it examined significant differences in the extent of JEEPGY practice among respondents, grouped by demographic

variables. This study may provide data for Diocesan Catholic school administrators to reevaluate the implementation of the framework, a program developed by the Catholic Educational Association of the Philippines (CEAP). Additionally, this study is central to CEAP’s mission of forming students into agents of transformation in society.

Theoretical Framework

This study theoretically assumed that the extent of practice of justice and peace, ecological integrity, engaged citizenship, poverty reduction, gender equality, and youth empowerment varies by sex, strand, religion, membership in any organization, and family structure among Grade 12 students in Diocesan Catholic schools. This assumption is grounded in Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems theory [A3.1](1979), which posits that a person’s development and behavior are shaped by various layers of the environment, including family, school, community, and broader society. These various layers influence how individuals think, act, and relate to others. In this study, these factors are evident in the students’ backgrounds and experiences, which may influence their practice of the six areas of the JEEPGY framework.

Similarly, the framework, developed by the Catholic Educational Association of the Philippines (CEAP), guides Catholic schools in forming learners who are faithful, responsible, and actively promote social good (Gozum et al., 2023). Thus, Bronfenbrenner’s theory helps explain how students’ environments and personal backgrounds influence their practice of JEEPGY. Figure 1 presents the demographics of Grade 12 students as independent variables, with the JEEPGY framework as the dependent variable. It implies that the demographic variables of respondents affect the extent of their practice of justice and peace, ecological integrity, engaged citizenship, poverty reduction, gender equality, and youth empowerment. Meanwhile, the possible findings of this study may serve as an evaluation of the Diocesan Catholic schools’ implementation of the CEAP program.

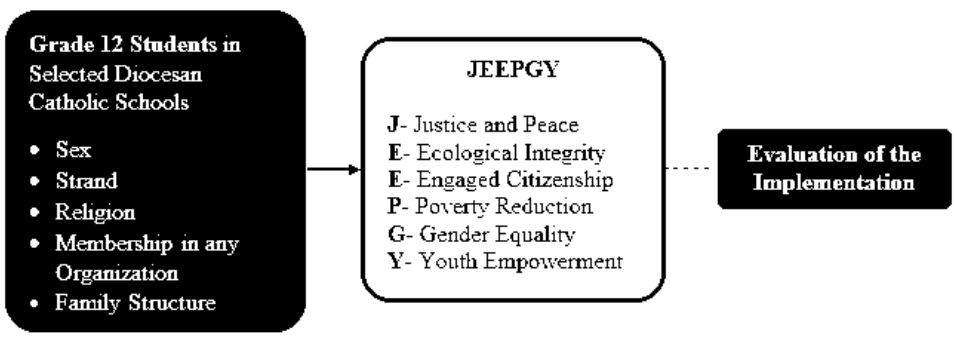


Figure 1. Conceptual Model

Methodology

This study utilized a quantitative research design, specifically the descriptive-comparative approach. The selected methodology statistically analyzed specific variables to address the theory-guided research questions and hypotheses (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The descriptive approach assessed the extent of practice of justice and peace, ecological integrity, engaged citizenship, poverty reduction, gender

equality, and youth empowerment (JEEPGY) among the Grade 12 students in selected Diocesan Catholic schools when taken as a whole and grouped according to sex, strand, religion, membership in any organization, and family structure. Meanwhile, the comparative approach examined significant differences in the extent of JEEPGY practice among Grade 12 students, grouped by demographics. To identify the sample, the researchers utilized the Raosoft sample size online calculator. The study consisted of 271 stratified randomly selected Grade 12 students in selected Diocesan Catholic schools in Western Visayas. The respondents were identified using the fishbowl technique.

Table 1 presents the distributions of the respondents. In terms of sex, 60.5% (n=164) are females, while 39.5% (n=107) are males. Regarding the academic strand, the largest group comes from STEM, comprising 45.4% (n = 123), followed closely by HUMSS at 43.2% (n = 117). Smaller proportions are enrolled in ABM at 8.5% (n = 23), and the least represented is TVL, with 3.0% (n = 8). The majority of the students identified as Catholic, accounting for 87.1% (n = 236), while 12.9% (n = 35) identified as belonging to other religious/faith affiliation. [A4.1]In terms of organizational involvement, 60.1% (n=163) reported no membership in any organization, whereas 39.9% (n=108) indicated that they are members of at least one group. Finally, family structure data show that 66.8% (n = 181) come from intact families, while 33.2% (n = 90) reported living in non-intact family settings.

Table 1. Demographic Profile of the Respondents

Variables	n	%
Sex		
Male	107	39.5
Female	164	60.5
Academic Strands		
HUMSS	117	43.2
ABM	23	8.5
STEM	123	45.4
TVL	8	3.0
Religion		
Catholic	236	87.1
Belonging to other religious/faith affiliation	35	12.9
Membership in any Organization		
Yes	108	39.9
No	163	60.1
Family Structure		
Intact	181	66.8
Non-intact	90	33.2
Whole	271	100.0

Data Gathering Procedure

The study utilized a validated and reliability-tested 47-item researcher-made questionnaire. In terms of validity, the questionnaire was rigorously reviewed by 10 subject experts using the content validity ratio by Lawshe (1975). It generated a valid score of 0.97. Only one item was removed. [A6.1]In terms of reliability, the questionnaire was pilot-tested with 30 non-actual respondents, and it yielded a Cronbach's alpha result of 0.95. The 47 items were distributed across six dimensions of JEEPGY: justice and peace, ecological integrity, engaged citizenship, poverty reduction, gender equality, and youth empowerment. The questionnaire consists of two sections. The first part involves gathering demographic information from the

respondents. The second section assesses the extent of practice of JEEPGY using a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (Very Low Extent) to 5 (Very Great Extent). Lastly, the study used a Google Form, which was sent to respondents due to the distance between the Diocesan Catholic schools in Western Visayas.

Data Analysis

The tabulated data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) under the guidance of a qualified statistician. The descriptive and comparative statistical analyses were employed. Specifically, the mean (M) and standard deviation (SD) were used to assess the extent of JEEPGY practice among Grade 12 students. Meanwhile, the normality of the overall JEEPGY practice was evaluated using the Shapiro–Wilk test. The result ($W = 0.980$, $p = 0.001$) indicates that the distribution significantly deviates from normality. Because the p-value is below the conventional threshold of 0.05, the data are considered not normally distributed. This suggests the need to use nonparametric statistical procedures for the subsequent inferential analyses involving this variable. Hence, the Mann-Whitney U test was used for sex, religion, organizational membership, and family structure, while the Kruskal–Wallis H test was applied for strand.

Ethical Considerations

The entire process of this study adhered to the Philippine Health Research Ethics Board (PHREB) and the institution's ethical guidelines. Approval from the superintendent and school administrators was sought to conduct the study. Additionally, the senior high school students were informed about the study's goals and purpose and reminded of their voluntary participation in the study. Moreover, they were guaranteed complete confidentiality and privacy of their data. The answered questionnaires, which contained raw information, were stored in password-protected files and disposed of by manual shredding after a specified period.

Results

Extent of Practice of JEEPGY among the Grade 12 students in Diocesan Catholic schools

Tables 2.1 and 2.2 present the extent of JEEPGY practice among the respondents. As a whole, Justice and Peace was rated great ($M=4.18$, $SD=0.53$). Both males ($M=4.17$, $SD=0.57$) and females ($M=4.19$, $SD=0.50$) showed great levels. All strands likewise reflected great practice: HUMSS ($M=4.16$, $SD=0.56$), ABM ($M=4.17$, $SD=0.43$), STEM ($M=4.20$, $SD=0.50$), and TVL ($M=4.20$, $SD=0.78$). Catholics showed great levels ($M=4.18$, $SD=0.53$), while belonging to other religious/faith affiliation [A7.1] demonstrated very great practice ($M=4.21$, $SD=0.48$). Students with organizational membership showed very great levels ($M=4.21$, $SD=0.54$), while non-members reflected great levels ($M=4.16$, $SD=0.52$). Both intact ($M=4.19$, $SD=0.52$) and non-intact families ($M=4.16$, $SD=0.54$) showed great levels.

Ecological Integrity was rated as great overall ($M = 3.98$, $SD = 0.59$). Males ($M = 3.97$, $SD = 0.64$) and females ($M = 3.99$, $SD = 0.56$) both reflected high levels. All strands also showed great ecological practice: HUMSS ($M=4.02$, $SD=0.60$), ABM ($M=3.82$, $SD=0.50$), STEM ($M=3.99$, $SD=0.57$), and TVL ($M=3.70$, $SD=0.88$). Catholics ($M=3.96$, $SD=0.59$) and belonging to other religious/faith affiliation [A8.1] ($M=4.10$, $SD=0.54$) both indicated great levels. Organization members ($M=4.04$, $SD=0.58$) and non-members ($M=3.94$, $SD=0.59$) were likewise within the great range. Students from intact ($M=3.99$, $SD=0.56$) and non-intact families ($M=3.97$, $SD=0.64$) also demonstrated great ecological integrity.

Engaged Citizenship was rated as great overall (M = 4.19, SD = 0.56). Males (M=4.16, SD=0.62) reflected great levels, while females (M=4.21, SD=0.52) showed very great engagement. HUMSS (M=4.22, SD=0.57) and STEM (M=4.21, SD=0.56) showed very great levels, while ABM (M=3.96, SD=0.47) and TVL (M=4.08, SD=0.63) showed great engagement. Catholics indicated great levels (M=4.18, SD=0.57), while belonging to other religious/faith affiliation [A9.1]demonstrated very great engagement (M=4.27, SD=0.49). Students with organizational membership also reflected very great levels (M=4.26, SD=0.58), compared to great levels among non-members (M=4.14, SD=0.54). Intact (M=4.19, SD=0.53) and non-intact families (M=4.20, SD=0.62) both showed great engagement.

Poverty Reduction was rated as great overall (M = 3.90, SD = 0.66). Males (M=3.94, SD=0.70) and females (M=3.87, SD=0.64) reflected great levels. HUMSS (M=3.85, SD=0.69), ABM (M=3.61, SD=0.67), STEM (M=3.99, SD=0.62), and TVL (M=3.91, SD=0.78) all showed great practice. Catholics (M=3.89, SD=0.66) and belonging to other religious/faith affiliation (M=3.96, SD=0.66) similarly demonstrated great involvement. Organizational members (M = 3.96, SD = 0.65) and non-members (M = 3.86, SD = 0.67) were both within a great range. Intact (M=3.89, SD=0.64) and non-intact families (M=3.91, SD=0.71) also showed great levels.

Table 2.1 Extent of JEEPGY Practice Among the Senior High School Students in Selected Diocesan Catholic Schools

Variables	Justice and Peace			Ecological Integrity			Engaged Citizenship			Poverty Reduction		
	M	SD	Int	M	SD	Int	M	SD	Int	M	SD	Int
Sex												
Male	4.17	0.57	Gr	3.97	0.64	Gr	4.16	0.62	Gr	3.94	0.70	Gr
Female	4.19	0.50	Gr	3.99	0.56	Gr	4.21	0.52	VG	3.87	0.64	Gr
Strand												
HUMSS	4.16	0.56	Gr	4.02	0.60	Gr	4.22	0.57	VG	3.85	0.69	Gr
ABM	4.17	0.43	Gr	3.82	0.50	Gr	3.96	0.47	Gr	3.61	0.67	Gr
STEM	4.20	0.50	Gr	3.99	0.57	Gr	4.21	0.56	VG	3.99	0.62	Gr
TVL	4.20	0.78	Gr	3.70	0.88	Gr	4.08	0.63	Gr	3.91	0.78	Gr
Religion												
Catholic	4.18	0.53	Gr	3.96	0.59	Gr	4.18	0.57	Gr	3.89	0.66	Gr
Belonging to other religious/faith affiliation	4.21	0.48	VG	4.10	0.54	Gr	4.27	0.49	VG	3.96	0.66	Gr
Membership in any organization												
Yes	4.21	0.54	VG	4.04	0.58	Gr	4.26	0.58	VG	3.96	0.65	Gr
No	4.16	0.52	Gr	3.94	0.59	Gr	4.14	0.54	Gr	3.86	0.67	Gr
Family Structure												
Intact	4.19	0.52	Gr	3.99	0.56	Gr	4.19	0.53	Gr	3.89	0.64	Gr
Non-Intact	4.16	0.54	Gr	3.97	0.64	Gr	4.20	0.62	Gr	3.91	0.71	Gr
Whole	4.18	0.53	Gr	3.98	0.59	Gr	4.19	0.56	Gr	3.90	0.66	Gr

Mean Range: 1.00 - 1.80 = Very Low (VL), 1.81 - 2.60 = Low, 2.61 - 3.40 = Moderate (Mod), 3.41 - 4.20 = Great (Gr), 4.21 - 5.00 = Very Great (VG)

Gender Equality received the highest overall rating, interpreted as very great (M = 4.28, SD = 0.58). Males (M=4.25, SD=0.62) and females (M=4.30, SD=0.56)

both reflected very great levels. HUMSS (M=4.27, SD=0.56), STEM (M=4.35, SD=0.60), and belonging to other religious/faith affiliation (M=4.33, SD=0.58) all showed very great levels, while TVL reflected great practice (M=3.95, SD=0.65). Organizational members (M=4.27, SD=0.57) and non-members (M=4.29, SD=0.60) also reflected very great levels. Students from intact (M=4.29, SD=0.55) and non-intact families (M=4.27, SD=0.64) showed consistent very great practice.

Youth Empowerment was rated as great overall (M = 3.96, SD = 0.64). Males (M=4.00, SD=0.63) and females (M=3.94, SD=0.64) both showed great levels. HUMSS (M=3.96, SD=0.64), STEM (M=4.05, SD=0.60), and TVL (M=3.95, SD=0.64) also indicated great levels, while ABM showed great but comparatively lower levels (M=3.54, SD=0.61). Catholics (M=3.96, SD=0.64) and belonging to other religious/faith affiliation (M=3.96, SD=0.63) demonstrated identical great levels. Organization members (M=4.08, SD=0.60) reflected higher great levels, compared to non-members (M=3.89, SD=0.65). Intact (M=3.97, SD=0.59) and non-intact families (M=3.95, SD=0.72) also showed great levels.

Lastly, the overall practice of JEEPGY was rated as great (M = 4.08, SD = 0.51). Males (M=4.08, SD=0.57) and females (M=4.08, SD=0.48) reported the same interpretation. HUMSS (M=4.08, SD=0.53), STEM (M=4.13, SD=0.50), ABM (M=3.85, SD=0.44), and TVL (M=3.95, SD=0.61) all remained within the great range. Catholics (M=4.07, SD=0.52) and belonging to other religious/faith affiliation (M=4.14, SD=0.49) showed great levels. Organizational members (M=4.14, SD=0.50) slightly exceeded non-members (M=4.04, SD=0.53), while intact (M=4.08, SD=0.48) and non-intact families (M=4.07, SD=0.58) reflected nearly identical great levels. Overall, the consistently high ratings across all JEEPGY dimensions suggest that students demonstrate strong values aligned with justice, environmental responsibility, civic participation, poverty awareness, gender equality, and youth empowerment. This widespread commitment across demographic profiles indicates a well-embedded culture of social responsibility and holistic formation within the student population.

Table 2.2 Extent of JEEPGY Practice Among the Senior High School Students in Selected Diocesan Catholic Schools

Variables	Gender Equality			Youth Empowerment			Practice of JEEPGY		
	M	SD	Int	M	SD	Int	M	SD	Int
Sex									
Male	4.25	0.62	VG	4.00	0.63	Gr	4.08	0.57	Gr
Female	4.30	0.56	VG	3.94	0.64	Gr	4.08	0.48	Gr
Strand									
HUMSS	4.27	0.56	VG	3.96	0.64	Gr	4.08	0.53	Gr
ABM	4.11	0.57	Gr	3.54	0.61	Gr	3.85	0.44	Gr
STEM	4.35	0.60	VG	4.05	0.60	Gr	4.13	0.50	Gr
TVL	3.95	0.65	Gr	3.95	0.64	Gr	3.95	0.61	Gr
Religion									
Catholic	4.27	0.59	VG	3.96	0.64	Gr	4.07	0.52	Gr
Belonging to other religious/faith affiliation	4.33	0.58	VG	3.96	0.63	Gr	4.14	0.49	Gr
Membership in any organization									
Yes	4.27	0.57	VG	4.08	0.60	Gr	4.14	0.50	Gr
No	4.29	0.60	VG	3.89	0.65	Gr	4.04	0.53	Gr
Family Structure									

Intact	4.29	0.55	VG	3.97	0.59	Gr	4.08	0.48	Gr
Non-Intact	4.27	0.64	VG	3.95	0.72	Gr	4.07	0.58	Gr
Whole	4.28	0.58	VG	3.96	0.64	Gr	4.08	0.51	Gr

Mean Range: 1.00 - 1.80 = Very Low (VL), 1.81 - 2.60 = Low, 2.61 - 3.40 = Moderate (Mod), 3.41 - 4.20 = Great (Gr), 4.21 - 5.00 = Very Great (VG)

Differences in the Extent of Practice of JEEPGY among the Grade 12 students in Diocesan Catholic schools

Table 3 presents the differences in the practice of JEEPGY among the respondents according to sex, religion, organizational membership, family structure, and strand. The results showed no significant difference in the practice of JEEPGY when grouped according to sex [U = 8742.000, p = 0.960], religion [U = 3873.500, p = 0.553], membership in any organization [U = 7958.000, p = 0.181], and family structure [U = 8133.000, p = 0.984], indicating that these groups demonstrated similar levels of JEEPGY practice. However, a significant difference was found across strands based on the Kruskal–Wallis test [H(3)=7.932, p=0.047]. Post hoc comparisons revealed that ABM students had significantly lower JEEPGY practice compared with those in HUMSS (p = 0.032) and STEM (p = 0.008). No other pairwise differences were statistically significant. This suggests that while most strands exhibit similar levels of JEEPGY practice, students in the ABM strand may require additional support or interventions to strengthen their engagement in JEEPGY-related initiatives.

Table 3. Difference in the Level of JEEPGY Practice Among Senior High School Students

Variable	U	z	p
Sex	8742.000	-0.051	0.960
Religion	3873.500	-0.593	0.553
Membership in any Organization	7958.000	-1.336	0.181
Family Structure	8133.000	-0.020	0.984
	H	df	p
Strand	7.932*	3	0.047

*Note: *difference is significant when p≤0.05*

Post hoc for Practice of JEEPGY				
Strand	Test Statistic	Std. Error	Std. Test Statistic	Sig.
HUMSS - ABM	38.381*	17.874	2.147	0.032
HUMSS - STEM	-9.101	10.120	-0.899	0.368
HUMSS - TVL	24.088	28.637	0.841	0.400
ABM - STEM	-47.483*	17.802	-2.667	0.008
ABM - TVL	-14.293	32.165	-0.444	0.657
STEM - TVL	33.189	28.592	1.161	0.246

Discussion

Extent of Practice of JEEPGY among the Grade 12 students in Diocesan Catholic schools

This finding suggests that Grade 12 students in the selected Diocesan Catholic schools in Western Visayas demonstrate a high level of practice of the JEEPGY across demographic groups. This means that the principles of justice and peace, ecological integrity, engaged citizenship, poverty reduction, gender equality, and youth empowerment are being meaningfully reflected in their practice. This could be because Diocesan Catholic schools offer regular spiritual and pastoral formation programs, such as recollections, retreats, and monthly masses, that reinforce the values of justice, peace, ecological integrity, and service among students. This claim is supported by Mua et al. (2024) and Akin-Otiko (2023), who emphasized that faith-

based formation activities significantly shape students' moral consciousness and social responsibility. The great extent of practice may also be attributed to the presence of strict yet compassionate school policies that promote respect, discipline, environmental care, and social responsibility. This finding is consistent with the work of Kleindienst (2024) and Akin-Otiko (2023), who found that well-implemented school policies and a favorable school climate enhance value-driven behavior among students. Additionally, the influence of Catholic teachings, which highlight justice, stewardship of creation, and service to the marginalized, likely strengthens the students' value orientation (Poncini, 2024; Kleindienst, 2024; Tibo & Lumban Tobing, 2022).

Additionally, this could also be because many students are regularly involved in parish-based activities or diocesan youth ministries, which reinforce JEEPGY-related competencies even beyond the school setting. This finding is consistent with studies by Msebi (2022) and Acero et al. (2025), which have shown that youth participation in church ministries contributes to stronger moral development and civic engagement. Another contributing factor may be the various leadership opportunities available to learners, such as YES O, SSG, and campus ministry, where they practice cooperation, responsibility, and service. This claim is supported by García Martín et al. (2023) and Gule (2022), who documented that youth leadership programs enhance character formation and value-based behavior. Furthermore, the conduct of Diocesan Youth Day and school-organized immersion programs or community engagements likely strengthens students' internalization of justice, engaged citizenship, and ecological integrity (Cardilino et al., 2022; Tirres & Schikore, 2020). Lastly, for students belonging to other religious or faith affiliations, the great extent of JEEPGY practice may be attributed to the inclusive and values-oriented nature of school programs, which emphasize universal principles such as justice, service, responsibility, and care for creation regardless of religious background as supported by the study of Acero et al. (2025) and Fernando et al. (2025). This suggests that while the JEEPGY framework is rooted in Catholic identity, its core competencies are accessible and formative for all learners, enabling even non-Catholic students to internalize and practice these values through shared school activities and leadership experiences. These findings suggest that diocesan Catholic schools are effectively cultivating socially responsible, morally grounded, and civically engaged learners, aligning with the mission of the JEEPGY framework.

Moreover, this finding suggests that students across sex, strand, religion, organizational membership, and family structure demonstrate a very great extent of practicing gender equality, making it the highest-rated JEEPGY domain. This means that students consistently uphold respectful and inclusive interactions, regardless of demographic differences. This could be attributed to the strengthened integration of gender-sensitive education and inclusive school policies that promote respect among learners. This finding is supported by the study of Truna et al. (2022) and Bernardo & Garcia (2025), who found that school-based gender programs significantly enhance students' gender-responsive attitudes and behaviors. This could be because students are increasingly exposed to awareness campaigns and classroom discussions that aim to challenge stereotypes and promote gender equity. This finding can be supported by the studies of Lanaban et al. (2025), Cagang (2023), and Bejasa (2024), who reported that gender education, inclusive pedagogies, and gender mainstreaming in schools lead to higher levels of acceptance, equity orientation, and positive gender-related practices among Filipino students. These findings suggest that Diocesan Catholic schools are effectively cultivating a culture of inclusivity and equality, enabling

students to internalize and consistently practice gender-equitable behaviors both within and beyond the school environment.

Differences in the Extent of Practice of JEEPGY among the Grade 12 students in Diocesan Catholic schools

This finding suggests that students demonstrated comparable levels of JEEPGY practice regardless of sex, religion, organizational membership, or family structure, but notable differences emerged across academic strands. This means that while JEEPGY is generally internalized among most Grade 12 students. This could be because Diocesan Catholic schools in Western Visayas provide a uniform Catholic instruction and spiritual activities that minimize differences across student groups. All students, regardless of sex, religion, membership, or family structure, received and underwent the same pastoral formation programs, classroom instruction, homeroom guidance, and religion classes that emphasized all the dimensions of the framework. This claim is supported by Hallinan and Kubitschek (2012) and Fernando and Cabardo (2024), who argue that Catholic schools provide equal opportunities and instruction to all students, regardless of their background. These findings imply that Diocesan Catholic schools are effective in providing consistent value formation that fosters a shared understanding and practice of JEEPGY among diverse student groups. This highlights the school system's strong capacity to promote equity through uniform instruction, pastoral activities, and Catholic educational programs.

In terms of academic strands, students in the ABM strand appear to exhibit significantly lower practice compared to those in HUMSS and STEM. First, this could be due to the low number of students in the ABM strand, which resulted in lower practice of JEEPGY compared to other academic strands. In addition, this could be attributed to the varying academic orientations and learning exposures of each strand, with HUMSS and STEM offering more opportunities for social participation, civic awareness, and community-engaged learning. This finding is supported by Wang and Hofkens (2020), who noted that learners' engagement in values-driven and socially oriented activities often varies depending on classroom experiences. This could be because ABM students may have fewer structured activities related to socio-civic themes or environmental programs, which limits opportunities to practice JEEPGY (Kyriakopoulos et al., 2020). These findings suggest that targeted interventions may be necessary to enhance the JEEPGY engagement of ABM students, ensuring a more equitable distribution across all strands.

Conclusion

The findings suggest that the selected Diocesan Catholic schools are successful in cultivating socially responsible, civically engaged, environmentally conscious, and gender-equitable students, as reflected in the consistently great and very great levels of JEEPGY practice across groups. The strong performance in the gender equality domain suggests that schools are effectively fostering inclusive and respectful learner environments where equitable attitudes are deeply internalized. The absence of significant differences across sex, religion, organizational membership, and family structure further indicates that JEEPGY-related values are being promoted uniformly across diverse student backgrounds. However, the significantly lower JEEPGY practice among ABM students highlights the need for more targeted, strand-specific interventions to ensure that their learning experiences equally expose them to socio-civic, ecological, and justice-oriented activities. Collectively, these results emphasize the importance of sustaining and strengthening school-based formation programs

while tailoring support to strands that may require additional opportunities for meaningful engagement.

Limitations of the Findings

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the research focused only on Grade 12 students in selected Diocesan Catholic schools in Western Visayas, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other grade levels, schools, or regions. Second, the use of a self-reported questionnaire may be subject to response bias, as students might have provided socially desirable answers rather than fully reflecting their actual practices. Third, the study employed a cross-sectional design during the academic year 2025-2026, capturing students' practices at a single point in time without considering possible changes over time. Fourth, while the questionnaire was validated and reliability-tested, it was researcher-made and may not encompass all possible aspects of the JEEPGY framework as experienced by students. Finally, the findings were primarily descriptive and comparative, limiting the ability to establish causal relationships between demographic variables and the extent of JEEPGY practice. Given these limitations, future research could expand the study to include other grade levels, regions, and longitudinal designs, as well as employ qualitative methods to gain deeper insights into the factors influencing the implementation of the JEEPGY framework.

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Declaration on the Use of AI

The researchers utilized the institution's Turnitin account to assess the similarity index and detect any AI-generated content. This was done to ensure that the manuscript is free from plagiarism and AI-generated text. In addition, the authors used the institution's Grammarly account to ensure accuracy in spelling, grammar, and overall writing quality.

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About the Authors

Daniel S. Fernando is currently the Research Officer of St. Anthony's College. He earned his Bachelor of Arts in Philosophy from St. Anthony's College and holds a master's degree in Social Science from West Visayas State University. He is also in the final stages of completing his Doctor of Philosophy in Social Science.

Rev. Fr. Eric Legada serves as the Dean of the Liberal Arts Department of St. Anthony's College. A priest of the Diocese of San Jose de Antique, he completed his Bachelor of Arts in Philosophy at St. Anthony's College and pursued his theological studies at the Loyola School of Theology. He also holds a master's degree in Guidance and Counseling from the University of Negros Occidental–Recoletos.

Sr. Ma. Rosini P. Escarilla is the Vice President for Student Affairs Services at St. Anthony's College. A member of the Missionary Sisters of the Lord's Table (MSLT) and completed her Doctor of Education degree at Guimaras State University.



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Original Article

Faith and Mental Health: A Mixed-Methods Study on How Catechetical Teaching Shapes Students' Help-Seeking Attitudes

Edgar R. Lumandas , Fremativo A. Vergara , & Evan P. Taja-on 

San Isidro College, Malaybalay City, Bukidnon, Philippines

Correspondence: elumandas@sic.edu.ph

Abstract

In a society where Catholic teaching strongly shapes personal values and daily life, students' views on mental health are often formed at the intersection of faith, culture, and education. As mental health concerns among college students continue to grow, understanding how religious formation influences openness to support becomes increasingly important. An explanatory sequential mixed-methods approach was employed, involving survey data from 2,376 students and in-depth interviews with 7 participants, to examine how exposure to catechetical teaching relates to students' mental health attitudes and help-seeking tendencies using a researcher-made instrument. The study used descriptive-correlational statistics to analyze quantitative data and thematic analysis to examine qualitative information. Quantitative findings showed strong catechetical knowledge and moderate mental health literacy; however, these did not consistently translate into open expression of distress or proactive help-seeking. Qualitative results revealed that faith-based coping practices support meaning-making, emotional control, and personal responsibility, yet they may also encourage private endurance of suffering. Students expressed conditional views of professional care, such as seeking formal help only when problems become severe or when personal coping efforts are no longer sufficient. Perceived stigma and concern about judgment further shaped cautious disclosure of psychological struggles. Overall, catechetical teaching plays a significant role in forming students' mental health attitudes by promoting dignity, compassion, and purpose, but its influence on help-seeking remains complex. Strengthening the connection between catechetical formation and mental health education may support more open expression and earlier engagement with professional services within Catholic institutions.

Keywords: Catechism, Catholic Teachings, Help-Seeking, Mental Health, Mental Health Attitudes

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Introduction

The Philippines is widely recognized as a predominantly Christian country, with Catholicism playing a central role in the social, cultural, and educational lives of many Filipinos (Aguilan, 2020). For a large portion of the population, exposure to faith formation begins at an early age through family practices, parish involvement, and formal instruction in Catholic schools (Canceran, 2025). Catechism, as a structured form of religious teaching, is commonly integrated into both basic and higher education. It shapes moral values, personal beliefs, and ways of understanding life experiences (Batan & Valientes, 2025). Within Catholic educational institutions, catechetical teaching provides a shared framework through which students interpret personal challenges, responsibilities, and sources of guidance (Astorga, 2024).

At the same time, mental health has become an increasingly visible public concern in the Philippines. The enactment of Republic Act No. 11036, or the Mental Health Act of 2018, promoted mental health awareness, protection, and access to services, encouraging institutions to strengthen support systems and research initiatives (Alibudbud, 2023). While national policies promote mental health awareness, individual students' attitudes toward seeking help remain shaped by their cultural and religious formation.

College students face academic, social, and personal pressures that can affect their emotional well-being (Samaniego, 2022). Although professional mental health services are widely recognized as essential, help-seeking decisions are influenced by personal beliefs and the environments in which students are formed (Lally et al., 2019; Dag-um et al., 2025). In Catholic educational settings, catechetical teaching plays a formative role and may influence how students understand emotional distress, resilience, and care for themselves and others (Gray & Cook, 2021). However, few studies have empirically examined how catechetical instruction within Catholic schools' influences students' attitudes toward mental health and help-seeking behaviors (Taja-on & Vergara, 2025; Tuquib et al., 2025).

Understanding this intersection is important because it clarifies how faith formation and mental health support can coexist within Catholic institutions. As mental health programs continue to expand, examining the influence of catechetical teaching helps ensure that institutional responses to student well-being are both culturally grounded and responsive to students lived experiences.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of the study is grounded in established theories that explain how faith, knowledge, and social context shape attitudes toward mental health and help-seeking. Religious Coping Theory (Pargament & Park, 2019) provides a lens for understanding how students use faith-based practices when experiencing emotional distress. This theory helps explain whether religious coping supports adaptive help-seeking behaviors or leads students to manage difficulties independently through spiritual means alone. Additionally, Catholic Anthropology, particularly the theology of the human person (Horan & Daniel, 2019), frames mental health as part of holistic human dignity, where spiritual, emotional, and psychological dimensions are interconnected. This perspective guides the study in examining how catechetical teachings shape students' views of suffering, personal responsibility, and

care for the self and others, rather than treating mental health as separate from faith formation.

These faith-based perspectives are complemented by psychological and educational frameworks that explain how understanding and social influence affect behavior. The Mental Health Literacy Framework (Soria-Martínez et al., 2024) informs the assessment of students' knowledge, awareness, and beliefs about mental health, including their ability to recognize concerns and understand appropriate sources of support. This framework supports the study's focus on how informed students are about mental health within a Catholic setting. Social Cognitive Theory (Krcmar, 2019) further explains how attitudes toward help-seeking are shaped through observation, personal beliefs, and social environments such as schools and religious communities. Together, these theories guide the study in examining how catechetical instruction, mental health knowledge, and social influences interact to shape students' attitudes toward mental health and professional support.

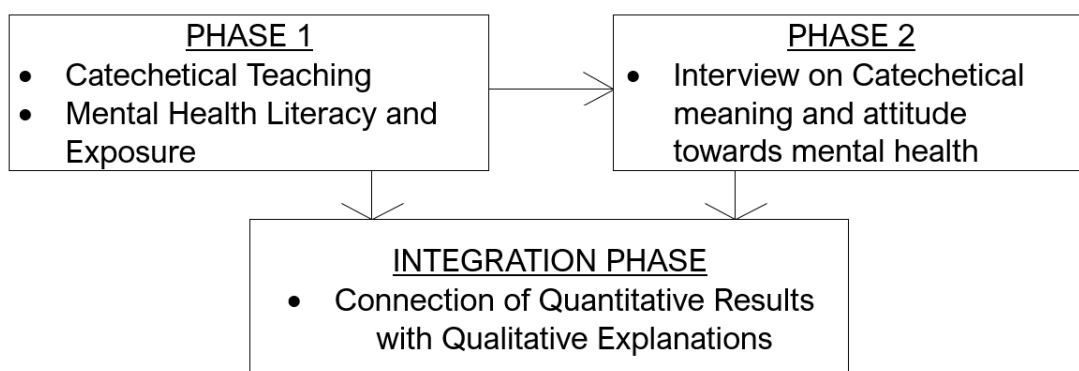


Figure 1. Explanatory sequential mixed-methods design of the study
Source: Author's design, 2026

The conceptual framework, as illustrated in Figure 1, is operationalized through a sequential mixed-methods process that allows theory to guide each phase of the study. In the first phase, quantitative data are collected through surveys that measure students' exposure to catechetical teaching and their mental health attitudes. Statistical analysis identifies patterns and relationships that suggest how faith formation and mental health understanding are linked. In the second phase, qualitative interviews are designed based on these findings to explore how students personally interpret Catholic teachings and apply them to their mental health experiences. Thematic analysis allows deeper insight into meaning-making processes grounded in Catholic Anthropology and lived religious practice. In the final integration phase, quantitative and qualitative results are brought together, allowing the theories to work collectively in explaining not only what patterns exist, but why they occur within a Catholic educational context.

Objective of the Study

Mental health concerns among college students have become increasingly prominent, yet attitudes toward mental health, including levels of literacy and willingness to express psychological distress, remain influenced by sociocultural and institutional contexts. In Catholic educational institutions, students are exposed to

catechetical teachings that emphasize moral formation, human dignity, and holistic well-being. However, the extent to which these teachings shape students' understanding of mental health and their attitudes toward seeking help remains insufficiently examined. Specifically, the study sought to answer the following:

1. What are the students' attitudes toward mental health, considering:
 - a. mental health literacy; and
 - b. mental health expression?
2. What is the students' knowledge towards the teaching of the catechism?
3. Is there a significant relationship between students' attitude towards mental health and the teaching of the catechism?
4. How catechetical teaching influences college students' attitudes toward mental health within a Catholic educational context?

Methodology

Research Design and Locale

The study employed an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design (Toyon, 2021) to examine how catechetical teaching relates to students' mental health attitudes within a Catholic educational context. The approach was selected to allow measurable patterns in mental health attitudes and of the catechism to be identified first, and then explored further through students' personal accounts. Conducted in a Catholic institution, this design was particularly appropriate because it supports an integrated examination of both structured catechetical exposure and lived faith experiences, ensuring that numerical trends are meaningfully interpreted within their religious and educational setting.

Sampling Method and Respondent

To determine the quantitative sample size, stratified sampling was applied using academic departments as the basis for grouping. The total population of enrolled college students aged 18 years and above was first identified, and the number of participants from each department was proportionally allocated according to its enrollment size. Through this proportional allocation, the final sample size reflected the distribution of students across departments, strengthening representativeness and reducing sampling bias. Inclusion criteria required that participants be currently enrolled college students, 18 years old and above, and self-identified as Roman Catholic. Only Catholic students were included because the study examined catechetical knowledge and its relationship to mental health attitudes. Students who were below 18 years old, not enrolled in the college department, non-Catholic, or who declined consent were excluded.

The participants of the study, as presented in Tables 1 and 2, were college students enrolled in a Catholic institution, representing the population for whom catechetical teaching is integrated into formal education and student formation.

Table 1. Demographic profile of the respondents of the study (N=2376).

	Demographic	Frequency	Percentage
Sex	Male	949	39.94
	Female	1427	60.06
Year	First	899	37.84
	Second	699	29.42
	Third	457	19.23
	Fourth	321	13.51
Course	Arts and Sciences	76	3.20

Education	375	15.78
Business Administration	260	10.94
Accountancy	118	4.97
Engineering	368	15.49
Information Technology	157	6.61
Nursing and Midwifery	1022	43.01

Table 1 outlines the respondents of the quantitative survey and presents their demographic profile in terms of sex, year level, and academic department, ensuring representation across different fields of study and stages of college education.

Following the quantitative phase, purposive sampling was used to select participants for in-depth interviews. Students were invited based on survey responses that reflected key trends or meaningful differences identified in the quantitative results. The qualitative sample size was determined through data saturation. Interviews were conducted until no new themes or significant insights emerged from the participants' responses. Inclusion criteria required that participants had completed the quantitative survey, met the same age and enrollment requirements, and identified as Roman Catholic.

Table 2. Demographic profile of the interviewed students.

Participants	Age	Sex	Year	Religious Role
Student-1	19	Male	Second	Sacristan
Student-2	24	Male	Fourth	Lay
Student-3	19	Female	First	Lay
Student-4	21	Male	Third	Seminarian
Student-5	21	Female	Fourth	Lay
Student-6	18	Male	First	Lay
Student-7	19	Male	First	Sacristan

Table 2 presents the participants of the qualitative interviews, describing their demographic characteristics in terms of age, sex, year level, and religious roles, which provided additional context for understanding their faith involvement. The inclusion of students from varied academic programs, year levels, and degrees of religious engagement allowed the study to capture diverse experiences and perspectives, aligning with the focus on how faith-based education intersects with mental health attitudes during the college years, a period marked by both academic demands and personal development.

Data Gathering Procedure

Data collection instruments consisted of both researcher-made and adapted tools to ensure alignment with the study context and research questions. For the quantitative phase, researcher-made questionnaires were developed to measure mental health literacy and knowledge of catechetical teaching. These instruments underwent expert validation and pilot testing, demonstrating strong content validity and acceptable to high reliability indices for mental health literacy (Content Validity Index [CVI]=0.942, Cronbach-alpha [α]=0.917) and catechetical knowledge (CVI=0.919, α =0.742). Mental health expression was measured using an adapted questionnaire developed by Daling and Taja-on (2025), which also showed strong validity and reliability (CVI=0.906, α =0.922). For the qualitative phase, a researcher-made interview guide was developed and validated by experts, yielding

high content validity (CVI=0.908) and strong inter-coder reliability (Krippendorff's alpha [$K\alpha$]=0.975).

Data collection followed a sequential mixed-methods process that began with the quantitative phase and was then expanded through qualitative inquiry. Structured questionnaires were administered to college students using both online and printed formats to ensure accessibility and encourage broad participation across academic departments. Before answering the survey, participants were informed of the study's purpose, the voluntary nature of participation, and their rights as respondents, and all provided written informed consent. The qualitative phase built on this initial stage through face-to-face interviews with selected participants, each lasting between fifteen and thirty minutes. Interviews were conducted in a quiet and comfortable setting and were audio-recorded with consent to ensure accurate documentation. Participation remained voluntary throughout, with participants free to decline questions or withdraw at any time. This careful and ethical approach supported informed participation and helped generate both wide-ranging quantitative data and in-depth qualitative insights.

Treatment of Data

Data analysis was conducted in line with the explanatory mixed-methods design, with quantitative results guiding the focus and depth of the qualitative phase.

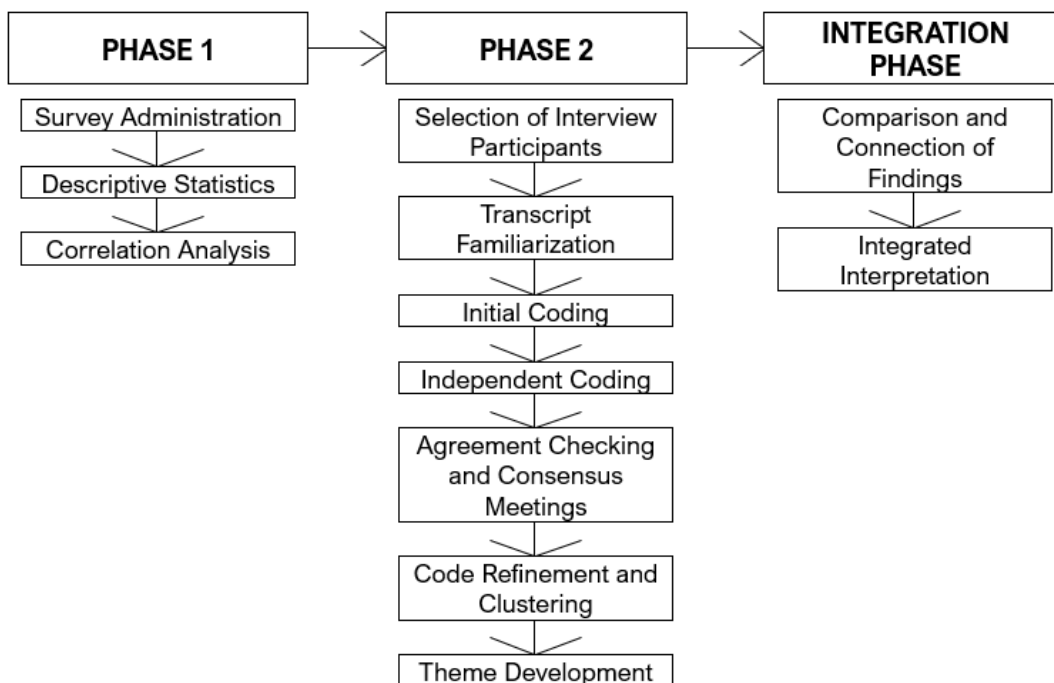


Figure 2. Analytic process of the explanatory sequential mixed-methods design.
Source: Author's design, 2026

The process, as presented in Figure 2, illustrates the step-by-step analytic process used in the study. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics to describe levels of mental health attitude and catechetical knowledge, while correlation analysis examined relationships among these variables. These results informed the selection of interview participants and the areas explored during the qualitative phase. Qualitative data were then analyzed thematically using an iterative and reflexive process consistent with Braun and Clarke's (2023) framework. Interview

transcripts were transcribed verbatim, reviewed multiple times, and coded line by line to capture participants' perspectives. Independent coding by two coders showed a high level of agreement, with differences resolved through structured discussion. Credibility was strengthened through audit trails, analytic memos, and member checking. Finally, qualitative themes were integrated with quantitative findings to clarify and deepen understanding of the statistical patterns, allowing for a more comprehensive interpretation of the results. The final phase highlights the integration of quantitative and qualitative findings, demonstrating how thematic insights were used to explain and contextualize statistical patterns, resulting in a cohesive mixed-methods interpretation.

Results

This section presents the results of the study using a mixed-methods approach. Quantitative findings provide an overview of students' mental health attitudes and catechetical knowledge, while qualitative findings offer deeper insight into how these are understood and experienced within a Catholic context.

Students Attitude Towards Mental Health

This section presents the results of the study based on the analysis of the collected data. The presentation of results is intended to provide an objective basis for interpretation, ensuring that the data are communicated clearly and consistently.

Table 3 presents students' attitudes toward mental health literacy by summarizing their levels of awareness, understanding, and perceived ability to manage mental health concerns.

Table 3. Students' attitudes toward mental health literacy.

Factors	\bar{x}	σ_x	Qualitative Interpretation
Awareness of Mental Health Resources	5.21	1.187	Moderate Awareness
Help-Seeking Behavior	3.55	1.439	Very Low Help-Seeking Orientation
Perceived Stigma Regarding Mental Health	3.54	1.556	Very High Perceived Stigma
Self-Efficacy in Managing Mental Health	4.95	1.767	Moderate Self-Efficacy
Culture Influences on Mental Health	3.29	1.582	Restrictive Cultural Influence
Mental Health Literacy	4.11	1.650	Average Literacy

The results presented in Table 3 show that students display a mixed pattern in their mental health literacy, combining general awareness with a cautious stance toward help-seeking. While students demonstrate an acceptable understanding of mental health concepts and some confidence in managing emotional concerns, this awareness does not consistently lead to a willingness to seek formal support. The findings suggest that mental health is recognized as important, yet engagement with professional services remains limited. This gap appears to be shaped by perceived stigma and cultural expectations that value personal strength, self-control, and perseverance, which encourage reliance on internal coping rather than external assistance. Accordingly, knowledge of mental health resources alone is insufficient to

prompt action, highlighting the need for supportive contexts that normalize help-seeking as a responsible form of self-care and shared responsibility for well-being within a Catholic educational environment.

Mental Health Expression

Table 4 outlines students' attitudes toward mental health expression, focusing on how comfortable they are in sharing emotional concerns and seeking understanding from others

Table 4. Students' attitudes toward mental health expression.

Factors	\bar{x}	σ_x	Qualitative Interpretation
Mental Health Expression	6.18	1.641	Noticeable Negative Reactions

The results shown in Table 4 further indicate that students' attitudes toward mental health expression are strongly influenced by social experiences that discourage open sharing. Many students associate expressing emotional struggles with negative reactions or discomfort from others, leading them to remain guarded even when they recognize mental health concerns internally. When viewed alongside the earlier findings on limited help-seeking and perceived stigma, this pattern reflects an environment where emotional awareness exists but is constrained by fear of judgment. Despite having general mental health knowledge, students often choose to manage difficulties privately, reinforcing restrained communication and delayed access to support. These findings underscore the importance of fostering environments that actively support respectful and safe expression of emotional concerns, where openness is treated as a valid human experience rather than a weakness, helping align awareness with healthier communication and timely help-seeking practices.

Students' Knowledge towards the Teaching of Catechism

Table 5 presents students' knowledge of the teachings of the catechism across major areas of faith.

Table 5. Students' knowledge towards the teaching of the catechism.

Factors	\bar{x}	σ_x	Qualitative Interpretation
Catholic Teachings	4.49	1.698	Moderate Awareness
Integration of Catechism in Daily Life	4.74	1.504	Moderate Awareness
Faith in Daily Life	5.33	1.633	High Awareness
Relationships and Community	4.78	1.354	Moderate Awareness
Faith Identity and Practice	5.30	1.487	High Awareness
Awareness of the Catechism	4.93	1.278	Moderate Awareness
Faith and Belief	5.52	1.489	Very Good Understanding
Sacrament and Worship	6.11	1.176	Excellent Understanding
Catholic Morality and Social Teaching	5.27	1.457	Good Understanding
Faith in Daily Life	5.89	1.435	Very Good Understanding
Faith Identity and Practice	5.63	1.647	Very Good Understanding
Understanding of the Catechism	5.68	1.159	Very Good Understanding
Knowledge of the Catechism	5.31	1.248	High Knowledge

The results presented in Table 5 indicate that students generally demonstrate a strong level of catechetical knowledge, particularly in areas related to core beliefs, worship, and the role of faith in shaping personal meaning and values. This suggests that students are not only exposed to formal catechetical instruction but are also able to internalize central elements of Catholic teaching. However, the findings also reveal uneven recognition of how these teachings are applied in daily life, especially in social relationships and community contexts. While doctrinal and devotional understanding appears more developed, awareness of faith as a lived guide for everyday decisions and interactions is less consistent. Overall, catechetical knowledge provides a meaningful foundation for reflection, moral judgment, and responsibility, including how students frame emotional and psychological concerns, yet the variation in lived awareness points to the need for stronger integration between faith knowledge and daily practice to support deeper self-understanding and engagement with available support systems.

Students Attitude towards Mental Health and Teaching of the Catechism

Table 6 shows the relationship between students' mental health attitudes and their knowledge of the catechism.

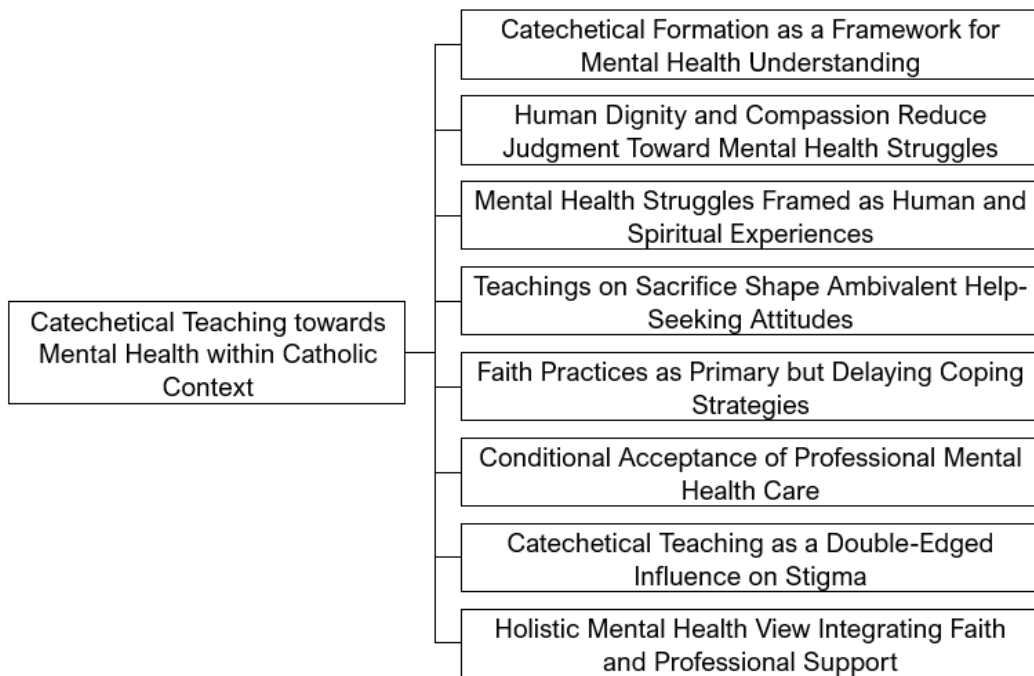
Table 6. Relationship between students' attitude towards mental health and the teaching of the catechism.

Variable	\bar{x}	r	Extent of Relationship	p
Mental Health Literacy	4.11	-0.649	Moderately Negative Relationship	<0.001
Knowledge of the Catechism	5.31			
Mental Health Expression	6.18	-0.873	Strong Negative Relationship	<0.001
Knowledge of the Catechism	5.31			

The results shown in Table 6 indicate that students' mental health literacy is related to their knowledge of the catechism, though this relationship does not suggest a direct or reinforcing connection. Higher familiarity with catechetical teachings does not consistently correspond to stronger mental health literacy, as students continue to display moderate awareness of mental health concepts alongside hesitation in help-seeking and sensitivity to stigma. This pattern suggests that religious knowledge and mental health understanding may develop in parallel rather than in alignment. In addition, a clearer association emerges between catechetical knowledge and mental health expression, where stronger religious knowledge is linked with greater discomfort in openly expressing psychological concerns. This finding is consistent with earlier results showing negative experiences related to emotional disclosure and perceived stigma, indicating that faith formation, while strong, may coincide with more reserved approaches to mental health expression within communal settings.

Catechetical Teaching towards Mental Health within Catholic Context

The thematic map presents how students interpret the relationship between catechetical teaching and mental health within a Catholic educational context. It illustrates how religious formation shapes students' understanding of emotional struggles, their attitudes toward expressing mental health concerns, and their views on seeking help. Through this map, the interconnected themes highlight how faith-based teachings influence both supportive and cautious responses to mental health experiences.



*Figure 3. Thematic map of the study.
Source: Author's design, 2026*

Figure 3 presents the thematic map illustrating how catechetical teaching shapes students' understanding of mental health within a Catholic context. The themes reveal that catechetical formation provides a framework through which students interpret emotional struggles, often emphasizing human dignity, compassion, and the recognition of mental health challenges as both human and spiritual experiences. At the same time, teachings related to sacrifice and perseverance influence how students approach personal suffering, which can contribute to ambivalent attitudes toward seeking help. Faith practices such as prayer and spiritual reflection often function as primary coping strategies, sometimes delaying engagement with professional mental health support. The themes also show that students may conditionally accept professional care, particularly when difficulties intensify, reflecting a cautious but evolving openness to mental health services. Overall, the thematic map demonstrates that catechetical teaching acts as a double-edged influence, simultaneously reducing judgment through compassion while shaping restrained expressions of distress. These themes collectively point toward a holistic view of mental health where faith and professional support can coexist in promoting well-being.

Discussion

This section discusses the findings of the study by interpreting the quantitative and qualitative results in relation to the research problem and existing literature. The discussion examines how students' mental health attitudes and their knowledge of catechetical teaching interact within a Catholic educational context.

Students Attitude Towards Mental Health

This section presents the discussion of the findings related to students' attitudes toward mental health. The analysis focuses on two key aspects: mental health literacy and mental health expression. Examining these dimensions provides

insight into how students understand mental health concerns and how comfortable they feel expressing emotional difficulties within their social and educational environment.

Mental Health Literacy

The results indicate that students hold a balanced but cautious attitude toward mental health literacy. Students appear to possess a general awareness of mental health concepts and show some confidence in their ability to manage emotional concerns. This suggests that knowledge and personal understanding of mental health are present at a basic level among the student population. However, this awareness does not consistently translate into openness toward seeking formal help. Students appear to recognize mental health as an important aspect of well-being, yet remain careful about engaging with professional support. The pattern reflects an attitude where mental health is acknowledged and understood, but responses to emotional difficulties are often approached through personal reflection and self-regulation rather than external assistance. At the same time, perceptions of stigma and cultural expectations appear to shape how students view the expression of mental health concerns and the decision to access support (Martinez et al., 2020; Munawar et al., 2022; Astorga, 2024; Dag-um et al., 2025; Flores et al., 2025; Taja-on & Vergara, 2025).

These results imply that students' attitudes toward mental health literacy are shaped by an interaction between awareness, personal coping, and social expectations. Although students demonstrate knowledge about mental health and available resources, this knowledge alone does not fully encourage help-seeking behavior. Instead, students appear to approach emotional challenges with a preference for managing concerns internally before considering external support. Such attitudes suggest that understanding mental health does not automatically lead to active engagement with professional services. The findings highlight that mental health literacy among students involves not only awareness and knowledge but also the social meaning attached to seeking help. Within the educational and cultural environment in which students are formed, attitudes toward mental health appear to be influenced by the value placed on responsibility, perseverance, and personal coping, which shapes how students interpret the appropriate response to emotional difficulties.

Mental Health Expression

The findings indicate that students' attitudes toward mental health expression are shaped by cautious communication and sensitivity to social responses. Although students may recognize emotional difficulties internally, the willingness to openly express these concerns appears to be limited by the anticipation of negative reactions from others. This suggests that students tend to remain reserved when discussing personal struggles, even when they possess some awareness of mental health issues. The pattern reflects an environment in which emotional experiences are acknowledged but are not always comfortably shared in social or academic settings. As a result, students appear to regulate how much they reveal about their emotional state, often choosing controlled or private forms of expression rather than open discussion.

These results imply that attitudes toward mental health expression among students are influenced by the social meaning attached to sharing personal concerns. When students expect judgment, misunderstanding, or discomfort from others, they may avoid expressing emotional struggles despite recognizing the importance of

addressing them. This situation can create a gap between internal awareness and external communication, where emotional concerns remain unspoken even when support may be needed. The findings highlight that the expression of mental health concerns is not only a matter of personal awareness but also of perceived safety within the social environment. Strengthening supportive and respectful spaces for dialogue may therefore help students view emotional expression as a normal part of human experience and encourage earlier communication when difficulties arise.

Students' Knowledge towards the Teaching of Catechism

The findings indicate that students generally demonstrate a strong level of knowledge regarding the teachings of the catechism. Students appear to be familiar with central elements of Catholic belief, worship, and moral instruction, suggesting that catechetical teaching has been consistently encountered through formal instruction and institutional formation. This pattern shows that the foundational ideas of faith, identity, and religious practice are recognized by students and are part of their conceptual understanding of values and personal responsibility. At the same time, the results suggest that students' awareness varies in relation to how these teachings are recognized in everyday contexts. While doctrinal knowledge and understanding of faith practices appear to be well established, the connection between these teachings and their practical expression in daily interactions and community life appears less consistently recognized. This indicates that students possess a solid cognitive understanding of catechetical teachings, although the extent to which these teachings are consciously reflected in daily experiences may differ among individuals (Astorga, 2024; Batan & Valientes, 2025; Canceran, 2025; Dag-um et al., 2025; Tuquib et al., 2025).

These results imply that students' knowledge of the catechism provides a meaningful foundation for shaping how they interpret personal experiences, moral choices, and human relationships. A strong familiarity with religious teachings may support reflection on personal challenges and guide students in interpreting emotional and psychological experiences within a broader framework of meaning and responsibility. However, the variation in how students perceive the application of catechetical teachings in everyday life suggests that knowledge alone does not automatically translate into lived awareness or practical integration. The findings highlight that catechetical instruction contributes to students' understanding of faith and identity, yet there remains an opportunity to further connect these teachings with daily experiences and decision-making. Strengthening this connection may help students recognize how faith-based perspectives can guide both personal well-being and engagement with available forms of support within their educational and social environment.

Students Attitude towards Mental Health and Teaching of the Catechism

The results indicate that students' attitudes toward mental health are significantly related to their knowledge of the catechism, although the pattern of association reflects a complex relationship rather than a direct alignment. Students who demonstrate stronger familiarity with catechetical teachings do not necessarily display higher levels of mental health literacy or greater openness in expressing psychological concerns. Instead, the findings show that while students possess meaningful knowledge of faith teachings, their attitudes toward mental health remain characterized by cautious communication and limited openness to sharing emotional difficulties. This suggests that the development of religious understanding and mental health attitudes occurs simultaneously but does not always reinforce one another in

practice. In particular, students who are more familiar with catechetical teachings appear to exhibit more reserved tendencies when expressing mental health concerns, reflecting a pattern in which personal awareness of emotional experiences may exist alongside restraint in outward communication.

These findings imply that the relationship between catechetical knowledge and students' attitudes toward mental health is present but not inherently supportive of open mental health engagement. While religious instruction provides a framework for meaning, moral reflection, and personal responsibility, it does not automatically lead to increased comfort in discussing or seeking support for psychological concerns. Instead, students appear to approach mental health experiences within a context shaped by both personal faith formation and social expectations about emotional expression. As a result, knowledge of religious teachings coexists with careful attitudes toward mental health communication. The results highlight the importance of fostering environments where faith formation and mental health understanding are more closely connected, helping students recognize that acknowledging emotional struggles and seeking appropriate support can be consistent with values of personal dignity, responsibility, and care for the whole person (Martinez et al., 2020; Munawar et al., 2022; Batan & Valientes, 2025; Canceran, 2025; Sab-it, 2025).

Across the results, students show strong engagement with their faith alongside mixed and cautious attitudes toward mental health. While students' exhibit moderate mental health literacy, low help-seeking orientation, heightened sensitivity to stigma, and negative experiences when expressing emotional struggles, their knowledge of the catechism remains generally high, especially in areas of belief, worship, and faith identity. Holistically, these findings suggest that catechetical knowledge and mental health attitudes are closely related but not mutually reinforcing, as religious understanding does not automatically translate into openness toward mental health expression. This pattern highlights the importance of creating environments where faith formation and mental health understanding support one another, helping students recognize that attending to mental well-being is consistent with personal dignity, shared responsibility, and compassionate self-care (Astorga, 2024; Dag-um et al., 2025; Flores et al., 2025; Taja-on & Vergara, 2025; Tuquib et al., 2025).

Catechetical Teaching towards Mental Health within Catholic Context

This section presents students' perspectives on how catechetical teaching shapes their understanding of mental health within a Catholic context.

Catechetical Formation as a Framework for Mental Health Understanding

The findings indicate that catechetical formation is deeply embedded in students' educational and formative experiences, serving as a consistent framework through which they understand themselves, their values, and their responsibilities toward others. As shared by the students:

“...I studied in a Catholic school where catechism was part of our curriculum, and this was reinforced by regular Masses, recollections, and retreats...” (Student-1)

“...I have studied in Catholic schools from basic education up to college, where catechism, theology subjects, and religious activities were integrated into academic life...” (Student-2)

“...My deeper and more structured understanding of catechism developed through seminary life, where doctrine, prayer, and community living are central...” (Student-4)

Exposure to catechism through formal instruction, liturgical activities, and structured religious formation has contributed to a solid level of knowledge and awareness of Catholic teachings, which serves as a central lens through which students understand personal struggles and well-being. Relative to the quantitative findings, this strong catechetical foundation exists together with moderate mental health literacy, limited openness to help-seeking, and cautious attitudes toward mental health expression, indicating that faith knowledge does not automatically translate into comfort with mental health concerns. These findings suggest that catechetical formation guides how students interpret responsibility, suffering, and care for self and others, while also revealing gaps in how this formation connects with mental health awareness and expression. This underscores the importance of presenting mental health within catechetical contexts in ways that support understanding, reduce silence or fear, and affirm the dignity and wholeness of the person, allowing moral and spiritual formation to more fully support informed, compassionate, and responsible attitudes toward mental health within the Catholic context (Camilleri, 2024; Dag-um et al., 2025; O'Connor, 2025; Tuquib et al., 2025).

Human Dignity and Compassion Reduce Judgment Toward Mental Health Struggles

The findings indicate that catechetical teaching consistently frames mental health struggles within a perspective of human dignity and compassion. As shared by the students:

“...it teaches that every person is created in God’s image, regardless of their struggles...” (Student-1)

“...Catechism teaches that everyone deserves understanding and care...” (Student-2)

“...the catechetical message about compassion and love for others reminds me not to judge others...” (Student-3)

“...struggles do not diminish a person’s worth or calling...” (Student-4)

Students’ accounts consistently reflect an understanding that personal difficulties do not diminish a person’s worth, aligning with the observed pattern of strong catechetical knowledge and awareness. Relative to the quantitative findings, this emphasis on dignity appears to temper negative judgments toward individuals experiencing mental health concerns, even as hesitation in help-seeking and challenges in open expression remain evident. These results highlight the role of catechetical teaching in shaping compassionate and nonjudgmental attitudes within the Catholic context, contributing to a moral environment that can reduce stigma at the level of personal perception. Concurrently, the findings indicate that compassion alone may not be sufficient to address barriers to expression and support-seeking, pointing to the need to connect teachings on dignity and care with clearer understanding of mental health concerns and appropriate forms of help, so that respect for human dignity is reflected in both attitudes and informed responses (Titus, 2024; Dag-um et al., 2025; Tuquib et al., 2025).

Mental Health Struggles Framed as Human and Spiritual Experiences

The findings indicate that students commonly understand mental health struggles as part of the human and spiritual condition rather than as signs of personal weakness. As shared by the students:

“...Catholic teaching frames struggles as experiences that require understanding, patience, and support...” (Student-1)

“...Catholic teachings influence me to see stress and struggle as meaningful challenges rather than failures...” (Student-2)

“...they encourage me to accept that stress and emotional struggles are part of life...” (Student-3)

Their responses indicate that catechetical teaching shapes how stress and emotional difficulties are understood, presenting them as experiences that call for patience, understanding, and care rather than as personal failures. Relative to the quantitative findings, this perspective aligns with the pattern of strong catechetical knowledge alongside mixed levels of mental health literacy, cautious expression, and limited help-seeking. The qualitative accounts show that students generally view mental health struggles as normal aspects of life that require reflection and support, which appears to lessen self-blame and harsh self-judgment. However, the continued hesitation to openly express concerns or seek assistance suggests that this accepting interpretation is not yet fully connected to practical knowledge of mental health support. These results highlight the importance of strengthening links between compassionate understandings of struggle and clear pathways for support, so that students are better able to translate acceptance into appropriate and timely help-seeking when difficulties arise (Stec & Kulik, 2021; Titus, 2024; Dag-um et al., 2025; Tuquib et al., 2025).

Teachings on Sacrifice Shape Ambivalent Help-Seeking Attitudes

The findings indicate that teachings on sacrifice, perseverance, and the call to endure difficulties are closely linked to how students understand and respond to emotional distress. As shared by the students:

“...the Church’s emphasis on carrying one’s cross helps me accept emotional distress, but it can also encourage silent endurance...” (Student-1)

“...I sometimes interpret distress as something I should simply overcome through discipline...” (Student-2)

“...the emphasis on sacrifice and obedience can make it difficult to express distress openly...” (Student-4)

Students’ catechetical formation appears to encourage acceptance of suffering as part of personal growth, helping them make sense of emotional challenges within a faith-based framework, while also reflecting patterns of restrained expression, limited help-seeking, and a tendency to manage difficulties privately. Relative to the quantitative findings, these results suggest a mixed orientation in which emotional struggles are acknowledged but often addressed through endurance and self-discipline rather than open dialogue or external support. While this approach may foster resilience, the data also indicate that it can be associated with hesitation to seek help or share distress. The findings point to the need for closer alignment between values of perseverance and responsible care for mental well-being, so that seeking assistance is understood as consistent with personal responsibility and respect for human dignity. Strengthening this alignment may support more balanced and healthy attitudes toward mental health within both the academic and faith community (Alviar & del Prado, 2022; Moreno et al., 2022; Dag-um et al., 2025; Tuquib et al., 2025).

Faith Practices as Primary but Delaying Coping Strategies

The findings indicate that faith practices serve as a central and trusted way for students to cope with emotional stress. As shared by the students:

“...I usually turn first to myself and my faith, through prayer and reflection...” (Student-1)

“...prayer provides me with clarity and a sense of control during stressful periods...” (Student-2)

“...faith practices provide comfort and meaning, but they also sometimes make me feel that I should be strong on my own...” (Student-4)

“...prayer helps me calm down and reflect when I feel overwhelmed...” (Student-6)

Students commonly rely on prayer and personal reflection as their first response when facing difficulties, reflecting strong engagement with faith teachings and religious practice that provide calm, meaning, and a sense of inner control during stressful situations. Relative to the quantitative findings, this reliance on faith-based coping appears to support emotional regulation while also being associated with delayed engagement with external forms of support. The findings indicate that prayer and reflection function as important internal resources, yet dependence on these practices alone may reduce the perceived urgency to seek professional or interpersonal assistance. This highlights the importance of framing faith practices as complementary to mental health support, where spiritual coping strengthens resilience while also encouraging openness to timely and appropriate care, supporting healthier and more responsive attitudes toward mental well-being (Blevins, 2024; Dag-um et al., 2025; Tuquib et al., 2025).

Conditional Acceptance of Professional Mental Health Care

The findings indicate that students generally recognize professional mental health care as consistent with Church teaching and concern for the whole person. As shared by the students:

“...the Church supports science and care for the whole person...” (Student-1)

“...the Church values reason and science, but seeking help often feels like a last resort...” (Student-2)

“...the Church recognizes the value of psychology when it supports vocation and personal integration...” (Student-4)

“...professional help is part of responsible and holistic care...” (Student-7)

Students’ recognition of professional mental health care reflects strong catechetical knowledge and an understanding that reason, science, and care are valued within their faith tradition. However, when these views are examined alongside low help-seeking tendencies and cautious mental health expression, professional support is often regarded as acceptable but conditional. Decisions to seek help appear shaped not only by formal teaching but also by community culture, where professional care is frequently viewed as a last option after personal coping and faith-based efforts. While students acknowledge the legitimacy of mental health services, this conditional stance may delay timely access to care. Strengthening messages that present professional support as a normal and responsible part of holistic well-being may help reduce hesitation and stigma, encouraging students to view professional care as an integrated response that aligns with faith values rather than as a sign of personal or spiritual limitation (Moreno et al., 2022; Titus, 2024; Dag-um et al., 2025; Tuquib et al., 2025).

Catechetical Teaching as a Double-Edged Influence on Stigma

The findings show that faith-based teaching plays a mixed role in shaping students’ views on mental health stigma. As shared by the students:

“...stigma can persist when mental health issues are framed only as spiritual problems...” (Student-1)

“...openness often depends on how faith leaders model understanding...” (Student-2)

“...mental health struggles can be seen as obstacles rather than areas for growth...” (Student-4)

While students demonstrate comprehensive knowledge of catechetical teachings, their mental health attitudes and experiences indicate that stigma may persist when emotional struggles are framed mainly in spiritual terms. This pattern is evident in cautious help-seeking, discomfort in expressing distress, and sensitivity to social judgment. Concurrently, the findings show that the way faith is communicated matters, as openness is greater when teachings emphasize understanding, care, and empathy rather than struggle or correction. These results suggest that faith-based messages do not automatically lessen stigma; instead, their influence depends on how they are presented and modeled within the community. When mental health concerns are recognized as part of the human experience and addressed with compassion, faith instruction can support openness and reduce fear of judgment. In contrast, when struggles are viewed primarily as obstacles or spiritual shortcomings, stigma may be reinforced, limiting dialogue and help-seeking. Clear and caring communication from faith leaders and educators is essential in aligning religious formation with respectful and supportive attitudes toward mental health (Grey & Cook, 2021; Dag-um et al., 2025; Tuquib et al., 2025).

Holistic Mental Health View Integrating Faith and Professional Support

The results indicate that students view mental health through a broad lens that goes beyond emotional comfort and includes personal functioning, reflection, relationships, and growth. As shared by the students:

“...well-being is not just about being happy but about being able to function, reflect, and grow...” (Student-1)

“...mental health involves emotional awareness and the ability to trust and relate well...” (Student-4)

“...Catholic teaching can provide meaning, while mental health support offers practical tools...” (Student-5)

This perspective reflects a formation that values the unity of inner life, human experience, and external support. Although students show strong engagement with faith knowledge and identity, their mental health attitudes reveal both awareness of mental health concepts and continued caution in help-seeking and emotional expression. Within this context, students recognize that faith provides meaning and direction, while mental health support offers practical ways to manage stress and emotional challenges. The findings indicate that spiritual and professional support are not viewed as opposing paths, but as distinct elements that can contribute to overall well-being when understood together. Reinforcing this holistic approach within Catholic educational settings may help students balance personal coping, spiritual practices, and professional care. Framing mental health support as part of responsible self-care can reduce hesitation and encourage informed decisions that respect personal dignity, strengthen relationships, and support timely access to appropriate mental health services (Stec & Kulik, 2021; Titus, 2024; Dag-um et al., 2025; O'Connor, 2025; Tuquib et al., 2025).

The combined quantitative and qualitative results present a consistent pattern showing that students' formation within a Catholic context provides a strong foundation of faith knowledge and moral understanding, while attitudes toward

mental health remain cautious and uneven. Survey findings indicate that students generally possess adequate mental health awareness but show low openness to help-seeking and experience discomfort when expressing emotional struggles. These patterns are reflected in the qualitative themes, which highlight how catechetical formation shapes views of mental health through teachings on dignity, compassion, perseverance, and spiritual meaning. Students describe faith as a primary framework for understanding personal struggles, often encouraging reflection, acceptance, and inner strength. Simultaneously, this framework appears to coexist with strong sensitivity to stigma and social judgment, helping explain why awareness of mental health does not consistently translate into open expression or active help-seeking.

Synthesizing these points, findings show that catechetical teaching influences mental health attitudes in complex and sometimes ambivalent ways. Quantitative results suggest that strong religious knowledge does not automatically support positive mental health attitudes, while qualitative themes explain how faith-based values can both support resilience and unintentionally delay external support. Students recognize the value of professional care and holistic well-being, yet often approach such support cautiously, shaped by personal interpretation and community culture. This synthesis underscores that mental health attitudes among students are formed through the interaction of belief, social learning, and lived experience, rather than through knowledge alone. The results collectively point to the importance of approaches that help students integrate faith, emotional awareness, and professional support in a balanced manner that supports dignity, responsible self-care, and timely access to help.

Conclusion

The findings show that students' strong catechetical knowledge provides a meaningful moral and spiritual foundation that shapes how they understand stress, suffering, and personal responsibility, yet this foundation does not consistently translate into open mental health expression or active help-seeking. Quantitative results reveal moderate mental health literacy alongside low help-seeking orientation and sensitivity to stigma, while qualitative accounts explain how faith-based values such as perseverance, sacrifice, and personal discipline support inner coping but may also encourage silent endurance and private management of distress. Additionally, students recognize the value of professional care and holistic well-being, though often in a conditional way shaped by community culture and interpretation of faith teaching. Collectively, the results show that catechetical influence functions as a guiding lens rather than a direct driver of help-seeking, shaping attitudes that value meaning, dignity, and self-control while leaving gaps in confidence, expression, and timely engagement with support.

Declaration on the Use of AI

The authors acknowledge the use of AI tools (ChatGPT and Grammarly) to enhance the readability and presentation of the study. These tools did not influence the original content, analysis, and/or conclusions. The authors affirm that all analyses and interpretations were conducted with strict adherence to research ethics and academic standards.

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About the Authors

Edgar R. Lumandas is a seminarian and student at San Isidro College–Bukidnon, affiliated with the School of Arts and Sciences. His academic involvement includes collaborative research on religious devotion, philosophy, and student well-being, reflecting interests in spirituality, mental health, and personal development within educational contexts.

Fremativo A. Vergara is a seminarian and student at San Isidro College–Bukidnon, affiliated with the School of Arts and Sciences. His academic involvement includes collaborative research on mental health, philosophy, and student well-being, contributing to student-focused inquiries that explore well-being, awareness, and contemporary social issues.

Dr. Evan P. Taja-on is a licensed professional teacher, certified mental health advocate, and has published research. He is a faculty member at San Isidro College–Bukidnon, affiliated with the School of Education, and a researcher whose interests include educational psychology, spirituality, and mental health. His work integrates teaching, research, and advocacy to foster student learning and well-being across diverse educational contexts.



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Original Article

From Beauty to Holiness and Panata: An Interreligious Reading of Iḥsān (إحسان) and Kalos (καλός)

Paul Mark Andres 

Technological University of the Philippines, Philippines

Correspondence: paulmarkandres@gmail.com

Abstract

In postcolonial contexts such as the Philippines, contemporary understandings of beauty are frequently shaped by commercial, visual, and consumerist norms, detaching beauty from its moral and spiritual foundations. This study reexamines beauty as an ethical and theological reality through an interreligious reading of Iḥsān (إحسان) in Islam and kalos (καλός) in Christianity, interpreted within the Filipino cultural practice of panata. Drawing on qualitative interreligious hermeneutics and comparative textual analysis, the study examines selected passages from the Qur'an, ḥadīth literature, the Hebrew Bible, and the Greek New Testament to show how beauty in these traditions is inseparable from moral integrity, spiritual awareness, and responsibility toward others. In Islam, Iḥsān frames beauty as excellence in action grounded in consciousness of God's presence, while in Christianity, kalos denotes moral goodness expressed through fidelity, sacrifice, and justice. These perspectives are brought into dialogue with panata, understood as a Filipino vow that translates inner devotion into communal and civic responsibility. The study argues that panata functions as a culturally grounded embodiment of ethical beauty, linking faith, moral action, and social commitment. By integrating Islamic, Christian, and Filipino cultural perspectives, this research contributes to interreligious theology and Filipino cultural ethics by proposing beauty as a lived moral practice oriented toward justice, dignity, and the common good.

Keywords: Beauty, Filipino Ethics, Holiness, Iḥsān, Interreligious Theology, Kalos, Panata

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Introduction

In the Filipino worldview, beauty or “kagandahan” transcends the purely aesthetic; it is a moral and relational construct deeply rooted in the alignment of one’s inner self (loob) with their conduct and connections to others. Traditionally, a person is deemed “beautiful” not through physical symmetry alone, but through their integrity, honor, and faithfulness to the community (Miranda, 1989). However, the forces of globalization and pervasive commercialism have shifted this paradigm, commodifying beauty into a metric of marketability, physical perfection, and media-driven imagery (Rafael, 2000). This modern “crisis of meaning” severs the inherent link between aesthetics and ethics, leading to what scholars describe as a shallow or “homeless” beauty that lacks spiritual depth. To reclaim beauty as a theological and moral reality, one must move beyond the superficial and embrace relational frameworks, such as interreligious dialogue, which restore the sacred connection between the human person and the Divine (Mercado, 1994).

In Islam, the concept of *Iḥsān* (إحسان) is regarded as the pinnacle of faith, surpassing mere adherence to law or doctrine. In the Hadith of Jibrīl in Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, *Iḥsān* is described as worshiping God as if one sees Him, and if one does not, being conscious that He always sees (Muslim ibn al-Ḥajjāj, 2007). This awareness produces beauty in action, as every deed is shaped by God’s presence and moral responsibility. In this sense, *Iḥsān* is not only social virtue but a form of spiritual beauty rooted in a faithful relationship with God (Nasr, 2003).

In the Christian tradition, the Greek word *kalos* (καλός) in the New Testament signifies moral weight in beauty. In John 10:11, Jesus identifies Himself as *ho poimēn ho kalos*, the Good Shepherd, who is not only kind but willing to lay down His life for His flock. Here, *kalos* denotes beauty arising from sacrifice, fidelity, and truth, not from appearance or power (Nestle, Aland, & Aland, 2012; Wright, 2013). The root of this perspective is also found in the Hebrew Bible, where *ṭōb* (טוֹב) describes the goodness and order of creation. In Genesis 1:31, after creating all things, God declares creation *toṽ me’od*, very good, signifying not only aesthetic pleasure but moral and cosmic order (Von Rad, 1972). These perspectives are particularly meaningful in the Filipino context, where *panata* serves as a bridge between faith and social life. *Panata* is not merely private devotion but a public pledge rooted in inner virtue and concern for others, oriented toward the community’s well-being (De Mesa, 2003). In this sense, beauty, read through the lens of *Iḥsān* and *kalos*, becomes a form of patriotic holiness, a moral ethic of service and responsibility connecting God, others, and the nation.

This study aims to show that *Iḥsān* in Islam and *kalos* in Christianity are not merely religious concepts but theological foundations for a beauty that informs *panata*, shapes moral character, and fosters social responsibility. Through interreligious hermeneutics, this research demonstrates that beauty, when re-rooted in holiness, becomes a force promoting justice, dignity, and relationality within a patriotic framework of faith (Clooney, 2010; Nasr, 2003; Wright, 2013).

Gaps Addressed by the Study

Detachment of Beauty from Morality. This research engages with the contemporary “crisis of meaning” in postcolonial societies like the Philippines, where globalization and consumer culture have transformed beauty into a commodified and

superficial ideal. In such a context, aesthetic appreciation often becomes disconnected from moral, spiritual, and ethical considerations, resulting in a form of beauty that is aesthetically pleasing but morally “homeless.”

- **Theological Distancing.** The study responds to concerns highlighted by De Mesa regarding theology’s tendency to distance itself from lived human experience. Here, beauty is explored not merely as an abstract or aesthetic category but as an intrinsically moral and theological reality, embedded in ethical action and relational life.
- **Underutilized Local Frameworks.** Traditional catechetical approaches often draw on foreign models, overlooking indigenous Filipino perspectives. This research emphasizes a theology that arises from local experience and cultural expression, employing the concepts of *loob* (inner self) and *kapwa* (shared identity) as central hermeneutical lenses for understanding ethical and spiritual life.
- **Lack of Interreligious Synergy in Ethics.** Finally, the study addresses a gap in the integration of interreligious moral thought by showing how Islamic principles such as *Iḥsān* and Christian notions of *kalos* can interact to enrich ethical reflection and offer culturally grounded solutions to local moral challenges.

Contributions to Religious Education and Ethical Formation

The comparison of *Iḥsān*, *kalos*, and *panata* offers several important contributions to religious education and ethical formation:

- **Pedagogical Shift to Lived Experience.** The study encourages a move away from traditional rote memorization in religious education toward approaches that prioritize lived experience. For example, students engage in "Integrity Portfolios" that document their sustained ethical actions and commitments, fostering reflection and accountability.
- **Operationalizing Virtue.** Concepts such as *kagandahang-loob* (shared goodness) are translated into practical action through community-based projects, where moral and social competence are expressed alongside compassion, making ethical principles tangible in everyday life.
- **Holistic Character Formation.** This research offers a framework for youth formation in which "true beauty" is understood not as outward appearance but as a manifestation of dignity, care for others, and responsible citizenship, cultivating character that integrates moral, social, and spiritual dimensions.
- **Cross-Traditional Ethical Frameworks.** By examining *Iḥsān*, *kalos*, and *panata* together, the study demonstrates that beauty is inherently multidimensional—spiritual, reflecting awareness of the divine; moral, expressed through honesty and humility; and social, realized through commitment to the common good.
- **Integration of Faith and Civic Duty.** Finally, the research highlights how religious devotion and civic responsibility are intertwined, framing public service as a form of *panata*, a sacred commitment to others, which reinforces ethical formation through the integration of faith, moral integrity, and communal engagement.

Importance of *Iḥsān* (إحسان), *Kalos* (καλός) and *Panata*

This study makes a significant contribution to deepening the understanding of the relationship between beauty, morality, and holiness within the context of

Filipino religion and culture. By examining the concept of kalos in Christianity, Iḥsān in Islam, and the local Filipino concept of panata, it demonstrates that true beauty goes beyond mere appearance or aesthetics. This beauty is rooted in moral and spiritual goodness and grounded in responsible engagement with God, others, and the community. From this perspective, beauty becomes a reflection of ethical living and spiritual integrity, intertwined with social responsibility (Nasr, 2003; Clooney, 2010).

Guidance from the Catechism of the Catholic Church

According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC 2500–2501), goodness (*bonum*), beauty (*pulchrum*), and truth (*veritas*) are inseparably interconnected and originate from God, the *summum bonum*, the source of all that is good, beautiful, and pleasing (Catholic Church, 1994). In this understanding, the concept of kalos as ethical and moral beauty exemplifies how human beings are called to participate in God's providential plan (*providentia divina*) by promoting justice (*iustitia*), human dignity (*dignitas humana*), and the common good (*bonum commune*) in the world. Moral and spiritual beauty is thus not merely a personal ideal but an active engagement in ethical living (*vita ethica*) in accordance with divine order (*ordo divinus*).

In the Filipino context, the practice of panata illustrates the integration of internal conviction and external action. When a person undertakes a panata, the inner virtue (*virtus interna*) and devotional intent are not merely private sentiments; they are translated into outward moral actions (*actio moralis*) that foster social cohesion and communal welfare (Alejo, 1990). This commitment embodies a form of moral integrity (*integritas moralis*) where the fulfillment of the vow serves as a public testament to one's faithfulness to both the Divine and the community (Ileto, 1979). Ultimately, panata functions as a lived theology that harmonizes the "inner" and "outer" dimensions of the human person. The Catechism further reinforces this duty in CCC 1877–1879, which emphasizes that faith (*fides*) must be lived through good works (*opera bona*), demonstrating that religious beauty is inseparable from moral responsibility and ethical practice. Through panata, the Filipino experience reveals how devotion becomes a lived ethics, where spiritual awareness (*conscientia Dei*) and moral action converge to shape social life, promote justice, and manifest beauty as an active expression of faith (*pulchrum fidei*) in service to God, community, and nation.

Thomas Aquinas on Beauty and Panata

In *Summa Theologiae* (I-II, q. 62–64), Thomas Aquinas explores the profound connection between goodness (*bonum*) and beauty (*pulchrum*), emphasizing that true beauty is grounded in *ordo* (order), *integritas* (integrity), and *fidelitas* (fidelity) within creation, and is inherently oriented toward justice (*iustitia*) and moral goodness (*virtus moralitas*) (Aquinas, 1947). According to Aquinas, the manifestation of *pulchrum* is not merely in physical form but in the proper alignment of parts, harmony of function, and the fidelity of created beings to their natural and divine purpose. In this framework, the Christian concept of kalos, understood as moral and ethical beauty, is a concrete realization of this principle, while the Islamic concept of Iḥsān exemplifies spiritual beauty in action, where every human deed is performed with awareness of God's presence (*praesens Dei*) and a conscientious commitment to ethical excellence.

In the Filipino context, panata serves as a living embodiment of these principles, translating inner virtue (*virtus interna*) into public action that nurtures communal justice, dignity, and social well-being. When devotees undertake a panata,

whether as a personal vow to God, a promise to fulfill a spiritual obligation, or a commitment to serve the community, they enact a moral and spiritual harmony akin to Aquinas' understanding of pulchrum, where beauty is inseparable from goodness and ethical fidelity. Panata thus exemplifies how faith and moral responsibility converge in Filipino lived experience, demonstrating that true beauty is relational, ethical, and oriented toward the common good, reflecting both divine order and human accountability (Bauckham, 2007)

Overall, the significance of this study is threefold. First, theologically, it highlights the relationship between beauty, morality, and holiness in both Christianity and Islam, facilitating deeper interreligious dialogue and expanding understanding of the ethical and spiritual dimensions of faith. Second, culturally and Filipino, it shows the concrete application of beauty in ethical and social responsibility through the concept of panata, linking personal morality with accountable action within the community and nation. Third, pedagogically and practically, the study can guide values formation, civic education, and spiritual formation, teaching youth and communities the true meaning of beauty as moral, spiritual, and patriotic action (De Mesa, 2003; Wright, 2013).

In summary, the study demonstrates that beauty is multidimensional, rooted in morality, holiness, and ethical responsibility. It is not for oneself alone but for others, the community, and the nation, in accordance with the principles taught by the CCC and Thomas Aquinas, which emphasize purposeful, moral, and spiritual beauty.

Kalos in the Christian Tradition: Moral and Ethical Beauty

The concept of kalos (καλός) in the New Testament extends far beyond aesthetic or visual beauty, encompassing profound moral, ethical, and spiritual dimensions rooted in divine goodness (agathos, ἀγαθός). In John 10:11, Jesus identifies himself as ho poimēn ho kalos, the Good Shepherd, in whom beauty is inseparable from moral virtue, sacrificial care, and faithful leadership. The term kalos here conveys not only external dignity (timē, τιμή) but also truthfulness (alētheia, ἀλήθεια) and the ethical obligation to act justly (dikaiosynē, δικαιοσύνη) toward others (Nestle, Aland, & Aland, 2012; Wright, 2013). Similarly, in Romans 12:9, Paul exhorts: “ἡ ἀγάπη ἀνυπόκριτος· κακὸν μισεῖτε, τῷ ἀγαθῷ κολλητοῦσθε”, “Let love be genuine; abhor what is evil, hold fast to what is good” (Nestle, Aland, & Aland, 2012). The use of agathos emphasizes that true beauty is inseparable from moral goodness, sincerity (eilikrineia, ειλικρνεια), and ethical action (praxis ethikē, πρακτικὴ ἠθικὴ). The ethical and moral beauty of kalos is mirrored in the Hebrew Bible through the concept of tōb (טוֹב), which signifies what is good, right, and pleasing before God. In Genesis 1:4 and 1:10, God observes the creation of light and land, saying: “וַיַּרְא אֱלֹהִים וַיֵּבֹרֵךְ אֶת-הָאוֹר וַיִּשְׁמְרֵהוּ” and “וַיַּרְא אֱלֹהִים אֶת-הַיַּבֵּשֶׁת כִּי-טוֹב” — “God saw the light... and the land... that it was good” (Von Rad, 1972). After the completion of creation, God affirms in Genesis 1:31: “וַיַּרְא אֱלֹהִים אֶת-כָּל-אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה וְהִנֵּה טוֹב מְאֹד” — “God saw all that He had made; and behold, it was very good.” The expression tov me’od reflects that true beauty is not superficial but entails moral and cosmic order, echoing the ethical dimensions emphasized in the Greek understanding of kalos. Further, in the Psalms, beauty is tied to moral integrity and justice (dikaiosynē, δικαιοσύνη), as in Psalm 33:5: “The Lord loves righteousness and justice; the earth is full of his steadfast love” (ESV). The Hebrew tzedek (קִדְשׁ) here parallels the Greek dikaiosynē, showing continuity between moral goodness and beauty across scriptural traditions. Likewise, Proverbs 31:30 asserts: “Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the Lord is to

be praised,” linking inner moral and spiritual excellence to true beauty, akin to kalos in the New Testament.

Both kalos and tōb converge in demonstrating that beauty is inseparable from goodness, ethical living, and justice. True beauty is manifested in acts of love (agapē, ἀγάπη), fidelity, humility (tapeinophrosynē, ταπεινοφροσύνη), and sacrificial service (tharseō, θάρσος in moral courage), shaping the individual to live in alignment with God’s will and cosmic order. In this framework, kalos is not merely aesthetic but fundamentally moral and spiritual, calling believers to cultivate inner virtue (aretē, ἀρετή), pursue justice, and enact beauty through ethical action (praxis kalē, πρακτική καλή) toward God and neighbor, in continuity with the Hebrew understanding of divine goodness (tōb) as the foundation of cosmic and moral order.

Iḥsān in Islam: The Spiritual Beauty of Action

In Islam, Iḥsān (إحسان) represents the highest level of faith (īmān, إيمان) and piety (taqwā, تقوى), encompassing not only ritual compliance but also the cultivation of moral and spiritual excellence. The essence of Iḥsān is acting with the constant awareness (ma’rifah, معرفة) of God’s presence in every thought, word, and deed. The Hadith of Jibrīl in Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim (Hadith 8) encapsulates this principle:

“Worship God as if you see Him; and if you do not see Him, know that He sees you” (Muslim ibn al-Ḥajjāj, 2007).

This Hadith illustrates that jamāl al-‘amal (جمال العمل), or beauty in action, emerges when human conduct is consciously aligned with God’s omnipresence. In this light, ethical and spiritual beauty is inseparable from moral responsibility, arising from sincere worship (‘ibādah, عبادة) and righteous interaction (mu‘āmalah, معاملة) with others.

The Qur’an reinforces this understanding of Iḥsān as both moral and spiritual excellence. Surah Al-Baqarah 2:177 emphasizes the ethical foundation of true righteousness (al-birr, البرّ):

لَيْسَ الْبِرُّ أَنْ تُولُوا وُجُوهَكُمْ قِبَلَ الْمَشْرِقِ وَالْمَغْرِبِ وَلَكِنَّ الْبِرَّ مَنْ آمَنَ بِاللَّهِ وَالْيَوْمِ الْآخِرِ وَالْمَلَائِكَةِ وَالْكِتَابِ وَالنَّبِيِّينَ وَآتَى الْمَالَ عَلَى حُبِّهِ ذَوِي الْقُرْبَىٰ وَالْيَتَامَىٰ وَالْمَسَاكِينَ وَابْنَ السَّبِيلِ وَالسَّائِلِينَ وَفِي الرِّقَابِ وَأَقَامَ الصَّلَاةَ وَآتَى الزَّكَاةَ وَالْمُوفُونَ بِعَهْدِهِمْ إِذَا عَاهَدُوا وَالصَّابِرِينَ فِي الْبَأْسَاءِ وَالضَّرَّاءِ وَحِينَ الْبَأْسِ أُولَئِكَ الَّذِينَ صَدَقُوا وَأُولَئِكَ الْمُتَّقُونَ

(Abdel Haleem, 2004)

This passage demonstrates that true al-birr is not confined to ritual observance (‘ibādah zahirī, عبادة ظاهرية) but is expressed through faith (īmān, إيمان), moral rectitude (taqwā, تقوى), justice (‘adl, عدل), compassion (raḥmah, رحمة), generosity (iḥsān al-māl, إحسان المال), and steadfastness in fulfilling covenants (‘ahd, عهد). The Qur’an consistently links ethical conduct to spiritual excellence, as in Surah Al-Imrān 3:134, which praises those who “spend in prosperity and adversity, restrain anger, and pardon people; Allah loves the doers of good (muḥsinīn, محسنين)” (Abdel Haleem, 2004). This understanding demonstrates that moral beauty is inseparable from social responsibility (mas’ūliyyah) and divine awareness (taqwā), not merely an aesthetic sense detached from ethical life. In the Filipino context, the Islamic concept of الإحسان (iḥsān, excellence/doing good) resonates with indigenous moral orientations such as panata, where inner devotion and outward ethical responsibility cohere in actions aimed at the welfare of others and the community. The Qur’an enjoins believers, إِنَّ اللَّهَ يَأْمُرُ بِالْعَدْلِ وَالْإِحْسَانِ (“Indeed, Allah commands justice and iḥsān...”) emphasizing that moral conduct must manifest in both justice and benevolence toward others (Qur’an 16:90). Iḥsān in the Qur’an further appears as وَأَحْسِنُوا ۗ إِنَّ اللَّهَ يُحِبُّ الْمُحْسِنِينَ (“and do good; indeed, Allah loves the doers of good”), indicating that

upright action is beloved to God when it exceeds mere obligation and is offered with excellence and compassion (Qur'ān 2:195). The Qur'ān also reminds us that هَلْ جَزَاءُ الْإِحْسَانِ إِلَّا الْإِحْسَانُ (“Is there any reward for good other than good?”), suggesting that ethical reciprocity and beauty in conduct are intrinsic to human flourishing (Qur'ān 55:60). This divine framework aligns with social virtues in Filipino moral consciousness, underlining that ihsān involves care for parents, neighbors, and the vulnerable in one's society, as outlined in directives to honor and do good to others (وَبِالْوَالِدَيْنِ وَبِذِي الْقُرْبَىٰ) (Qur'ān 4:36). When such relational excellence is internalized, moral beauty extends beyond personal virtue into community care, reflecting both spiritual mindfulness and compassionate service. Scholarly analysis of 'adl wa-ihsān (justice and benevolence) shows that ethical perfection comprises both equitable treatment and compassionate responsibility toward others, forging a moral ecology that resonates with communal values across cultures and deepens theological notions of beauty and goodness. It is not merely a private religious commitment but a comprehensive ethic that guides speech, behavior, and social engagement, cultivating character (akhlāq, أخلاق) and spiritual beauty in alignment with Qur'anic principles and Hadith teachings (Nasr, 2003). In this way, Ihsān provides a framework for understanding moral and spiritual beauty as a holistic, relational, and socially responsible ethic, fostering ethical conduct that benefits both individuals and the wider community.

Panata in the Filipino Context: Moral and Patriotic Beauty

In the Filipino context, panata (vow) is more than a simple religious promise; it functions as a social obligation and a patriotic ethic that bridges spirituality, moral responsibility, and interpersonal relationships. It is deeply rooted in indigenous Filipino concepts such as loob (inner self) and kapwa (shared identity), where the individual is understood not as a separate entity but as inherently connected to others. According to Enriquez's Sikolohiyang Pilipino framework, kapwa is the core value of Filipino social interaction, emphasizing a shared sense of identity and mutual recognition of humanity (Enriquez, 1992). Kagandahang-loob (shared goodness and moral generosity) serves as a linking socio-personal value that connects personal virtue with communal wellbeing, shaping how individuals engage with their kapwa in meaningful social relations (Enriquez, 1992). The practice of panata reflects a cultural orientation toward kagandahang-loob, acting as a mechanism that translates inward moral and spiritual commitments into outward actions that promote justice, dignity, and communal welfare (Alejo, 1990). This commitment is not merely a private ritual but a "sacred contract" that binds the individual to the community, ensuring that one's loob (inner self) remains integrated with pakikipagkapwa (the act of relating to others as equals) (Enriquez, 1992). Historically and sociologically, the panata has served as a catalyst for social integrity, transforming personal devotion into a collective pursuit of the common good (Ileto, 1979). This aligns with the Hebrew *tôb* (good, pleasing) in the biblical account of creation, where God sees all that has been made and declares it “very good,” indicating that moral order and integrity are intrinsic to true beauty and wellbeing (Genesis 1:31, as cited in Von Rad, 1972).

In the Filipino setting, panata thus becomes a practical expression of moral and spiritual beauty, integrating inner commitment with ethical conduct toward others and society. By fulfilling one's panata, the Filipino believer cultivates qualities such as humility, sincerity, compassion, and responsibility in public life. These virtues are reinforced through social norms like *hiya*, guiding ethical behavior in relation to others, and *utang na loob*, which fosters gratitude and reciprocity in communal life. Moreover, the practice of panata fosters *pakikiramay* (shared empathy) and

bayanihan (communal cooperation). This is not merely a social habit but a manifestation of what Enriquez (1992) identifies as the shared inner self (*kapwa*). In this framework, a *panata* functions as a moral commitment that prevents the "self" from becoming isolated; instead, it binds the devotee to the suffering and needs of the community. To address the concern of a "vow toward evil," Jocano (1997) emphasizes that Filipino values are governed by *diwa* (spiritual essence) and *dangal* (honor). A vow intended to cause harm would be a violation of *dangal* and would be culturally categorized as *masamang loob* (evil intent), which is the antithesis of the *kagandahang-loob* required for a legitimate *panata*. Thus, the structural nature of *panata* in the Philippine context is inherently oriented toward the "good" and the "communal.". This moral beauty is not limited to personal devotion but becomes a shared relational ethic that responds to societal needs and nurtures communal harmony, solidarity (*pakikipagkapwa*), and moral integrity (*loob*) within the broader social fabric (Enriquez, 1992; Galano, 2017). In this way, *panata* bridges religious faith and ethical living, strengthening the beauty of inner character, social responsibility, and national unity through ethical action that benefits the community and society at large, embodying a uniquely Filipino understanding of virtue, relationality, and civic duty.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative interreligious hermeneutical approach focused on the careful reading and comparison of key Islamic and Christian texts, situated within the Filipino context of beauty and vows (*panata*). This approach is appropriate for studying theological and ethical concepts because these cannot be measured statistically but are understood through meaning, context, and the traditions from which they emerge (Clooney, 2010).

First, a textual analysis was conducted on selected passages from the Qur'an, collections of *ḥadīth*, the Hebrew Tanakh, and the Greek New Testament. For the Qur'an, the translation and commentary of Abdel Haleem (2004) were used to ensure a clear and scholarly reading of verses concerning *Iḥsān* and ethical beauty. The *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, translated by Siddiqui (Muslim ibn al-Ḥajjāj, 2007), was used for the *ḥadīth*, as it is recognized as one of the most reliable collections in Islam. The Hebrew texts were examined in light of the Septuagint and Old Testament theological studies by Von Rad (1972), while New Testament passages were based on the Nestle Aland *Novum Testamentum Graece* (2012) to maintain precision in Greek terms such as *kalos*.

Second, comparative theology was used as the framework for comparison, following the methodology outlined by Clooney (2010), which seeks not merely to juxtapose texts but to allow each tradition to illuminate the other. Rather than searching for simple similarities, the study explored how *Iḥsān* and *kalos* operate within their respective theological worlds and how they may engage in dialogue within the ethical and social context of the Philippines.

Third, a Filipino cultural theological reading was incorporated, drawing on local concepts of *loob* (inner self), *kapwa* (shared humanity), and *panata* as hermeneutical categories. This reading follows De Mesa's (2003) view that Philippine theology must emerge from Filipino experience and language, not solely from foreign conceptual frameworks. In this way, beauty is not treated as an abstract idea but as a lived value connected to communal and civic responsibility.

No statistical or empirical analysis was conducted because the study's goal was not to measure religious behavior but to understand the theological meaning of beauty as an ethical and spiritual reality. The focus is on how Islamic and Christian

texts provide narratives and concepts that can shape a patriotic ethics of beauty, where faith is expressed as a vow of service and justice (Nasr, 2003; Wright, 2013).

Criteria for Selecting Scriptural Passages

The study deliberately selected texts according to theological and linguistic considerations rather than at random:

- **Linguistic Precision:** Passages were chosen to feature the key terms, *Iḥsān* in Arabic, *kalos* in Greek, and *ṭôb* in Hebrew. Ensuring that the analysis remained faithful to the semantic depth of each religious tradition.
- **Theological Centrality:** Within the Islamic corpus, priority was given to the Hadith of Jibrīl, recognized as the authoritative articulation of *Iḥsān* as the highest dimension of faith.
- **Moral and Sacrificial Dimensions:** Biblical passages, such as John 10:11, were selected because they illuminate *kalos* through the lens of sacrificial leadership and ethical fidelity, rather than mere external or aesthetic qualities.
- **Cosmic and Moral Order:** Hebrew texts, including Genesis 1:31, were analyzed to show how beauty (*ṭôb*) reflects divine order and moral integrity inherent in creation.

Filipino Cultural Theological Reading as Method

This study employs "Filipino cultural theological reading" as an active interpretive method rather than a passive perspective:

- **Indigenous Hermeneutics:** Local concepts, *loob* (inner self), *kapwa* (shared identity), and *panata* (vow), serve as primary hermeneutical categories to engage and interpret universal religious texts.
- **Theological Re-rooting:** Drawing from De Mesa's approach, the study insists that theological understanding emerge from lived Filipino experience and language, avoiding exclusive reliance on foreign conceptual models.
- **Operationalizing Concepts:** Abstract theological ideas are translated into practical, lived values. For instance, *Iḥsān* and *kalos* are not only compared theoretically but are also examined through the Filipino practice of *panata*, showing how these principles manifest as concrete moral practices in everyday life.

Handling Theological Asymmetries and Differences

The comparative process is designed to respect differences while highlighting meaningful intersections:

- **Comparative Theology Framework:** Following Clooney's (2010) methodology, the study emphasizes "deep learning across religious borders", which preserves the distinctiveness of each tradition while allowing them to illuminate one another.
- **Dialogue over Juxtaposition:** The analysis focuses on the functional operation of concepts within their specific theological and cultural contexts. While terms and practices vary, points of convergence emerge in the integrity of character and the social expression of faith.
- **Contextual Reconciliation:** Differences are mediated by situating both traditions within a shared Filipino cultural framework. Here, *panata* provides a neutral ground, enabling the sacrificial ethos of *kalos* and the spiritual excellence of *Iḥsān* to be expressed in ways that are culturally resonant and socially responsible.

Findings

The analysis of textual and theological material from the Qur'an, ḥadīth, the Hebrew Tanakh, and the Greek New Testament revealed that beauty transcends mere visual or aesthetic appeal, encompassing profound ethical, moral, and spiritual dimensions. First, within Islamic theology, the concept of *Iḥsān* (إحسان) emerges as the spiritual beauty of action, integrating moral consciousness with relational and societal responsibility. The ḥadīth of Jibrīl in Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim (Hadith 8) emphasizes that *Iḥsān* is not limited to outward deeds but involves a heightened awareness that every action occurs in the presence of God. “Worship God as if you see Him, and if you do not see Him, know that He sees you” (Muslim ibn al-Ḥajjāj, 2007), illustrates that true beauty, *jamāl al-‘amal* (جمال العمل), is inseparable from moral accountability, ethical conduct, and social goodness. In this framework, spiritual beauty becomes the alignment of intention, action, and ethical responsibility toward both God and human communities, where compassion (*raḥmah*, رحمة), justice (‘*adl*, عدل), and honesty shape the human moral horizon.

Second, in the Christian tradition, *kalos* (καλός) articulates moral and ethical beauty grounded in goodness that originates from God. In John 10:11, Jesus' self-identification as *ho poimēn ho kalos*, the Good Shepherd, presents a model of moral excellence that encompasses dignity (*timē*, τιμή), truth (*alētheia*, ἀλήθεια), ethical responsibility, and sacrificial love (Nestle, Aland, & Aland, 2012; Wright, 2013). Across the New Testament, *kalos* extends beyond superficial appearance, expressing *agathos* (ἀγαθός), moral excellence oriented toward justice (*dikaiosynē*, δικαιοσύνη), communal harmony, and care for the vulnerable. This emphasis resonates with the Hebrew *tōb*, טוב, in the Tanakh, exemplified in Genesis 1:31: *vayar Elohim et kol asher asah vehineh tov me'od*, “God saw all that He had made; and behold, it was very good” (Von Rad, 1972). The term *tov me'od* communicates that beauty is inseparable from moral order, integrity, and relational responsibility, indicating that creation itself is a manifestation of goodness and ethical coherence.

Third, in the Filipino cultural context, the notion of beauty becomes concretely social through the practice of *panata*, or vow. *Panata* bridges spiritual devotion and ethical action by translating inner commitment into relational responsibilities toward others, the community, and the nation. This relational moral beauty draws upon indigenous concepts such as *loob* (inner self), *kapwa* (shared identity), and *kagandahang-loob* (moral generosity), where individual virtue is inseparable from social ethics (Enriquez, 1992). *Panata* is further expressed through practices of *pakikiramay* (empathy and solidarity), *bayanihan* (cooperative action), and *utang na loob* (reciprocity rooted in gratitude), which ensure that ethical commitment is visible, communal, and socially transformative (Galano, 2017). In this light, beauty is a lived ethic, where spiritual devotion manifests as practical action, and personal moral integrity is inseparable from social justice, dignity, and care for the community. *Panata*, therefore, embodies a uniquely Filipino integration of faith, morality, and civic responsibility, demonstrating that ethical beauty is relational, communal, and patriotic. Taken together, the study reveals that beauty in its fullest sense, whether as *Iḥsān*, *kalos*, or *panata*, is not a superficial quality but a multidimensional reality that unites spiritual intention, moral integrity, and social responsibility. In Islam, beauty manifests through conscious devotion and ethical awareness of God's presence in every act; in Christianity, through a life characterized by dignity, ethical excellence, and sacrificial love; and in the Filipino worldview, through relational and communal moral action that nurtures *kapwa*, *kagandahang-loob*, and *bayanihan*. By integrating these perspectives, beauty emerges as a theological and ethical principle that informs personal character, social engagement, and civic responsibility, providing a robust

framework for understanding virtue, moral action, and patriotic personhood. This synthesis demonstrates that true beauty is simultaneously spiritual, ethical, and relational, guiding human action toward justice, communal well-being, and the harmonious flourishing of society.

Discussion

The analysis of textual materials from Islam and Christianity shows that beauty, represented by *Iḥsān* and *kalos*, goes beyond visual aesthetics; it is moral, ethical, and spiritual. In Islam, *Iḥsān* demonstrates that true beauty arises from action performed with awareness of the presence of God, as illustrated in the ḥadīth of Jibrīl in *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* (Muslim ibn al-Ḥajjāj, 2007). This awareness fosters moral and spiritual beauty, *jamāl al-‘amal*, in which every action carries responsibility and moral purpose. This understanding transcends mere social goodness and becomes a means of spiritual formation of character. *Iḥsān* connects faith and morality, aiming to uphold justice, ‘adl, compassion, *rahmah*, and honest dealings with others, which are integral to ethical living (Nasr, 2003; Abdel Haleem, 2004).

From the Christian perspective, *kalos* arises from a life of dignity, *timē*, τιμή, truth, *alētheia*, ἀλήθεια, and purposeful goodness, *agathos*, ἀγαθός, directed toward justice, *dikaiosynē*, δικαιοσύνη. The example of *ho poimēn ho kalos* in John 10:11 demonstrates that beauty is grounded in sacrifice, integrity, and care for others (Nestle Aland, 2012; Wright, 2013). The Hebrew concept of *ṭōb*, טוב, in Genesis 1:31 emphasizes cosmic order and moral goodness as a measure of true beauty (Von Rad, 1972). In both traditions, it is clear that beauty is not an external attribute but an integrated moral and spiritual reality that shapes a person’s actions, speech, and relationships with God and others.

When placed in the Filipino cultural context, the concept of beauty becomes practical and social through the idea of *panata*, vow. *Panata* connects spirituality, morality, and patriotic responsibility, reflecting the local understanding of *loob* and *kapwa* (De Mesa, 2003). In this view, beauty is not merely a private virtue but a public duty; it becomes concrete action that promotes justice, dignity, and goodness in the community. *Panata* serves as a bridge between religious devotion and ethical living, emphasizing that moral and spiritual goodness should be applied in the context of the community and nation. The integration of *Iḥsān* and *kalos* with *panata* demonstrates an interreligious and cross-cultural framework in which beauty is multidimensional. First, beauty is spiritual because it is oriented toward awareness of God’s presence and trust in Him. Second, it is moral because it shapes action that is honest, humble, and compassionate. Third, it is social and patriotic because this beauty is directed toward the welfare of others and justice within the community. In this way, it becomes clear that beauty cannot be separated from ethics, faith, and social responsibility. The interreligious hermeneutical approach employed in this study allowed for a deeper understanding of the universality and particularity of beauty in Islam and Christianity. Despite differences in terminology and context, both *Iḥsān* and *kalos* emphasize integrity of character, moral action, and relationship with God and others. This perspective highlights the potential for dialogue and mutual enrichment between traditions and contributes to the development of Filipino cultural theology, where beauty becomes the foundation of ethics and holiness rooted in social life and patriotic responsibility.

Overall, the discussion shows that beauty goes beyond external or personal virtue; it is an ethical, spiritual, and social reality. Through an interreligious and Filipino cultural lens, *Iḥsān* and *kalos* become the basis of moral and civic beauty, emphasizing the connection between faith, ethics, and responsibility to the

community. The concept of panata serves as a concrete way to live out beauty, promoting justice, dignity, and goodness in personal, religious, and public spheres.

Conclusion

The analysis of Iḥsān in Islam and kalos in Christianity demonstrates that beauty goes beyond outward appearance or personal virtue; it is ethical, moral, spiritual, and social. In both traditions, true beauty is rooted in a sincere relationship with God, humble and honest action toward others, and the practice of justice, dignity, and goodness. The Hebrew concept of *tôb* emphasizes cosmic order and moral integrity as a measure of true beauty, while Iḥsān and kalos link beauty to spiritual awareness and moral action. In the Filipino context, panata serves as a concrete application of this interreligious perspective. Panata is not merely a personal devotion but a public ethical obligation that connects the individual to others and to the nation. Through panata, beauty becomes a practical force that shapes moral and spiritual character, promoting ethical living, community cohesion, and patriotic responsibility.

Overall, the interreligious reading of Iḥsān and kalos, along with the Filipino cultural lens of panata, shows that beauty is multidimensional, spiritual, moral, and social. This beauty is not focused solely on the self but on the welfare of others and the community, fostering integrity, justice, and dignity as the foundation of true holiness.

Implications

1. Theological and Interreligious Implications

The study highlights the potential for interreligious dialogue, where concepts of beauty in Islam and Christianity can foster mutual enrichment. Iḥsān and kalos reveal similarities in the moral and spiritual dimensions of beauty, which can serve as a foundation for a deeper understanding of faith, ethics, and spiritual formation in both academic and community settings.

2. Cultural and Filipino Context

Integrating the concept of panata into Filipino cultural theology strengthens the connection between religion and social ethics. Panata can serve as a framework to cultivate ethical and patriotic action, particularly in addressing the challenges of community life and national responsibility.

3. Educational and Practical Implementation Strategy

Rather than mere conceptual inclusion, the integration of "moral beauty" requires a pedagogical shift from theory to lived experience. Educational institutions should adopt Service-Learning Models where students are assessed not on rote memorization of values, but on the execution of panata-based community projects. In these frameworks, *kagandahang-loob* is operationalized as "competence-with-compassion."

Actionable Step: Values Education (ESP) and Religious Education curricula should replace traditional exams with "Integrity Portfolios," documenting students' long-term commitments to social justice, thereby mirroring the discipline of Iḥsān.

4. Academic and Policy Contribution

This research provides a framework for Qualitative Social Metrics. It argues that national progress should not be measured solely by economic indicators (marketable beauty), but by "Ethical Aesthetics"—the visible health of communal relationships and social cohesion.

Actionable Step: This study proposes a "Social Dignity Index" for local government units (LGUs), using the principles of kalos and panata to evaluate the quality of public service and the inclusivity of community programs.

5. Concrete Social Impact through Institutionalized Practice

To move beyond "lip service," the concepts of Ihsān and panata must be institutionalized through Civic Vow Initiatives.

Actionable Step: Government and NGO leadership programs should adopt a "Covenantal Leadership" model. Here, public service is framed as a panata to the kapwa, shifting the focus from individual careerism to the "moral beauty" of collective upliftment. By applying the Qur'anic principle of Ihsān (excellence in service), public officials are held to a standard where efficiency and empathy are inseparable.

Declaration on the Use of AI

During the preparation of this manuscript, the author used ChatGPT for grammar improvement, editing, and organization of ideas, and have reviewed and take full responsibility for the final content of this publication.

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About the Author

Paul Mark “Mohammed Amir” Andres, LPT, is a graduate student of Philippine Studies at the University of the Philippines Diliman and a master’s degree holder in Islamic Studies from the Institute of Islamic Studies, University of the Philippines Diliman. He has completed 45 units toward a PhD in Applied Theology with specialization in Religious Education, and also holds a Master in Applied Theology and a Certificate in Teaching Religious Education from De La Salle University Manila.

He pursued foundational Arabic language studies at Saheeh Al-Jaami Institute and completed Advanced Christian Spirituality at Fordham University, New York. For his undergraduate studies, he earned a Bachelor of Secondary Education in General Science with specialization in Women’s Studies from the Philippine Normal University, Manila. He also completed the Curso de Proficiente de la Lengua Española para los Profesores and undertook one year of Arabic Language and Values Education (ALIVE).

He was a scholar at Princeton Theological Seminary in the United States and has also completed the SYOB Business Master Class at the Institute of Small Scale Industries, University of the Philippines Diliman.



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Original Article

From Gossip to Grace: Understanding Marites Culture through Catholic Doctrine and the Formation of Ethical Speech

Jonald C. De Leon 

Holy Angel University, Pampanga, Philippines

Correspondence: jonaldeleon_15@yahoo.com

Abstract

Marites culture, a contemporary expression of gossip in Filipino society, has become increasingly visible within offline and digital Catholic communities. This study examines how gossip operates in these relational settings and explores its moral and pastoral implications for the Catholic Church. Drawing on synthesized literature on gossip, Filipino cultural values, social networks, and Catholic moral teaching, the study highlights both perceived benefits such as bonding and shared awareness and harms, including mistrust, anxiety, and weakened communal harmony. These patterns reveal a moral tension consistent with the Eighth Commandment's call to truthfulness, necessity, and charity. The study further evaluates intercessory prayer and charitable speech commitments as formative practices capable of transforming harmful communication, enabling Catholic communities to move "from gossip to grace" in everyday interactions.

Keywords: Catholic Church, Digital Communication, Gossip, Intercessory Prayer, Marites Culture

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Introduction

Gossip—informal evaluative talk about absent individuals—is a pervasive feature of human communication, shaping reputational landscapes, social coordination, and group norms (Dunbar, 2004; Foster, 2004). Evolutionary and social functional scholars argue that gossip enables individuals to track others' behavior, enforce cooperation, and navigate complex social environments, with research suggesting that a substantial portion of everyday conversation involves discussion about those not present (Dunbar, 2004; Foster, 2004). Empirical studies further indicate that reputational information guides individuals in selecting trustworthy partners and responding to norm violations, demonstrating that gossip can promote cooperation and group stability when motivated by protection or fairness (Feinberg et al., 2012; Feinberg et al., 2014). However, the effects of gossip are not uniformly beneficial; negative, inaccurate, or malicious gossip can erode trust, damage relationships, and create psychological strain, especially for targets (Cheng et al., 2022; Dores Cruz et al., 2019). Organizational network research also reveals patterned vulnerabilities: negative gossip often disproportionately targets individuals with lower informal status and has been linked to reduced well-being, heightened anxiety, and retaliatory behavior (Ellwardt et al., 2012; Grosser et al., 2010). A recent meta-analysis strengthens these findings, noting that negative workplace gossip has significantly stronger detrimental outcomes for both targets and participants compared to positive gossip, undermining relational climates and organizational functioning (Wax et al., 2022). In digital environments, gossip becomes further amplified—online platforms intensify reach, blur relational boundaries, introduce algorithmic amplification and persistence and accelerate the spread of unverified or harmful content, making reputational injury both more rapid and more difficult to repair (Dores Cruz et al., 2021b; Lee et al., 2022).

In the Philippine context, gossip is intertwined with cultural values rooted in *Sikolohiyang Pilipino*. The core value *kapwa* (shared identity) and the relational value *pakikisama* (smooth interpersonal relations) encourage social closeness and mutual awareness, often expressed through information-sharing practices that may slide from concern into detraction when unregulated (Pe-Pua & Protacio-Marcelino, 2000; Salanga & Yabut, 2017). Contemporary “*Marites culture*”, a popularized term referring to individuals who quickly seek, receive, and disseminate the latest news—illustrates the fusion of traditional *tsismis* and digital media's accelerated information flow (Cuadra, 2023). Recent Philippine research further documents how *pakikipagkapwa* is enacted and transformed in online environments, showing that relational communication in digital spaces reflects enduring Filipino values while simultaneously amplifying risks of moral judgment, reputational harm, and misinformation through data driven and algorithmic dynamics (Kobayashi et al., 2024).

These cultural and technological dynamics underscore the need for ethical frameworks that address how Filipinos negotiate reputational talk in both face-to-face and online settings (Navarro & Aguirre, 2017; Pe-Pua & Protacio-Marcelino, 2000)

Integrating the Eighth Commandment (“You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor”) provides a doctrinal anchor for interpreting *Marites culture* as a moral issue rather than simply a social habit. The Catechism teaches that offenses against truth like rash judgment, detraction, and calumny, directly injure the dignity

of persons and violate justice and charity, while enjoining charitable interpretation and reparation (Catechism of the Catholic Church [CCC], n.d., ¶¶2475–2479; ¶2478). These teachings map closely onto Filipino gossip dynamics, where evaluative talk, even when socially normative, can easily cross into moral fault when lacking truth, necessity, or charity. The same moral standards apply to mass and digital communications, insisting that media users seek truth and the common good (Pontifical Council for Social Communications, 2002a, 2002b; CBCP, 2017; CBCP, 2022)

Against this backdrop, the present study examines literature derived patterns concerning the prevalence, motives, and perceived impacts of gossip among Filipino Catholics and explores a pastoral intervention, i.e., intercessory prayer paired with charitable speech commitments, as a potential formative alternative to harmful gossip. This article is a literature based, integrative theological reflection rather than a primary empirical investigation. The significance of the study lies in its interdisciplinary integration of social psychological research, Filipino cultural values, and Catholic moral teaching to address a pervasive but often neglected moral and relational issue (Cuadra, 2023; Pe Pua & Protacio Marcelino, 2000). By synthesizing existing research and Catholic moral theology, this article advances the core claim that Catholic communities can move “from gossip to grace” by redirecting the impulse to speak about others into intercessory prayer and by adopting communal commitments to charitable speech grounded in the Eighth Commandment, thereby contributing to both scholarly understanding and pastoral praxis (Koenig, 2012; Masters et al., 2006). Specifically, it seeks to theoretically synthesize scholarship on who gossips about whom, how, and why among Filipino Catholics; analyze perceived harms, benefits, and moral intuitions related to speaking about absent others; interpret these findings in light of Catholic doctrine on truth, charity, and reputation; and assess the acceptability and potential formative value of intercessory prayer and charitable speech commitments as practical responses to detraction (Benson et al., 2006; CCC, n.d.). In doing so, the study aspires to illuminate how communities might move from “gossiping about others” toward “praying for others,” aligning communication practices with the Christian call to uphold human dignity (CBCP, 2022; Vatican/USCCB, n.d.).

Marites Defined

“Marites” is a contemporary Filipino meme vernacular that personifies the hyper-curious gossiper often glossed as “Mare, what’s the latest?” and, in public discourse, functions as shorthand for rapid collection and diffusion of personal or social news across online/offline networks (Cuadra, 2023). Recent scholarship identifies Marites culture as an emergent online gossip phenomenon whose practices intensified during the pandemic and continue to shape everyday communication in the Philippines, amplifying both community information-sharing and risks of misinformation and reputational harm. In qualitative and gray literature sources, Marites dynamics are described as the digital evolution of tsismis that thrives in social media ecosystems where speed, entertainment, and virality incentivize the circulation of others’ affairs; while such exchanges can strengthen social bonds, they also heighten exposure to false allegations and moralized judgments (Cuadra, 2023).

Filipino Cultural Psychology: Kapwa, Pakikisama, and Tsismis

Sikolohiyang Pilipino provides the cultural frame for understanding Marites. Foundational expositions identify kapwa (shared identity) as a core value and pakikisama (smooth interpersonal relations) as an accommodative surface value that fosters social harmony; information sharing can be seen as a mode of maintaining relational equilibrium, but it risks slipping into ethically problematic detraction when unbounded (Aguas, 2016; Pe-Pua & Protacio-Marcelino, 2000). Complementary empirical and interpretive work shows how pakikisama is expressed through context-sensitive behaviors that encourage inclusion and consensus, while sometimes normalizing indirect talk that facilitates evaluative discussions about third parties (Lynch, 1962; Salanga & Yabut, 2017). Contemporary analyses extend these dynamics into online relational spaces, where Filipino communicative norms interact with platform incentives (Solis, 2024; UP CIDS, 2024).

Global Gossip Scholarship

Decades of research conceptualize gossip as informal evaluative communication about absent targets with dual valence: it can protect norms and coordinate cooperation, yet also inflict social and psychological harm (Dunbar, 2004; Foster, 2004). In an evolutionary functional account, gossip operates as a language-based analogue of primate grooming that bonds large groups and helps control free riders (Dunbar, 2004). Across controlled experiments, sharing reputational information motivates partner selection and norm enforcement; recipients ostracize defectors and prefer cooperators, while ostracized free riders often return more cooperative showing potential corrective effects (Feinberg et al., 2014; Stanford Graduate School of Business, 2014). Complementary work models reputational information sharing as a prosocial behavior under certain motives and constraints (Feinberg et al., 2012; ScienceDaily, 2014).

Digital Acceleration and “Marites” as Socio-Technical Phenomenon

If classical gossip articulates a slow, relational economy of reputation, Marites indexes a socio-technical acceleration. Experience-sampling and field studies show that gossip is frequent and used to update reputations for partner choice; however, digital platforms multiply audiences and collapse contexts, reshaping the costs of insinuation and error (Dores Cruz et al., 2021b). Philippine analyses locate Marites within ‘platformized’ publics, where algorithmic incentives reward novelty and affect, and where humor (memes) can launder moral judgment into apparently benign “updates”, patterns accentuated during and after pandemic lockdowns (Cuadra, 2023). Emerging behavioral evidence explains when people choose to gossip, sensitivity to target category (ingroup/celebrity), valence (overall negative, but more positive about ingroup), and content (moral topics attract sharing) illuminating why online communities rapidly spread norm-relevant narratives about public figures or peers (Lee et al., 2022; Dores Cruz et al., 2021a).

Psychosocial and Organizational Consequences

Cumulative evidence suggests asymmetric risks when Marites/gossip skews negative: anxiety, lowered well-being, poorer cohesion, and retaliatory dynamics can emerge, harming not only targets but also gossip participants and bystanders

(Martinescu et al., 2021; Wax et al., 2022). In Filipino milieus where pakikisama pressures social harmony, downstream effects include avoidance, indirect conflict management, and informal sanctions dynamics consistent with network findings on who becomes a gossip target and with experimental evidence on the emotions and strategic responses gossip elicits (Cheng et al., 2022; Ellwardt et al., 2012). Multi-source negative gossip differentially evokes anger or shame, predicting social undermining or reputation-repairing exemplification, which further destabilizes communal climates (Zong et al., 2024; Cheng et al., 2022). Prosocial motives (e.g., protecting others) can drive prosocial gossip that deters selfishness and reduces negative affect, yet emotion-venting and status-competition motives are also potent, with more harmful outcomes (Dores Cruz et al., 2019; Lee et al., 2022).

Ethical–Pastoral Frames

For Filipino Catholics, the Eighth Commandment furnishes a robust ethical lexicon to parse Marites dynamics. The Catechism explicitly condemns rash judgment (assuming moral fault without sufficient evidence), detraction (disclosing another’s faults without proportionate reason), and calumny (false statements that harm reputation), while enjoining charitable interpretation and reparation (CCC, n.d., ¶¶2475–2479; ¶2478). The same moral standards apply to mass and digital communications, insisting that media users seek truth and the common good (Pontifical Council for Social Communications, 2002a, 2002b). This stance has been localized in Philippine pastoral teaching that urges Catholics to resist fake news and cultivate truth-centered communication in online environments (CBCP, 2017; CBCP, 2022), a theme echoed in press coverage encouraging responsible speech (Sabillo, 2017; Rappler, 2017). These norms do not deny that reputational information can serve legitimate protective aims, but they require prudence regarding necessity, truthfulness, and proportionality; they also commend first-person correction when feasible rather than third-person detraction (CCC, n.d., ¶¶2475–2479; Vatican/USCCB, n.d.).

The Eighth Commandment and the Ethics of Speech

The Eighth Commandment (“You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor”) extends beyond juridical contexts to govern all forms of communication that shape truth, charity, and human dignity (CCC, n.d., ¶2464; ¶¶2475–2479). The Catechism specifies closely related offenses—rash judgment, detraction, and calumny (¶2477)—and imposes a positive duty of charitable interpretation (¶2478) and reparation for harm done (¶2487). In the digital sphere, magisterial teaching further emphasizes the responsibility of users to seek truth and the common good, resisting sensationalism and misinformation (Pontifical Council for Social Communications, 2002a, 2002b; CBCP, 2017; CBCP, 2022; CBCP Online, 2026).

Applied to Marites culture, this commandment reframes gossip as a moral act, not merely a social behavior. It invites diagnostic discernment before speaking or posting: (1) Is it true (verified, proportionate)? (2) Is it necessary (protective good vs. idle curiosity)? (3) Is it charitable (interpreting favorably, avoiding detraction)? (4) Is reparation possible if harm occurs? Such examination aligns with Filipino values of kapwa and pakikisama by re-humanizing absent others and fostering restorative

practices when reputations are injured (Aguas, 2016; Pe-Pua & Protacio-Marcelino, 2000).

Marites and Pastoral Formation: Intercessory Prayer and Charitable Speech Covenants

Because Marites blends social curiosity with moral evaluation, interventions that focus solely on prohibition may be less effective than formation-based approaches that reframe the practice. In the cooperation literature, prosocial gossip can serve protective group functions when oriented by care and justice (Feinberg et al., 2012; Feinberg et al., 2014). Analogously, a pastoral reframe invites communities to convert the impulse to talk about others into praying for others, cultivating empathy and truth in charity (CBCP, 2022; Vatican / USCCB, n.d.). While randomized controlled trials on distant intercessory prayer show mixed or null effects on clinical outcomes (American College of Cardiology, 2006; Benson et al., 2006), research on religion, spirituality, and health identifies plausible affective and prosocial pathways that may shape communicative dispositions (Koenig, 2009; Koenig, 2012). In this article, intercessory prayer is framed primarily as a formative practice that cultivates empathy, humility, and self regulation in speakers rather than as a mechanism for producing external or clinical outcomes. Prayer centered formation paired with charitable speech covenants—verify before sharing, interpret favorably, avoid unnecessary disclosures, repair harm—offers behavioral scaffolds that align with kapwa and stabilize bonds (CCC, n.d., ¶2478; Pontifical Council for Social Communications, 2002a).

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative, literature based research design grounded in literature review, document analysis, and thematic synthesis, integrating scholarship on gossip, Filipino cultural psychology, and Catholic moral teaching (Dores Cruz et al., 2021a; Foster, 2004). No primary data were collected; all findings are derived from published sources and presented as synthesized interpretive patterns rather than empirical measurements. Data collection involved systematically identifying, selecting, and reviewing peer reviewed journals on gossip's functions and harms (Cheng et al., 2022; Dunbar, 2004; Ellwardt et al., 2012; Feinberg et al., 2014; Martinescu et al., 2021; Wax et al., 2022), research on Filipino cultural psychology and values (Aguas, 2016; Lynch, 1962; Pe Pua & Protacio Marcelino, 2000; Salanga & Yabut, 2017), and studies on digital transformation and online communication in the Philippine context (Cuadra, 2023). Magisterial and pastoral sources were likewise gathered, including the Catechism of the Catholic Church on offenses against truth and duties of charitable interpretation and reparation (CCC, n.d., ¶¶2475–2479; Vatican / USCCB, n.d.), as well as Ethics in Internet and The Church and Internet (Pontifical Council for Social Communications, 2002a, 2002b). Contemporary pastoral statements on truth telling and digital responsibility provided localized application (CBCP, 2017; CBCP, 2022; CBCP Online, 2026), supplemented by news reports documenting the Church's efforts to address misinformation (Commonweal Magazine, 2018; Sabillo, 2017; Rappler, 2017). Data analysis employed document analysis and thematic synthesis in two stages: (1) first cycle descriptive coding identifying themes of cooperation, harm, cultural mediation, socio technical dynamics, and moral norms; and (2) second cycle pattern coding clustering these themes into broader analytical categories aligned with Catholic moral teaching

(truthfulness, necessity, charity, and reparation). As a literature based study, this project posed no risks to human participants. Ethical considerations included accurate representation of cited authors, faithful interpretation of Catholic teaching, and responsible use of publicly accessible materials (CCC, n.d.; Pontifical Council for Social Communications, 2002a).

Findings

Mapping literature derived patterns of who gossips about whom, how, and why among Filipino Catholics suggests that gossip most often emerges within close relational contexts, including family circles, parish ministries, neighborhood communities, and digital groups—patterns that reflect social network findings that gossip tends to follow existing relational ties and group boundaries (Ellwardt et al., 2012; Grosser et al., 2010). These settings create natural opportunities for reputational talk, whether through face to face interaction or through online exchanges that accelerate information flow, a pattern also observed in Filipino analyses of digital communication and the emergence of Marites culture (Cuadra, 2023). Across the reviewed studies, gossip is commonly associated with curiosity, relational bonding, staying informed about communal life, and making sense of others' actions, consistent with research showing that gossip is motivated by both prosocial and self-interested functions (Dores Cruz et al., 2019; Lee et al., 2022).

The literature also highlights both perceived benefits and harms of such communication. Gossip may promote a sense of connection, shared awareness, or social coordination, aligning with studies showing that reputational talk can facilitate cooperation and group regulation (Feinberg et al., 2012; Foster, 2004). However, gossip becomes harmful when negative, unverified, or judgmental, leading to diminished trust, anxiety, heightened conflict, or a strained relational climate—outcomes supported by organizational and behavioral studies documenting reduced inclusion and deteriorated group relations in the presence of negative gossip (Martinescu et al., 2021; Wax et al., 2022). Several sources discussing Filipino Catholic contexts also note a recurring moral discomfort around unnecessary or uncharitable talk, reflecting an intuitive awareness that such communication violates the expectations of truth and fairness expressed in the Eighth Commandment, which warns against rash judgment, detraction, and calumny (Catechism of the Catholic Church [CCC], 2475–2479).

Additionally, literature examining gossip through Catholic moral teaching indicates that many everyday communication patterns such as evaluative commentary, indirect judgments, and the rapid circulation of incomplete information fail to meet doctrinal standards for truthful and charitable speech as articulated in the obligations of the Eighth Commandment (CCC, 2475–2479; 2487). At the same time, teachings on charitable interpretation and reparation offer practical guidance for restoring relationships and respecting human dignity, providing an ethical framework that complements empirical findings on how harmful gossip affects social environments. The reviewed sources also identify intercessory prayer and charitable speech commitments as pastorally meaningful approaches, translating the ethical demands of Catholic teaching into concrete, spiritually grounded practices that encourage compassion, prudence, and relational harmony, an approach aligned with episcopal guidance promoting truth oriented, responsible communication (CBCP, 2022). In this light, prayer is treated in this article primarily as a formative discipline shaping dispositions of empathy and restraint rather than as an intervention aimed at external or clinical outcomes.

Discussion

The findings indicate that Marites style gossip among Filipino Catholics aligns with broader evidence that gossip concentrates within proximal relational networks such as family circles, parish groups, neighborhood communities, and digital clusters, mirroring social network research in which gossip reliably travels along existing ties and often targets individuals within one's subgroup, especially those with lower informal status who lack relational defenders (Ellwardt et al., 2012; Grosser et al., 2010). Digital contexts further amplify this dynamic through rapid dissemination and context collapse, consistent with experience sampling research showing that everyday gossip quickly updates reputations and influences partner selection (Dores Cruz et al., 2021) and with Filipino analyses describing Marites as an accelerated, platform dependent extension of traditional tsismis (Cuadra, 2023). Motivations that emerged in the literature, including curiosity, relational bonding, norm interpretation, and affective release, correspond closely to experimental findings demonstrating that gossip stems from both prosocial motives and self interested impulses (Dores Cruz et al., 2019; Lee et al., 2022).

Across studies, there is strong agreement that reputational talk can produce short term cooperative benefits, such as improving partner choice accuracy or promoting norm adherence, as documented in experimental work on prosocial gossip and gossip mediated ostracism (Feinberg et al., 2012; Feinberg et al., 2014). However, disagreements arise due to methodological variation: whereas laboratory studies highlight coordination benefits, field and organizational studies identify persistent harms including reduced social inclusion, lower organizational citizenship behavior, and deteriorated group climates particularly when gossip is negative or unverified (Martinescu et al., 2021; Wax et al., 2022; Zong et al., 2024). Differences also stem from message content and target category; for example, people gossip more about celebrities and ingroup members and more frequently share moral information, producing inconsistent effects across social settings (Lee et al., 2022).

A strength of the existing literature is its methodological diversity including social network analysis, experimental designs, experience sampling, and meta analytic synthesis, each offering insight into mechanisms like partner selection and reputation dynamics (Ellwardt et al., 2012; Dores Cruz et al., 2021; Wax et al., 2022). Still, weaknesses remain: gossip studies have historically been neglected in organizational and communication scholarship (Michelson et al., 2010), and much empirical work is based on WEIRD or workplace samples rather than religious or intercultural contexts. Filipino and Catholic community contexts, while gaining attention, remain underrepresented and often rely on descriptive or non experimental approaches (Cuadra, 2023).

These limitations highlight several literature gaps. Mixed methods studies that integrate experience sampling with social network mapping are needed to trace how reputational signals propagate across parish groups, ministries, and digital parish spaces (Dores Cruz et al., 2021; Ellwardt et al., 2012). Additionally, there is almost no empirical evaluation of formation based interventions that use catechetical norms, such as charitable speech covenants or "Pause, Pray, Proceed" habits to reduce negative gossip or improve trust and inclusion (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2475–2479).

Theoretically, these findings reinforce indirect reciprocity and partner selection models, in which gossip functions to update reputations, regulate cooperation, and manage social risk (Dores Cruz et al., 2021). At the same time, a socio technical lens clarifies the Marites phenomenon by showing how algorithmic amplification, persistence, and virality reconfigure traditional gossip dynamics within

Filipino digital publics (Cuadra, 2023; Kobayashi et al., 2024). Within this moral frame, it is important to distinguish detraction (revealing true faults without necessity) from calumny (spreading false claims), and to avoid rash judgment (concluding moral fault without sufficient evidence), especially online where speed and persistence magnify harm (CCC, 2477–2479). These insights have direct practical, pastoral, and research implications. In practice, parishes can formalize charitable speech commitments by verifying information, offering favorable interpretations, avoiding unnecessary disclosure, and repairing harm, echoing ecclesial guidance to resist misinformation and cultivate truth (CBCP, 2022). Concrete applications include digital parish communication policies with moderator prompts, gentle correction scripts, and guidelines for group chats. In simple terms, this means that parishes can establish clear and compassionate rules for how members communicate in digital spaces such as parish group chats and social media pages. These digital parish communication policies can include short moderator prompts that remind members to pause before posting, such as asking, “Is this true, necessary, and charitable?” Parish leaders or moderators can also use gentle correction scripts—respectful, non confrontational phrases—to address unverified or harmful messages without shaming anyone. In addition, clear guidelines for group chats can help members know when information should not be shared publicly and when concerns should be handled privately. When harmful or inaccurate information has already circulated, parishes can follow simple reparation protocols, such as posting public corrections, pinning clarification messages so they remain visible, and requesting members to reshare corrections to reach those who saw the original message. Together, these practices help ensure that digital communication within parish communities reflects truthfulness, charity, and responsibility.

Catechetical programs can integrate short formation modules that address Christian communication in digital contexts. These may include lessons on truth and charity online, helping learners apply the Eighth Commandment to social media and group chats; the Pause–Pray–Proceed habit, which trains participants to reflect and pray briefly before speaking or posting; and digital reparation practices, which teach concrete ways to correct misinformation and restore harmed reputations. Programs can also emphasize kapwa centered charitable interpretation, forming learners to view absent others as persons of shared dignity rather than objects of judgment. Together, these modules cultivate responsible, faith centered habits of speech suited to contemporary digital life.

For future research, intervention studies should evaluate whether intercessory prayer paired with speech ethics commitments improves communicative behavior, especially given that while clinical trials on intercessory prayer show mixed physical outcomes (American College of Cardiology, 2006; Benson et al., 2006), spirituality research identifies reliable affective and self-regulatory benefits relevant to communication ethics (Koenig, 2012). Together, these directions suggest a path for transforming ordinary gossip into practices that support reputation justice, relational harmony, and the Catholic commitment to truth and charity.

Conclusion

This literature based study shows that the Marites phenomenon arises within the everyday relational structures of Filipino Catholic life and follows patterns long observed in gossip research, where reputational talk flows through familiar networks and is amplified by digital platforms (Ellwardt et al., 2012; Grosser et al., 2010; Cuadra, 2023). While gossip can sometimes support bonding and social coordination (Feinberg et al., 2012; Foster, 2004), it becomes harmful when unverified or

judgmental, producing relational strain consistent with evidence of reduced inclusion, trust, and well being in contexts marked by negative gossip (Martinescu et al., 2021; Wax et al., 2022). Interpreted through Catholic moral teaching, these patterns reveal frequent tensions with the Eighth Commandment's expectations of truthfulness, necessity, and charity in communication, as outlined in the Church's teaching on rash judgment, detraction, and calumny (CCC, 2475–2479). The literature also points toward constructive pastoral responses: intercessory prayer, shown to cultivate compassion despite mixed clinical outcomes (American College of Cardiology, 2006; Benson et al., 2006; Koenig, 2012) and charitable speech commitments, which operationalize doctrinal principles and echo episcopal guidance on truth in public communication (CBCP, 2022). Together, these insights affirm the need for spiritually grounded, culturally attuned formation that helps Filipino Catholics transform everyday communication into a practice that safeguards dignity and aligns with the Christian call to speak with truth and love. Future parish level evaluations can assess whether prayer centered formation and charitable speech covenants measurably improve trust, inclusion, and effective digital reparation in Catholic communities.

Declaration on the Use of AI

The researcher declares that generative artificial intelligence tools were used in a limited and supportive capacity during the preparation of this manuscript. QuillBot was used for grammar checking, paraphrasing, and plagiarism screening, while Microsoft Copilot was used for sentence condensing and stylistic refinement. All substantive content, arguments, interpretations, and conclusions are the sole responsibility of the author.

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About the Author

Dr. Jonald C. De Leon is an Associate Professor II at Holy Angel University in Angeles City, Pampanga, Philippines, where he is a member of the Christian Living Education Department (CLE) under the Institute for Christian Formation and Social Integration (ICFSI). Dr. De Leon furthered his expertise by earning Master of Arts in Religious Education and a PhD in Educational Management from Holy Angel University, after acquiring a strong foundation in philosophy from Mother of Good Counsel Seminary in San Fernando, Pampanga. He is deeply passionate about theology, religion, and environmental education, and he engages college students through dynamic theology courses, fostering profound insights that shape minds and hearts.



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Original Article

Ecological Responsibility and the Action Gap Among College Students Anchored on the *Laudato Si'* Framework

Fremativo A. Vergara  and Evan P. Taja-on 

San Isidro College, Malaybalay City, Bukidnon, Philippines

Correspondence: etajaon@sic.edu.ph

Abstract

Environmental care has become urgent as ecological challenges increasingly affect human life and sustainability. Understanding how students relate to this responsibility provides insight into strengthening ecological awareness, values, and action within educational and moral frameworks inspired by Laudato Si', a papal encyclical that promotes integral ecology and emphasizes care for creation. Student perspectives were gathered through a researcher-developed questionnaire administered both online and in print to 2,376 college students. The resulting responses were organized and examined using descriptive statistics to outline prevailing patterns in how students understand and engage with care for the environment within an integral ecological perspective. The findings indicate that students demonstrate generally low ecological responsibility, with stronger development in ethical awareness and environmental concern than in concrete action and lifestyle practice. While moral sensitivity toward ecological issues is present, this awareness is not consistently reflected in daily behaviors, spiritual engagement, or sustained participation in environmental initiatives. The results reveal a clear gap between what students recognize as important and how they act in practice, suggesting that ecological responsibility remains unevenly developed across attitudes, values, and personal commitment. These findings highlight the need for more integrated and action-oriented approaches to environmental formation that connect ethical reflection with lived practice. For religious educators and catechists, the results provide empirical insight into the challenges of translating ecological teaching into everyday life, emphasizing the importance of faith-based educational approaches that nurture moral responsibility, encourage practical engagement, and integrate care for creation as a lived dimension of faith and community life.

Keywords: *Ecological Responsibility, Environmental Education, Environmental Engagement, Integral Ecology, Laudato Si'*

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Introduction

Ecological responsibility refers to the way individuals recognize, value, and respond to their relationship with the natural environment and with others who share it. It involves awareness of environmental issues, ethical consideration of human actions, and a willingness to act in ways that protect and sustain life (Nainggolan et al., 2024). In the 21st century, this responsibility has become increasingly relevant as societies face environmental degradation, climate-related risks, and growing pressure on natural resources (Sánchez-Camacho & Villegas Moreno, 2024). These challenges affect not only ecosystems but also human health (Gozum et al., 2023), social stability (Christie et al., 2019), and the quality of life of present and future generations (Boustani, 2025; Knox, 2025). As young people will live and work within these conditions, understanding how they relate to ecological responsibility has become an important concern for education and social development.

Within this broader context, the idea of integral ecology provides a way of understanding the close connection between environmental, social, cultural, and moral concerns. Rather than treating ecological issues as separate from human life, this perspective highlights how environmental well-being is closely tied to human values, relationships, and everyday choices (de Oliveira & de Souza, 2025). This understanding is reflected in *Laudato Si'*, which calls for renewed care for the environment grounded in human dignity, social responsibility, and moral reflection (Francis, 2015). By emphasizing that ecological problems are closely linked to human behavior and decision-making, the document encourages individuals and communities to respond with greater responsibility toward the common good.

Despite the increasing number of environmental programs, policies, and initiatives promoted by public and private institutions, a noticeable gap remains between these efforts and the lived experiences of students. Many initiatives aimed at environmental protection and sustainability are implemented through schools, organizations, and government agencies, often encouraging participation in environmental activities. However, these efforts frequently focus on involvement and compliance rather than examining how students themselves understand, internalize, and respond to such initiatives (Leighter & O'Keefe, 2019; Sršen & Petrović Štefanac, 2023; Francisco & Flores, 2024). As students are among those most directly encouraged to support and sustain these initiatives, exploring their perspectives becomes essential. Without a clearer understanding of how students perceive ecological responsibility, it is difficult to determine whether existing programs foster meaningful engagement or lasting commitment.

Understanding students' ecological responsibility is important for both educational practice and institutional planning. As integral ecology is increasingly taught and promoted across public and private sectors, there is a growing emphasis on shaping values, attitudes, and behaviors that support sustainable living. The Catholic Church (Colella, 2022), in particular, continues to encourage educational institutions to integrate care for creation into learning and formation, reinforcing the moral and social dimensions of ecological responsibility (Buencibello & Aton, 2025). Within the field of catechesis and religious education, examining how students respond to these teachings provides practical insight into how ecological values are received and lived out in daily life. The findings help religious educators identify the gap between students' ethical awareness and their concrete actions, allowing them to

design formation activities, classroom discussions, and community initiatives that better connect moral teaching with everyday ecological practice. In this way, the study offers empirical guidance for strengthening faith-based education that encourages students not only to understand the call to care for creation but also to translate that understanding into responsible action.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual foundation of this study is grounded in the idea that ecological responsibility is shaped by the way individuals understand their relationship with the environment, society, and moral life. Integral Ecology, as articulated in *Laudato Si'* (Francis, 2015), provides the primary lens by emphasizing that environmental concerns cannot be separated from human values, social conditions, and ethical responsibility (Knox, 2025; Barete et al., 2026). This perspective frames ecology as a shared concern that includes care for nature, concern for others, and responsibility for future generations (de Oliveira & e Souza, 2025). In the conduct of the study, this framework guides the examination of how students perceive ecological issues not as isolated environmental problems but as part of a wider system of human actions, values, and responsibilities.

Building on this holistic view, the Value–Belief–Norm (VBN) theory and the Social Ecological Model help explain how ecological responsibility develops and is expressed in everyday life. The VBN theory (Negm, 2024) highlights how values shape beliefs, which in turn influence personal norms and readiness to act. This allows the study to examine how students' values and beliefs about the environment relate to their sense of obligation and willingness to respond. At the same time, the Social Ecological Model (Walker et al., 2024) situates these individual processes within broader social contexts, recognizing that students' attitudes and behaviors are influenced by family, school, community, and institutional environments. Together, these frameworks help the study move beyond individual awareness by acknowledging that ecological responsibility is also shaped by social structures and shared practices.

Spiritual Ecology (Mickey, 2020) further strengthens this framework by addressing the moral and spiritual dimensions of ecological responsibility. It emphasizes that care for the environment is not only a social or personal task but also a moral calling that shapes identity, purpose, and agency. Within the study, this perspective complements Integral Ecology by highlighting the deeper motivations that influence students' commitment to care for creation. When combined, these frameworks support one another by linking values and beliefs to social context, moral responsibility, and action.

Statement of the Problem

The study focuses on examining how college students engage with ecological responsibility in their current context. By looking at students' levels of awareness, values, attitudes, and actions related to care for the environment, the study aims to provide a clearer picture of how ecological responsibility is understood and practiced among young adults. Establishing this understanding is necessary for developing educational strategies and programs that are more responsive to students' realities and more effective in promoting sustained care for our common home. Specifically,

the study sought to answer: What is the overall level of ecological responsibility of college students?

Methodology

Research Design and Locale

A cross-sectional research design (Hunziker & Blankenagel, 2024) was employed to capture a clear snapshot of students' perspectives and dispositions toward ecological responsibility at a single point in time. Data were gathered simultaneously from participants enrolled at San Isidro College, ensuring that responses reflected the current institutional, social, and cultural context in which students engage with ecological concerns. The distribution of the questionnaire was facilitated through the Office of Student Affairs, and the data collection was conducted over a three-week period in October 2025. The use of a cross-sectional approach was appropriate for establishing baseline empirical evidence and for providing a timely overview that can inform both institutional reflection and future longitudinal research.

Sampling Method and Respondents

The study adopted a stratified random sampling method to ensure fair and representative participation. The population consisted of college students enrolled at San Isidro College, and the strata were formed based on the institution's seven academic departments. This approach ensured that students from each department were proportionally included, reducing the risk that findings would be influenced by overrepresentation from any single academic group.

Table 1. Demographic profile of the respondents of the study (N=2376).

	Demographic	Frequency	Percentage
Sex	Male	949	39.94
	Female	1427	60.06
Year	First	899	37.84
	Second	699	29.42
	Third	457	19.23
	Fourth	321	13.51
Course	Arts and Sciences	76	3.20
	Education	375	15.78
	Business Administration	260	10.94
	Accountancy	118	4.97
	Engineering	368	15.49
	Information Technology	157	6.61
	Nursing and Midwifery	1022	43.01

The respondents of the study, as presented in Table 1, were college students currently enrolled at San Isidro College, reflecting a broad range of academic backgrounds and levels of study. Their inclusion provided direct insight into how ecological responsibility and related values are understood and expressed within the student body. By focusing on this population, the study grounded its findings in the lived experiences of students who actively participate in campus life and academic formation.

Research Instrument and Development

The instrument used in the study was a researcher-developed survey questionnaire designed to capture students' perspectives on ecological responsibility

in a structured and systematic manner. Its development was guided by the *Laudato Si'* framework, which emphasizes care for creation, human responsibility, and the interconnectedness of social, moral, and environmental life. Drawing from these core ideas, the questionnaire items were carefully written to reflect everyday attitudes, values, awareness, behaviors, spiritual reflections, and perceived capacity for action related to ecological concerns. This framework-based development ensured that the instrument remained faithful to the integrative vision of ecology presented in *Laudato Si'* while remaining accessible and relevant to the student population.

To ensure the soundness of the research instrument prior to its use in the main survey, the questionnaire underwent a process of expert validation and pilot testing. Seventeen experts from relevant academic and professional fields reviewed the instrument using the evaluation framework developed by Solanon et al. (2020). Their assessment focused on the clarity, relevance, and alignment of the items with the conceptual components of ecological responsibility. The evaluation results indicated a very high level of agreement among reviewers. The overall Content Validity Index (CVI) reached 0.986, while the computed Krippendorff's alpha was 0.949, showing strong inter-rater reliability. These results indicate that the items were clearly understood by the reviewers and were considered appropriate for measuring the intended concepts related to ecological responsibility.

Following this validation stage, the instrument was pilot tested to examine its internal consistency before full administration. The reliability analysis showed strong consistency across the questionnaire components. Cronbach's alpha values for the individual sections ranged from 0.854 to 0.932, while the overall reliability coefficient for the full 72-item instrument reached 0.924. These results suggest that the items worked together as a coherent measurement tool and were able to consistently capture the different aspects of ecological responsibility included in the instrument. The combined results from expert validation and pilot testing provided sufficient evidence that the questionnaire was methodologically sound and appropriate for use in the main data collection.

The final instrument is a structured questionnaire that measures students' ecological responsibility through six interconnected dimensions: ecological attitudes and concern; values and ethical responsibility toward integral ecology; ecological awareness and interconnectedness; pro-ecological behaviors and simplicity of lifestyle; spiritual ecology and moral responsibility; and ecological self-efficacy and commitment to action. Each dimension is composed of twelve indicators that represent key aspects of students' perspectives, practices, and confidence in taking action. Responses are measured using a 7-point Likert scale, allowing for a detailed assessment of variations in students' views. Negatively worded items are reverse coded to maintain consistency in scoring, ensuring that higher values indicate stronger ecological responsibility. This structure allows for both dimension-specific analysis and an overall assessment, offering a comprehensive view of how ecological responsibility is developed and expressed across cognitive, ethical, behavioral, and spiritual domains.

Data Gathering Procedure

Data collection was carried out using both online and printed versions of the questionnaire to ensure wider accessibility and participation among students. The administration of the instruments was coordinated through the Office of Student Affairs, which facilitated distribution and retrieval while maintaining an orderly process. Prior to participation, all respondents were provided with an informed consent form that clearly explained the purpose of the data collection, the voluntary

nature of participation, and assurances of confidentiality. Only students who had read and formally agreed to the consent were allowed to proceed, ensuring that ethical standards were observed throughout the data gathering process.

Treatment of Data

Following data collection, the responses were systematically encoded, organized, and processed to ensure accuracy and consistency prior to analysis. Descriptive statistics were applied to summarize students’ responses and to present the overall pattern of ecological responsibility reflected in the data. Central tendency and variability were examined to provide a clear picture of how students generally responded to the questionnaire items, allowing the results to be interpreted in a way that is both structured and accessible.

Results

This section presents the empirical findings derived from the collected data, offering an objective overview of the patterns observed among the respondents. The results provide a structured basis for understanding how key aspects of the phenomenon manifest within the student population, serving as a foundation for subsequent interpretation and discussion.

Table 2 provides a synthesized view of students’ responses across multiple dimensions, offering a quantitative snapshot of prevailing tendencies and overall standing. It organizes the results in a manner that allows for a balanced appreciation of central patterns and variations within the dataset.

Table 2. Level of students’ ecological responsibility.

Components	\bar{x}	σ_x	Qual. Int.
Ecological Attitudes and Concern	3.91	1.217	Moderate
Values and Ethical Responsibility towards Integral Ecology	4.44	1.108	Moderately High
Ecological Awareness and Interconnectedness	3.76	1.117	Moderate
Pro-Ecological Behaviors and Simplicity of Lifestyle	2.77	1.578	Low
Spiritual Ecology and Moral Responsibility	2.63	1.544	Very Low
Ecological Self-Efficacy and Commitment to Action	2.80	1.582	Low
Ecological Responsibility	3.39	1.476	Low

Table 2 presents a differentiated view of students’ ecological responsibility across several dimensions. Overall, the level of ecological responsibility is characterized as low, indicating that ecological considerations are only weakly integrated into students’ general outlook and everyday practices. Across the cognitive and attitudinal dimensions, students demonstrate developing but not yet consolidated orientations. Ecological attitudes and concern, as well as ecological awareness and interconnectedness, are described as moderate, suggesting that students are beginning to recognize ecological issues and their broader implications, but such recognition remains tentative and not firmly established. In contrast, values and ethical responsibility toward integral ecology are assessed at a moderately high level, indicating that ethical considerations related to care for creation are generally present, although they may not yet be consistently internalized or translated into practice.

More pronounced limitations are evident in the behavioral, spiritual, and agency-related dimensions. Pro-ecological behaviors and simplicity of lifestyle are rated low, reflecting infrequent engagement in environmentally responsible actions and limited adoption of sustainable consumption patterns. Similarly, ecological self-

efficacy and commitment to action are low, pointing to weak confidence and limited intention to actively engage in ecological initiatives. The lowest level is observed in spiritual ecology and moral responsibility, which indicates minimal integration of ecological concerns into students' spiritual life and moral agency. Taken together, these findings suggest that while some ethical awareness is emerging, substantial gaps remain in translating awareness and values into sustained action, lifestyle change, and deeper moral or spiritual engagement, resulting in an overall ecological responsibility that remains limited and uneven across dimensions.

Discussion

Building on the presented findings, the discussion section offers a deeper examination of the observed patterns by situating them within a broader conceptual and practical context. This part aims to clarify the meaning of the results, highlight significant trends, and articulate their broader relevance in a coherent and accessible manner.

Ecological Attitudes and Concern

The results indicate, as presented in Table 2, that students' ecological attitudes and concern are present but remain at a developing stage. This pattern suggests that many students already recognize environmental problems and express a degree of concern for ecological issues, yet such concern has not fully matured into a deeply internalized orientation. Within the broader pattern of findings, this dimension reflects the early formation of ecological awareness, where recognition of environmental problems begins to shape attitudes but does not yet consistently guide behavior. In religious education, this stage of awareness is often associated with the initial formation of moral sensitivity toward creation, where students begin to understand that care for the environment is not only a scientific or social issue but also a matter of moral responsibility and stewardship (Buencibello & Aton, 2025). Previous discussions in Catholic education also emphasize that ecological concern frequently develops gradually through reflection on ethical teachings, community engagement, and the integration of social responsibility within faith formation (Colella, 2022; Barete et al., 2026). Seen in this light, the moderate level of concern suggests that students are beginning to relate ecological issues to their personal values, although this connection is still forming and has not yet become a stable guide for consistent ecological engagement.

At the same time, the results reflect the broader pattern observed across the other dimensions, where students demonstrate awareness and emerging values but show weaker expressions of action-oriented responsibility. This pattern suggests that the movement from awareness to sustained ecological commitment may still be incomplete. In many educational settings, awareness of environmental issues often develops earlier than the sense of personal obligation that motivates consistent action. Moral reflection and belief formation can encourage positive attitudes toward environmental care, yet the translation of these attitudes into daily practices often depends on additional factors such as social influence, institutional support, and opportunities for participation. Studies in religious education have noted that when ecological concern is presented primarily at the level of moral reflection without sustained opportunities for lived practice, students may affirm the values associated with care for creation but struggle to integrate them into their everyday decisions (Sršen & Petrović Štefanac, 2023; Boustani, 2025). The moderate level of ecological attitudes and concern reflects an important stage in the formation of ecological responsibility, where awareness and moral sensitivity are present but still require

deeper reinforcement through education, community engagement, and consistent ecological practice.

Values and Ethical Responsibility towards Integral Ecology

The results indicate, as presented in Table 2, that students demonstrate a generally positive orientation toward values and ethical responsibility in relation to ecological concerns. This suggests that many students recognize the moral importance of caring for the environment and acknowledge the responsibility of individuals and communities to protect creation. Within the broader pattern of findings, this dimension appears more developed than several other areas of ecological responsibility, reflecting a stronger ethical awareness even when behavioral and action-oriented dimensions remain less established. In the context of religious education, such patterns are often associated with the formative role of moral teaching, where learners become familiar with ethical principles related to stewardship and the common good. Catholic social teaching consistently emphasizes that care for creation is closely linked to human dignity, solidarity, and responsibility toward future generations (Colella, 2022; Buencibello & Aton, 2025). The moderately high level in this dimension suggests that students are able to recognize and affirm these ethical principles, indicating that ecological responsibility is already present at the level of moral understanding.

At the same time, the contrast between this stronger ethical orientation and the weaker levels observed in behavioral and action-based dimensions points to a gap between recognizing moral responsibility and translating it into consistent practice. Moral values can shape beliefs about what ought to be done, yet the movement from ethical recognition to sustained action often depends on whether individuals feel personally responsible and capable of acting within their social environment. In educational contexts, students may affirm ecological values and agree with the moral call to care for creation, but this agreement does not automatically lead to changes in daily behavior if opportunities, support systems, or reinforcing experiences are limited. Studies in Catholic education note that ecological responsibility becomes more fully integrated when ethical reflection is accompanied by concrete forms of participation, communal practice, and opportunities for students to connect moral teachings with everyday decisions (de Oliveira & de Souza, 2025; Nainggolan et al., 2024). Viewed in this way, the moderately high level of values and ethical responsibility highlights an important foundation for ecological formation, while the differences across other dimensions indicate the need to strengthen the connection between moral awareness and lived ecological practice among college students.

Ecological Awareness and Interconnectedness

The results indicate, as presented in Table 2, that students demonstrate a developing level of awareness regarding the interconnected nature of ecological systems and human life. This suggests that many students recognize that environmental issues are linked to broader social and human concerns, yet their understanding of these connections remains partial and not yet fully integrated into a consistent perspective. Within the broader pattern of findings, this dimension reflects an emerging awareness that environmental challenges are connected to human choices, social conditions, and shared responsibilities. In religious education, such awareness is often linked to the moral formation of students, where the relationship between human dignity, social justice, and care for creation is gradually introduced through ethical reflection and community-oriented learning. Catholic social teaching, particularly the reflections on integral ecology, emphasizes that

environmental problems cannot be separated from social and moral concerns, as the well-being of the natural environment is closely tied to human relationships, economic practices, and cultural values (Colella, 2022; Buencibello & Aton, 2025). The moderate level in this dimension suggests that students are beginning to recognize these relationships, although this understanding has not yet developed into a deeply rooted ecological outlook.

At the same time, the pattern of results across the other dimensions indicates that awareness of interconnectedness does not necessarily translate into consistent ecological commitment or action. Recognizing that environmental issues are linked to broader social and ethical concerns may shape how students view ecological responsibility, but awareness alone may not be sufficient to influence everyday behavior if it is not accompanied by a stronger sense of personal obligation and meaningful opportunities for engagement. Educational studies have noted that students often express agreement with the idea that human actions affect the environment and society, yet this recognition does not always lead to sustained ecological practices when personal responsibility and practical pathways for action remain unclear (Sršen & Petrović Štefanac, 2023; Sánchez-Camacho & Villegas Moreno, 2024; Boustani, 2025; de Oliveira & de Souza, 2025; Barette et al., 2026). In this sense, the moderate level of ecological awareness and interconnectedness highlights an important stage in the development of ecological responsibility, where students acknowledge the broader implications of environmental issues but may still require deeper formation and supportive contexts to translate this awareness into active and sustained ecological engagement.

Pro-Ecological Behaviors and Simplicity of Lifestyle

The results indicate, as presented in Table 2, that students demonstrate a low level of engagement in environmentally responsible behaviors and the practice of a simpler lifestyle. This suggests that ecological responsibility is not yet strongly reflected in their everyday habits, consumption choices, and routine actions. Within the broader pattern of findings, this behavioral dimension appears weaker than students' ethical orientations and developing awareness, pointing to a noticeable gap between what students recognize as important and what they consistently practice in daily life. In the context of religious education, this pattern reflects a common challenge in moral formation, where students may accept the ethical call to care for creation but still struggle to translate this understanding into concrete lifestyle choices. Catholic social teaching emphasizes that ecological responsibility involves not only reflection on moral values but also a commitment to simpler ways of living that respect both human dignity and the limits of the natural world (Colella, 2022; Buencibello & Aton, 2025). The low level of engagement in pro-ecological behavior indicates that while moral awareness may be present, its expression in daily practice remains limited.

At the same time, the contrast between students' ethical orientation and their behavioral engagement highlights the difficulty of transforming moral recognition into consistent ecological action. Awareness of environmental responsibility and agreement with ethical principles do not automatically produce changes in personal habits when the sense of personal obligation and the practical conditions for action are still developing. In many educational contexts, students may value environmental protection and acknowledge the importance of caring for creation, yet everyday behavior is often shaped by social routines, consumption patterns, and the opportunities available within their environment. Studies in religious education note that ecological responsibility becomes more visible when ethical reflection is

supported by concrete experiences, community participation, and institutional practices that encourage sustainable habits (Sánchez-Camacho & Villegas Moreno, 2024; de Oliveira & de Souza, 2025; Seide, 2026). The low level observed in pro-ecological behaviors and lifestyle simplicity reflects the continuing gap between values and practice, suggesting the need for stronger connections between ecological teaching, personal responsibility, and opportunities for students to engage in consistent environmental action.

Spiritual Ecology and Moral Responsibility

The results indicate, as presented in Table 2, that students show very limited integration of ecological concerns into their spiritual life and moral decision-making. This suggests that care for the environment is rarely understood by students as part of their moral or spiritual responsibility and is more often viewed as a practical or social issue. Within the broader pattern of findings, this dimension reflects the weakest expression of ecological responsibility, indicating that ecological concern has not yet become deeply rooted in the moral reflection that shapes personal decisions and long-term commitment. In the context of religious education, this pattern raises important questions about how ecological themes are currently integrated into faith formation. Catholic social teaching consistently presents care for creation as a moral duty grounded in human dignity, stewardship, and responsibility toward the common good (Colella, 2022; Buencibello & Aton, 2025). When students recognize environmental concerns but do not connect them with moral reflection or spiritual meaning, it suggests that ecological teachings may be received primarily as information rather than as part of the deeper formation of conscience. The very low level observed in this dimension points to a limited internalization of the moral and spiritual foundations that support long-term ecological responsibility.

At the same time, this pattern highlights a broader challenge for faith formation, particularly in helping students move from acknowledging ecological values to integrating them into personal conviction and daily life. Moral understanding often develops gradually, beginning with exposure to ethical principles before these principles shape a stable sense of responsibility and action. When this process remains incomplete, students may agree with the idea of caring for the environment but still experience difficulty connecting it with their spiritual identity or personal obligations. Studies in religious education note that ecological responsibility becomes more deeply rooted when environmental concerns are consistently linked to moral reflection, communal practices, and opportunities for students to see care for creation as part of their faith commitment (Christie et al., 2019; Mickey, 2020; de Oliveira & de Souza, 2025). The very low level in spiritual ecology and moral responsibility suggests that current approaches to formation may need to strengthen the connection between ecological awareness, moral reasoning, and lived faith practice so that environmental responsibility is experienced not only as a social expectation but also as a meaningful expression of moral and spiritual commitment.

Ecological Self-Efficacy and Commitment to Action

The results indicate, as presented in Table 2, that students demonstrate limited confidence in their ability to contribute meaningfully to environmental protection and show a weak intention to engage in concrete ecological action. This suggests that although some level of awareness and ethical concern is present among students, these elements do not consistently develop into a strong sense of personal capability or readiness to act. Within the broader pattern of findings, this dimension

reflects a weak expression of ecological responsibility in areas that require initiative, participation, and sustained engagement. In the context of religious education, this pattern highlights a difficulty in translating moral understanding into personal agency. Catholic social teaching emphasizes that responsibility for creation involves not only recognizing moral principles but also responding through concrete participation in the care of the common good (Francis, 2015; Colella, 2022; Buencibello & Aton, 2025). When students acknowledge environmental responsibility but do not perceive themselves as capable actors, the moral call to stewardship may remain distant from their everyday sense of responsibility and influence.

At the same time, the contrast between students' ethical awareness and their low confidence in taking action reflects the continuing gap between recognizing ecological values and practicing them in daily life. Moral beliefs may shape how students understand environmental responsibility, yet action often develops only when individuals feel that their efforts can make a meaningful difference and when supportive conditions encourage participation. In many educational environments, students may affirm the importance of caring for creation but remain uncertain about how their individual actions contribute to broader environmental change. Research in religious education suggests that this gap becomes smaller when ecological teachings are connected with participatory experiences, community initiatives, and opportunities for students to practice responsibility in visible and meaningful ways (Leighter & O'Keefe, 2019; Boustani, 2025; de Oliveira & de Souza, 2025; Seide, 2026). The low level of ecological self-efficacy and commitment to action indicates that while moral awareness may be present, students may still require stronger encouragement, practical engagement, and supportive contexts to develop the confidence needed to act consistently in caring for the environment.

Ecological Responsibility

The overall findings, as presented in Table 2, indicate that students' ecological responsibility remains limited, reflecting a weak integration of environmental concern into their everyday attitudes, decisions, and behaviors. While certain dimensions show emerging awareness and ethical sensitivity—particularly in values and ethical responsibility—these have not yet developed into a coherent and consistent ecological orientation. The pattern of results suggests that students tend to recognize environmental issues at the level of moral understanding and conceptual awareness, yet this recognition does not consistently guide lifestyle choices, spiritual reflection, or sustained action. Within the context of religious education, this pattern reflects a common challenge in the formation of moral responsibility. Catholic social teaching consistently presents care for creation as an expression of stewardship, solidarity, and responsibility for the common good (Colella, 2022; Buencibello & Aton, 2025). However, when ecological concern remains primarily at the level of ethical reflection rather than lived commitment, the moral call to care for creation may not fully influence daily habits or personal decision-making. The results suggest that students acknowledge the importance of ecological responsibility but may not yet experience it as a deeply integrated aspect of their moral and social identity.

At the same time, the differences observed across the dimensions point to a gap between moral recognition and consistent ecological practice. Students appear capable of affirming the ethical importance of environmental care, yet this affirmation does not always develop into personal obligation, confidence in taking action, or long-term engagement. In many educational settings, moral values and environmental awareness can develop through instruction and reflection, but sustained behavior often emerges only when individuals also perceive themselves as responsible actors

within supportive social and institutional environments. Research in religious education suggests that ecological responsibility becomes more deeply rooted when ethical teachings are consistently connected with lived experience, communal participation, and opportunities to practice stewardship within everyday contexts (Sánchez-Camacho & Villegas Moreno, 2024; Nainggolan et al., 2024; de Oliveira & de Souza, 2025; Barete et al., 2026). The overall low level of ecological responsibility reflects the continuing gap between values, awareness, and action, indicating the need to strengthen the integration of ecological teaching, moral formation, and practical engagement so that environmental responsibility becomes a more visible and sustained part of students' lives.

Conclusion

The findings indicate that students demonstrate an uneven development of ecological responsibility across the six examined dimensions. Taken together, these results show that ecological responsibility among students is present in awareness and values but remains fragmented and insufficiently expressed in behavior, moral engagement, and personal initiative. The findings demonstrate that the formation of ecological responsibility among students involves more than developing environmental awareness or ethical agreement with ecological principles. Even when students acknowledge the importance of caring for creation, the integration of these values into personal identity, spiritual reflection, and daily practice remains uneven. The study provides evidence that the challenge of translating ecological teaching into lived commitment is not only theoretical but also observable within student formation. In this way, the findings help expand the global discourse on integral ecology by showing how the relationship between values, moral understanding, and action unfolds within a specific educational and cultural setting, offering insights that may inform faith-based ecological formation in similar institutions.

The findings also provide an important reference point for catechists and religious educators who seek to promote ecological responsibility as part of faith formation. The particularly weak development of spiritual ecology suggests that environmental responsibility is rarely experienced by students as a dimension of their spiritual life or moral vocation. This indicates that environmental teaching within religious education may often remain at the level of information or ethical reflection without sufficiently connecting ecological care with spiritual identity, moral commitment, and everyday practice. For catechists, the results highlight the need to more intentionally integrate ecological themes into faith formation so that care for creation becomes part of the lived expression of belief rather than an external social concern. The data provide practical guidance for educators in strengthening ecological formation, encouraging deeper moral reflection, and creating opportunities where students can connect ecological awareness with concrete actions grounded in faith and responsibility.

Recommendations

Based on the results, there is a clear need to strengthen educational, institutional, and community-based efforts that move beyond awareness toward meaningful ecological practice. Programs and initiatives may place greater emphasis on helping students translate ethical concern into daily habits, while also strengthening their confidence to participate in environmental activities within the

campus and the wider community. Within faith-based educational settings, ecological responsibility may be more effectively developed when care for creation is consistently integrated into moral formation, community service, and campus initiatives. Approaches grounded in religious education and Catholic social teaching encourage students to view environmental stewardship not only as a social concern but also as a moral responsibility connected to human dignity and the common good.

Future research may focus on more specific areas that emerge from these findings. In particular, studies may investigate the cultural, institutional, or educational factors within the college environment that contribute to the gap between students' ethical awareness and their everyday ecological behavior. Research within the field of religious education may also examine how faith formation programs, campus ministry activities, or service-learning initiatives influence students' ability to internalize ecological responsibility as part of their moral and spiritual identity. In addition, qualitative studies may explore how students interpret ecological teachings within Catholic social thought and how these teachings shape their motivations, perceived responsibilities, and barriers to environmental action.

Declaration on the Use of AI

The authors declare the use of AI tools (ChatGPT and Grammarly) to enhance the readability and presentation of the study. These tools did not influence the original content, analysis, and/or conclusions. The authors affirm that all analyses and interpretations were conducted

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About the Authors

Fremativo A. Vergara is a seminarian and student at San Isidro College–Bukidnon, affiliated with the School of Arts and Sciences. His academic involvement includes collaborative research on mental health, philosophy, and student well-being, contributing to student-focused inquiries that explore well-being, awareness, and contemporary social issues.

Dr. Evan P. Taja-on is a licensed professional teacher, certified mental health advocate, and has published research. He is a faculty member at San Isidro College–Bukidnon, affiliated with the School of Education, and a researcher whose interests include educational psychology, spirituality, and mental health. His work integrates teaching, research, and advocacy to foster student learning and well-being across diverse educational contexts.



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Original Article

Serving Beyond Borders: The Missionary Witness of Sr. Conchita Cruz, SSps and its Impact on the Church in Flores, Indonesia

Herlina Hadia 

Yarra Theological Union-University of Divinity, Melbourne, Australia

Correspondence: herlinhadia@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper explores the missionary life and enduring impact of Sr. Conchita Cruz, SSps, whose forty-six years of service in Flores, Indonesia, exemplify a profound commitment to mission “beyond borders.” Using a qualitative, historical-narrative methodology, the study examines her life within the wider socio-cultural, historical, and religious landscape of Flores, a region shaped by deep Catholic roots, indigenous traditions, and increasing socio-economic transformation. The paper situates her ministry within the missiological framework of the Missionary Sisters Servants of the Holy Spirit (SSps), highlighting her vocational journey from the Philippines to Indonesia, her professional contribution as a medical doctor, and her significant act of adopting Indonesian citizenship. Drawing on contemporary mission theology—particularly the attitudes of spirituality of presence, kenotic spirituality, reconciliation, and holistic spirituality—the study analyzes how Sr. Conchita embodied a cross-cultural and transformative missionary identity. Her witness reveals a mission rooted in friendship, humility, mutual learning, and intercultural solidarity. The findings show that her service transcended geographical, cultural, linguistic, and religious boundaries, demonstrating an incarnational and relational approach to mission that enriched both herself and the communities she served.

Keywords: Church; Flores; Missionary witness; Serving beyond borders; Sr. Conchita Cruz

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Introduction

Pope Francis opens his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (EG) with the affirmation that “the joy of the Gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus” (1). This foundational statement frames Christian mission not merely as an obligation, but as a natural outpouring of a transformative relationship with Christ. The encounter with Jesus, understood as a profound experience of God’s unconditional love becomes the wellspring of authentic missionary discipleship.

When missionaries internalize this divine love, their ministry is no longer driven primarily by duty or institutional expectations, but by an inner joy that seeks expression in service. Such joy fosters resilience, compassion, and a deep sense of purpose, enabling them to witness the Gospel in diverse cultural and social contexts. Thus, the missionary vocation according to *Ad Gentes* emerges as both a personal response to God’s initiative and a communal act of sharing the Good News, rooted in a heart that has been fundamentally transformed by the love it has received (2; *Deus Caritas Est*, 1).¹

The missionary vocation within the Mission Congregation of the Servants of the Holy Spirit (*Servarum Spiritus Sancti*, SSpS) entails a conscious and radical commitment to participate in the Church’s universal mission. As articulated in the SSpS Constitution (Art. 103), the missionary is called to relinquish familial, cultural, and linguistic attachments in order to be available for service wherever her presence as a woman is most needed. This form of discipleship requires not only geographical relocation but also profound intercultural engagement, demanding adaptability, spiritual maturity, and a willingness to inhabit unfamiliar socio-religious contexts for the sake of the Gospel (Bevans, 2002).

Within this framework, the missionary life of Sr. Conchita Cruz, SSpS, emerges as a paradigmatic example of cross-cultural religious commitment. A medical doctor trained at the University of Santo Tomas in Manila, she discerned a vocation that combined professional expertise and missionary service. Motivated by deep faith and guided by her biblical motto “I Love You with Eternal Love. Therefore I Continue My Loyal Love to You” (Jer 31:3), she accepted her assignment to Flores, Indonesia, arriving in 1972 with little prior knowledge of its people, culture, or language. Her subsequent forty-six years of uninterrupted service until her death in 2018 demonstrate a remarkable degree of self-giving, cultural integration, and fidelity to mission.

Flores provided a complex pastoral context shaped by a long history of Portuguese Catholic mission, indigenous animistic traditions, and linguistic diversity. The island’s socio-religious environment required missionaries to engage in sustained language acquisition, anthropological sensitivity, and dialogical interaction with local customs. Sr. Conchita’s ability to navigate these dynamics is evidenced not only by her enduring service in key medical institutions but also by her eventual decision to obtain Indonesian citizenship in 1996. This act signified a profound identification with the nation and community she served, demonstrating a missionary identity that transcends national and cultural boundaries.

¹ The Council affirms that the Church’s missionary mandate flows from God’s initiative and the transformative grace that draws believers into communion and sends them forth as witnesses. See also Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter *Deus Caritas Est* on Christian Love, 1. Benedict XVI teaches that Christian identity and mission originate in the encounter with God’s love, which transforms the believer and becomes the impetus for sharing that love with others.

Her missionary trajectory thus constitutes more than a personal narrative; it provides a lens through which to examine broader questions concerning cross-cultural mission, inculturation, and the embodiment of Christian witness in pluralistic contexts. The present paper situates her life within the historical and cultural landscape of Flores, analyzes her ministry through contemporary missiological frameworks, and reflects on how her lived experience exemplifies mission “beyond borders” geographical, cultural, linguistic, and ecclesial.

This paper attempts to answer to several questions. What is the situation in Flores, when she arrived and until her death? Who is Conchita and why she decided to hold an Indonesian citizenship? What is the meaning of mission beyond borders drawing from her missionary experiences?

By examining the life and work of Sr. Conchita Cruz, this study contributes to ongoing scholarly conversations on the nature of missionary identity, intercultural competence, and the transformative possibilities of religious presence in diverse settings. It also highlights the enduring significance of women religious missionaries in shaping local ecclesial communities and fostering cross-cultural solidarity.

This paper is organized into five main parts. The Introduction outlines the meaning of missionary life within the SSpS Congregation and presents the context of Sr. Conchita’s call. The second part describes Flores’ historical and religious background. The third part highlights the formation, service, and personal qualities of Sr. Conchita. The fourth part analyzes her missionary attitudes using theological and missiological frameworks. Finally, the Conclusion synthesizes the findings and reflects on her enduring legacy among the people of Flores.

Methodology

This paper uses a qualitative, historical-narrative methodology to explore the missionary life and impact of Sr. Conchita Cruz, SSpS, in Flores, Indonesia. Data for the study were gathered from documentary sources such as SSpS congregational archives, mission records, biographical accounts, historical descriptions of Flores, and legal texts on Indonesian citizenship. These sources were examined through historical and narrative analysis to reconstruct her life story, mission assignments, and her integration into the local community.

Findings and Discussion

Flores: Historical, Cultural, and Religious Context

The word Flores comes from Portuguese which means “flower” reflects the early European encounter with the island and its natural beauty. Located in the province of East Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia, Flores encompasses approximately 14,300 km² and forms part of the Lesser Sunda Islands, together with Bali and West Nusa Tenggara (Toda, 1999). Geographically, the island is characterized by a rugged topography of mountains and hills shaped by volcanic activity. Historically, its rough seas and remote terrain rendered access difficult for outsiders, contributing to the island’s relative isolation prior to modern transportation. Today, however, Flores has become both a culturally vibrant region and a prominent tourist destination. Most notably, it is recognized as one of the major predominantly Catholic regions in Indonesia (Wydiawati, 2018).

Before the arrival of Christianity, the indigenous religions of Flores were rooted in animistic worldviews. Natural elements such as forests, large stones, and ancient trees were believed to be inhabited by spiritual forces. Ancestor veneration

formed a central component of local cosmology, wherein ancestors were regarded as powerful intermediaries capable of bestowing prosperity, fertility, and protection, yet also capable of inflicting misfortune, illness, and natural disasters (Widyawati, 2018).

While contemporary Florenese communities now include adherents of Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Confucianism (Kong Hu Chu), elements of ancestral reverence persist. Evidence of this continuity can be seen in the megalithic traditions that remain active in several sub-ethnic groups. These traditions, dating back approximately 2,500 to 3,000 years—include the construction and preservation of ritual structures dedicated to ancestral spirits, underscoring the enduring influence of indigenous belief systems.

The introduction of Catholicism to Flores dates to the mid-16th century. In 1561, the Bishop of Malacca dispatched four Dominican missionaries, marking the beginning of sustained Catholic evangelization on the island. Their efforts laid the foundation for more than three centuries of Dominican missionary activity across the region. The establishment of a fort in Solor and a seminary in Larantuka by Father Antonio da Cruz in 1566 further consolidated the missionary presence (Steenbrink, 1993).

By the 19th century, the mission was continued by the Jesuits and subsequently by Dutch diocesan priests, leading to the widespread expansion of Catholic influence throughout mainland Flores and neighboring islands such as Adonara and Timor. Over time, Catholicism became deeply woven into the socio-cultural fabric of Flores, shaping its religious identity and communal life.

In the contemporary era, Flores stands at the intersection of cultural preservation and rapid socio-economic development. The island has gained international prominence as home to Komodo National Park, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, and a growing number of ecotourism destinations such as Kelimutu National Park, traditional villages (e.g., Wae Rebo, Bena), and numerous marine conservation areas. Improved transportation networks, expanding educational institutions, and increasing economic opportunities have contributed to significant social transformation.

Despite these developments, Flores retains a strong communal identity rooted in Catholic faith, indigenous cultural values, and traditional kinship systems. The coexistence of modernity and tradition—evident in the continued practice of ancestral rituals alongside active parish life—illustrates the island's dynamic and evolving character. This present reality provides crucial context for understanding missionary engagement on the island, including the work of individuals such as Sr. Conchita, whose ministry unfolded within this complex tapestry of cultural continuity and socio-religious change.

The Life and Formation of Sr. Conchita Cruz,SSpS

Pope Francis on his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* remarked “The Lord does not disappoint those who take this risk; whenever we take a step towards Jesus, we come to realize that he is already there, waiting for us with open arms” (3). Sr. Conchita came to Flores - Indonesia with a love she has for God and with her total trust that God is waiting for her in Flores. She risked herself to be His missionary to the people of Flores. She did not know how or what is Floresnese look like. What she has was a spirit of a young missionary to be a healer for all.

She was born on December 29, 1936 to a devoted Catholic Family of Fidel N. Cruz and Belen Topacio. She was baptized as Amicia Conchita Cruz. At home she is usually called by the sweet name Amicia, which means friend and Cruz means Cross, now we address her by the name Sr. Conchita Cruz , SSpS.[6] She lived out her name

in a wonderful way; becoming a friend for all and serving them beyond her own self. She decided to enter the convent of Missionary Sisters Servant of the Holy Spirit or known as SSps Sisters or Blue Sisters or Holy Spirit Sisters, on June 5, 1962 and went through the initial formation period in Manila - Philippines. On May 8, 1965 she made her first vows. After completing his formation periods she decided to answer her total 'YES' to God's call forever through professing her final vows on May 8, 1971, and received a new mission from the General Leadership Team in Rome. Sr. Conchita is to be sent to Flores – Indonesia.

She arrived in Jakarta and then Flores on 12 February 1972. At this time, Flores was predominantly Catholic, with farming as its major economic resources (Steenbrink, 81). Upon her arrival in Flores, she started learning Indonesian. In September 1972 - October 1972, she was sent to St. Elisabeth Hospital-Lela, Maumere, then to St. Raphael Hospital-Cancar, Manggarai, West Flores in November 1972 – November 1973. In December 1973 – September 2006, she served as medical doctor, teacher and leader of St. Elisabeth Hospital-Lela. She had devoted almost her entire life and mission to this institution.

Her motto –“I Love You with Eternal Love. Therefore I Continue My Loyal Love to You” which taken from the Prophet Jeremiah 31:3 beautifully capture her missionary spirit. Jeremiah in this particular chapter (31) spells out “the certainty and character of Israel’s future hope, which firmly grounded in the message of salvation” (Clements, 1973, 184). This specific verse 3 speaks “God’s freshly offered love issues in faithfulness, which gives impetus for rehabilitation of Israel,” (Brueggemann, 1998, 283) a divine love that does not remain abstract but expresses itself in faithfulness, initiating Israel’s restoration and healing.

This same dynamic of love—one that reaches, restores, and renews—echoes profoundly in her call to serve beyond borders. Just as God’s faithful love in Jeremiah extends to Israel even in exile, moving past boundaries of failure, separation, and distance, her missionary life reflects a willingness to cross physical, cultural, and emotional borders in order to embody that same restorative love. The verse becomes not only a source of personal inspiration but also a theological foundation for mission: love that goes beyond self becomes service that goes beyond borders.

Through this lens, her ministry is not simply an act of duty but a continuation of God’s own outreach—a commitment to meet others where they are, to accompany them in their struggles, and to help rebuild hope. Jeremiah’s message of divine fidelity becomes the heartbeat of her vocation, empowering her to serve with courage, tenderness, and perseverance wherever love is needed.

Became An Indonesian; Close to The People

The issue of Indonesian Citizenship is regulated in Law No. 12 of 2006 and Government Regulation (PP) No. 2 of 2007 (Indonesian Immigration Office website). There are eight requirements for a non-Indonesian to gain an Indonesian citizenship.

1. 18 (eighteen) years of age or already married;
2. At the time of filing the application, she/he has resided in the territory of the Republic of Indonesia for at least 5 (five) consecutive years or at least 10 (ten) consecutive years;
3. Physically and mentally healthy;
4. She/he can speak Indonesian and recognize the Indonesian philosophy: Pancasila and the Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia year 1945;
5. She/he has never been sentenced for committing a crime by imprisonment of 1 (one) year or more;

6. If by obtaining Citizenship of the Republic of Indonesia, do not become dual citizenship;
7. She/ he has a job and / or has a regular income; and
8. She/he pays citizenship payment to the Indonesian government

After many years of dedicated service among the people of Flores, Sr. Conchita Cruz, SSpS, completed the formal process of naturalization and was granted Indonesian citizenship. Having fulfilled all legal and civic requirements, she received full recognition as an Indonesian citizen. On 10 September 1996, motivated by her profound love for the mission in Flores, she made the deliberate and sacrificial decision to leave behind her Filipino citizenship and fully embrace a new national identity. From that moment onward, she identified herself entirely as Indonesian—not merely in official status but also in personal and missionary commitment.

Wholeheartedly she promised in front of Indonesia government and people “I relinquish entirely all allegiance to any foreign power, and I accept and acknowledge the supreme authority of the Republic of Indonesia and will remain faithful to it. I undertake this obligation wholeheartedly and will not diminish it in any way” (Flores East Secretariat E-File).

Her decision entailed relinquishing the rights, privileges, and social advantages associated with being a Filipina, including the comfort of cultural familiarity, economic benefits, and the security of her homeland. Such a choice, however, was not an act of loss but a theological and missiological testimony. By freely surrendering what many would consider indispensable markers of identity, she embodied a fundamental principle of missionary life: that authentic service often requires crossing boundaries—geographical, cultural, and existential.

In this context, her naturalization becomes a concrete expression of the theme “serve beyond borders.” It demonstrates that missionary commitment is not confined to temporary presence or emotional affection for a people, but may call for a radical reconfiguration of one’s own identity for the sake of deeper solidarity. Her life illustrates that serving beyond borders does not diminish the self; rather, it expands one’s horizons, enriches personal and spiritual growth, and strengthens one’s capacity to participate fully in the life of the community being served. In choosing to become Indonesian, Sr. Conchita witnessed to a mission that transcends territorial definitions and national allegiances, revealing a form of discipleship grounded in universal love, intercultural openness, and unwavering dedication to the people entrusted to her care.

Serving Beyond Borders

The spirit of being a religious missionary had brought her service beyond borders. She went beyond the border of cultural background, border of language, border of race, border of faith, border of geographical, and in short, border of differences in so many aspects of life. She came to a situation where Flores at that time, as stated by John Paul II, in his Encyclical Letter *Redemptoris Missio* (RM), was considered as “lack Christian communities sufficiently mature to be able to incarnate the faith in their own environment and proclaim it to other groups” (33). Into this situation, he continues, the missionary activities should tackle on “pastoral care” (33). The presence of Sr. Conchita, SSpS in the land of Flores has brought many people to experience God’s love as a source of life. She has cared for them and cured them from their illnesses.

The transformative impact of her missionary presence in Flores becomes even more evident when viewed through the wider theological and missiological discourse

on what it means to cross borders for the sake of the Gospel. Her life and ministry not only responded to the concrete pastoral needs identified in the region but also exemplified the deeper spiritual dispositions required of missionaries in contemporary contexts. In this sense, Sr. Conchita's service was not merely a response to external circumstances; it was an embodiment of an interior spirituality that enabled her to engage people across lines of culture, language, and social experience. It is within this framework that the insights of contemporary missiologists become particularly relevant, offering conceptual lenses through which her lived witness can be interpreted and appreciated.

Peter C. Phan mentioned four attitudes and practices that appear most appropriate missionaries in crossing borders in today's world, as he quoted from Robert Schreiter; "spirituality of presence, kenotic spirituality, reconciliation, and holistic spirituality" (Phan, 2003, 137). Sr. Conchita, SSpS has lived out all these four attitudes as a missionary serve beyond borders.

1. *Spirituality of Presence*

Flores politically, is an island with nine regencies. It has 28 languages used across the island, with richness of cultural values and rituals (Fernandez, 2007). There are six religions practiced in this island, with Catholic as its majority. Into these realities, Sr. Conchita was sent and witnessed to God's love, "the presence goes beyond accessibility," (Phan, 2003, 138). It demands not only presence physically but it should go beyond it. It is an acceptance to a reality of pluralism.

Spirituality of presence "includes genuine friendship with those living on the other side of the border and a dialogue of life with them" (Phan, 2003, 138). It indicates sometimes "silent witness of life rooted in the experienced of God" (Phan, 2003, 138). John Paul II, in his Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia* notes that the spirituality of presence in mission is expressed as "contemplative action and active contemplation" (23). The spirituality of presence as described here emphasizes a mode of missionary engagement grounded not primarily in verbal proclamation but in relational depth and existential authenticity.

The first element, "genuine friendship with those living on the other side of the border," highlights the interpersonal dimension of mission, suggesting that authentic evangelization arises from reciprocal relationships rather than hierarchical or directive encounters. This friendship presupposes openness, vulnerability, and the capacity to enter another's cultural, social, and personal world with respect and humility (Bevans and Schroeder, 2004). In this sense, as describes in the document *Dialogue and Mission*, presence becomes a form of dialogical encounter, often referred to as a "dialogue of life" (42), in which shared experiences, daily interactions, and mutual concern become vehicles for communicating God's love.

The second aspect, "silent witness of life rooted in the experience of God" underscores the contemplative foundation of missionary presence. Silence here is not passivity or withdrawal but a witness arising from interiority, where the missionary's actions, attitudes, and manner of being reflect a life shaped by ongoing communion with God (Nouwen, 1981 and Merton, 1971). Such silent witness is particularly effective in contexts where direct proclamation may be inappropriate or where trust must first be established. Pope Paul VI in his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi* states that "modern people listen more willingly to witnesses than to teachers" (21). It is a spirituality that relies on integrity of life as a form of testimony.

Together, these elements form what has been described as mission understood as "contemplative action and active contemplation." This formulation expresses a dynamic integration of doing and being, where action flows from

contemplative grounding, and contemplation is continually enriched by active engagement with others.

Mission, therefore, is not a task added onto spiritual life but a natural extension of it—a way of being present in the world that reveals God’s love through attentiveness, compassion, and relational fidelity. As *Redemptorist Missio* put it beautifully that “The witness of a Christian life is the first and irreplaceable form of mission: Christ, whose mission we continue, is the “witness” *par excellence* (Rv 1:5; 3:14) and the model of all Christian witness” (42). The spirituality of presence thus offers a model of missionary practice that transcends mere functional service and embodies a holistic, incarnational approach to serving across borders.

Sr. Conchita embodied this spirituality with remarkable consistency throughout her decades in Flores. Her presence among the people was characterized by genuine friendship rather than clerical distance. She learned local languages, participated in community rituals, and entered homes not as an outsider but as a trusted companion. Her attentiveness to the sick, whom she cared for with tenderness and skill made her a visible sign of God’s healing love. In many instances, the trust she gained came not from words but from the silent witness of her daily actions: walking long distances to visit the ill, sitting quietly with families in their grief, and offering her time without complaint.

Her life exemplified “contemplative action,” for her service was sustained by deep prayer and an unmistakable joy rooted in her relationship with God. At the same time, her “active contemplation” was evident in the way she discovered God in the people she served—their resilience, their stories, their cultural richness. She did not impose faith; she shared life. Through her steady presence, she became a bridge across differences of language, culture, and religion, revealing that the heart of mission is not movement but being with.

In this way, Sr. Conchita’s witness in Flores stands as a living expression of the spirituality of presence: a mission that crosses borders through friendship, humility, and contemplative love.

2. Kenotic Spirituality

The concept of kenotic spirituality emerges from the theological notion of kenosis, derived from Philippians 2:6–7, where Christ “emptied himself” in order to assume the condition of a servant. In missionary theology, this kenotic dimension translates into an attitude grounded in humility, self-emptying, and receptivity. The kenotic spirituality refers to an attitude of a missionary as a “receiver not a giver” (Phan, 2003, 139). They have to put themselves “as a stranger and as a guest” (Phan, 2003, 139). They need to let the host teach them about everything. Above all they are to live a life filled with gratitude.

The description of the missionary as “a receiver not a giver” reframes traditional understandings of mission by challenging the presumption that missionaries arrive primarily to impart knowledge, faith, or resources. Instead, kenotic spirituality insists that authentic mission begins with the recognition of one’s own incompleteness and with an openness to learn from the host community (Bosch, 1991).

To “put themselves as a stranger and as a guest” underscores this disposition. A stranger acknowledges that they do not fully understand the cultural, linguistic, and social dynamics of the community they enter. A guest recognizes dependence on the hospitality, guidance, and generosity of others. These dual postures according to *Ad Gentes*, dismantle asymmetries of power and privilege, allowing the missionary to enter into relationships marked by mutuality rather than dominance (11).

By allowing the host community to “teach them about everything,” missionaries affirm the inherent dignity, cultural wisdom, and theological insight embedded within local contexts. This approach aligns with contemporary missiological perspectives that emphasize inculturation, intercultural dialogue, and the recognition of God’s presence already operative within every culture (Bosch, 1991; Bevans & Schroeder, 2004; Dupuis, 2002).

Central to kenotic spirituality is also the cultivation of a life of gratitude. Gratitude, in this framework, is not merely an emotional response but a spiritual orientation that acknowledges the gifts received from God and from the host community (Amaladoss, 1990). It shapes the missionary’s worldview, fostering humility, respect, and reverence for the people among whom they minister. Gratitude prevents the missionary from viewing themselves as benefactors and instead situates them as participants in a reciprocal exchange of grace (Nouwen, 1981; Merton, 1971).

In sum, kenotic spirituality challenges conventional notions of missionary authority by replacing them with vulnerability and relational reciprocity. It positions mission not as an act of one-sided giving but as a transformative encounter in which the missionary is continually formed, enriched, and humbled by those they serve. This spirituality forms an essential foundation for a mission that genuinely crosses borders, not through power, but through self-emptying and openness to the other (RM, 55).

The dynamics of kenotic spirituality are clearly reflected in the life and missionary witness of Sr. Conchita. Upon her arrival in Flores, she did not assume the role of an expert or benefactor, despite her professional competence and religious training. Instead, she entered the local context as a learner, recognizing herself, in Phan’s terms, as a “receiver rather than a giver.” She allowed the people of Flores to teach her their languages, customs, healing practices, and ways of relating. By positioning herself as a “stranger and a guest,” she relinquished any claim to cultural superiority and embraced the vulnerability required for genuine intercultural encounter.

Her willingness to depend on the hospitality of local families, especially in her early years, demonstrated a profound openness to being formed by the community she came to serve. She listened attentively to the stories of mothers, elders, and village leaders; she sought guidance from them in navigating cultural rituals and local norms; and she allowed their wisdom to shape her ministry. In doing so, she lived the foundational principle of kenotic mission: that the people evangelize the missionary even as the missionary seeks to evangelize the people.

Moreover, her daily life was marked by a deep spirit of gratitude. She frequently expressed appreciation for the trust extended to her, for the opportunity to accompany the sick and the poor, and for the cultural richness she encountered. This grateful disposition not only sustained her spiritually but also strengthened her relationships with the community, who saw in her not a foreign authority but a humble presence who honored their identity. It was precisely this gratitude that empowered her to surrender her Filipino citizenship and embrace Indonesian identity fully, an act that further manifested her self-emptying love for the people of Flores.

Thus, Sr. Conchita’s life stands as a compelling embodiment of kenotic spirituality. Through humility, receptivity, and gratitude, she crossed borders not by imposing herself but by allowing herself to be transformed. Her mission was shaped not by dominance but by mutuality, not by unilateral giving but by the reciprocal exchange of grace. In her, the kenotic way of Christ took a concrete, human form, revealing a missionary presence capable of healing, uniting, and enriching both the giver and the receiver.

3. Reconciliation

The spirituality of reconciliation has vertical and horizontal dimensions. Vertical dimension refers to “God’s reconciling humanity to God’s own self,” (Romans 5:1-11), where reconciliation is portrayed as a divine act made possible through Christ’s self-giving love. In this perspective, reconciliation is not merely the restoration of moral balance but the reestablishment of a covenantal relationship in which humanity is invited into communion with God (Schreiter and Jorgensen, 2013, 13; RM, 55). This vertical grounding serves as the theological foundation for any missionary practice, reminding the missionary that reconciliation is first received as gift before it is extended as task (Bosch, 1991; Bevans & Schroeder, 2004).

While horizontal reconciliation is between humans and with cosmos. It encompasses interpersonal relationships, community dynamics, and broader societal structures marked by division, injustice, or historical wounds (Schreiter, 1992; Amaladoss, 1990). This spirituality of reconciliation becomes especially significant when viewed against the backdrop of colonial and postcolonial histories, which have deeply shaped the contexts in which missionaries often work. Colonialism introduced hierarchical relations between colonizer and colonized, frequently justified under the guise of “civilizing missions.” Such histories have left lingering wounds, including mistrust toward foreign presence, cultural dislocation, and the erosion of indigenous authority structures (Schreiter, 1992; Bosch, 1991).

Within this context, the spirituality of reconciliation calls missionaries to reject any remnants of colonial attitudes, whether explicit or subtle and adopt a posture that actively dismantles unequal power dynamics. For missionaries to achieve this, they need to cultivate attitude of “listening and waiting, attention and compassion and post-exilic existence” (Phan, 2003, 143).

The emphasis on listening counters the colonial impulse to speak first or define reality for others. The call to attention and compassion resists the objectification of local communities and restores their dignity as agents of their own history. The notion of post-exilic existence invites missionaries to recognize and accompany communities still grappling with collective trauma, displacement, or the legacy of cultural suppression (Schreiter & Jorgensen, 2013).

In this way, reconciliation becomes not only interpersonal but profoundly anti-colonial, fostering relationships built on mutuality rather than domination, partnership rather than paternalism, and solidarity rather than superiority. Mission according to Pope Francis in his Encyclical *Fratelli Tutti* is thus reframed as a collaborative process in which healing is pursued through shared vulnerability, truthful memory, and the restoration of just and respectful relationships (215).

Within the Flores context, where colonial histories had left both visible and invisible marks on society, Sr. Conchita embodied this spirituality of reconciliation. Her ministry was characterized by a posture of deep listening—whether to local leaders, families, or patients—allowing their narratives to shape her understanding of the community’s needs and aspirations. She approached the people not as subjects to be instructed but as partners whose wisdom, culture, and spiritual heritage deserved reverence.

Her compassionate presence among the sick and marginalized functioned as a form of horizontal reconciliation, healing not only physical ailments but also the relational fractures caused by poverty, marginalization, or historical wounds. By integrating herself fully into Indonesian life, even to the point of embracing Indonesian citizenship, she rejected colonial patterns of foreign superiority and instead chose a posture of solidarity and shared identity.

In living this way, Sr. Conchita became a reconciling presence—embodying a mission that is not coercive but liberative, not colonial but communally participatory, and not hierarchical but mutually transformative. Through her witness, the spirituality of reconciliation takes on concrete form as a pathway toward healing, justice, and unity in a postcolonial world.

4. Holistic Spirituality

Another essential attitude for missionaries entering a new cultural or religious context is the capacity to integrate into and remain open to the religious lives of others. This openness requires a deep respect for the beliefs, practices, and spiritual experiences of the communities they serve, acknowledging that the divine can be encountered in multiple ways beyond one's own tradition. Phan identifies four interrelated dimensions that a missionary must embrace to cultivate this integrative openness: "the self, fellow human beings, the cosmos, and God" (Phan, 2003, 145).

The first dimension, the self, calls missionaries to cultivate self-awareness and humility. They must recognize their own cultural, religious, and personal assumptions while remaining open to growth and transformation through interaction with others (Rahner, 1978; Nouwen, 1981). This self-reflective posture prevents the imposition of one's own worldview and allows for genuine encounter.

The second dimension, fellow human beings, emphasizes relational engagement and mutual respect. Missionaries are invited to recognize the dignity, wisdom, and spiritual insights of others, entering into dialogue rather than unidirectional teaching (Smith, 1979; Sanneh, 1989). In this way, human relationships become spaces for reciprocal learning and authentic witness.

The third dimension, the cosmos, expands the missionary's horizon to include the interconnectedness of creation. Respecting the natural and cultural environment in which communities live is a recognition that religious life is often inseparable from ecological and social contexts (*Laudato Si*, 66-69). Engagement with the cosmos encourages missionaries to appreciate the sacred embedded in local landscapes, rituals, and communal ways of life.

Finally, the fourth dimension, God, situates the missionary's openness within the broader theological framework of divine transcendence and immanence. By seeing God's presence at work in multiple contexts, missionaries develop a spirituality that affirms rather than diminishes the religious experiences of others (EA 31-32). This dimension encourages a contemplative stance, allowing the missionary to discern divine action within the lives and cultures of the people they serve.

Taken together, these four dimensions foster a holistic missionary attitude: one that is integrative, respectful, and dialogical. Such openness enables missionaries to engage meaningfully with diverse communities, witnessing to their own faith while honoring the sacred realities already present in others' lives. This approach transforms mission from a one-sided transmission of beliefs into a mutual encounter that enriches both the missionary and the community (Schreier, 1992).

Sr. Conchita exemplified this integrative and open attitude throughout her decades of missionary service in Flores. In terms of the self, she approached the community with humility, acknowledging her own cultural and religious background as a foreigner from the Philippines while remaining willing to be transformed by the local context. She continuously adapted her ministry to the lived realities of the people, demonstrating a reflective awareness that her presence was not to impose but to accompany.

Regarding fellow human beings, Sr. Conchita fostered deep, reciprocal relationships across social, cultural, and religious divides. She listened attentively to

the elders, families, and local leaders, learning from their wisdom and respecting their spiritual practices. Her engagement was relational rather than transactional; she entered into the lives of others not as an authority but as a companion, creating spaces of trust where dialogue and mutual learning could flourish.

Her respect for the cosmos was evident in how she immersed herself in local cultural rituals and appreciated the spiritual significance of the natural environment. She recognized that people's religious expressions were often inseparable from their agricultural cycles, sacred sites, and community traditions. By honoring these dimensions of life, she demonstrated that mission is not limited to doctrinal teaching but includes attentiveness to the holistic experience of human life and creation.

Finally, in relation to God, as religious missionary Sr. Conchita maintained a spirituality that discerned the presence of the divine in all aspects of the communities she served. She witnessed God's work not only in explicitly Christian expressions but also in the moral, cultural, and spiritual richness of the people she encountered. This recognition allowed her to celebrate the gifts already present in the lives of others while sharing her own faith with integrity and humility.

Through these four dimensions, Sr. Conchita lived an integrative missionary presence, bridging cultural, religious, and social divides. Her openness and receptivity illustrate that mission is not solely about conversion or instruction; it is about accompanying people in their spiritual journeys, honoring their worldview, and participating in a mutual exchange of life, faith, and love. In doing so, she embodied a form of service that transcends borders not only geographical but also cultural, religious, and relational.

Her presence does not break down the boundaries of differences, but makes those differences enrich each other. She became a person whom Anthony Bellagamba described as the "person of the present," a person living in the present, who is in contact with today's reality, and a "person of the beyond" (Bellagamba, 1992), someone which goes beyond its own culture, history, values, mother tongue, living symbols and even empties herself in order to adapt and accept the culture of the people of Flores.

Conclusion

Pope John Paul II expressed his gratitude to all missionaries in his Encyclical Letter, *Redemptorist Missio* when he says "I express gratitude to the missionaries who, by their loving presence and humble service to people, are working for the integral development of individuals and of society through schools, health-care centers, leprosaria, homes for the handicapped and the elderly, projects for the promotion of women and other similar apostolates" (60).

Being a missionary is a way of going beyond oneself for the Kingdom Of God. Sr. Conchita Cruz, SSpS, exemplifies a missionary life that truly serves beyond borders not only crossing geographical boundaries but also cultural, religious, and relational divides. Through her spirituality of presence, she revealed God's love in attentive companionship and silent witness; through kenotic humility, she embraced vulnerability, gratitude, and learning from the communities she served; through the spirituality of reconciliation, she fostered healing, justice, and solidarity while rejecting hierarchical and colonial attitudes; and through openness to the religious lives of others, she engaged in mutual dialogue, honoring the self, fellow human beings, the cosmos, and God.

Her life demonstrates that authentic mission is relational, incarnational, and transformative, enriching both the missionary and the communities they accompany.

Sr. Conchita's witness offers a paradigm for contemporary mission, a mission grounded in love, humility, and mutual respect that transcends borders in every sense of the term.

Sr. Conchita has left her land and her beloved family for the sake of the Kingdom of God. She is a religious missionary who serves beyond borders of land, language, culture and background. She might have left this world, but her legacy lives forever in the heart of the people of Flores, Indonesia.

Declaration on the Use of AI

The authors declare the use of AI tools (ChatGPT and Grammarly) to enhance the readability and presentation of the study. These tools did not influence the original content, analysis, and/or conclusions. The authors affirm that all analyses and interpretations were conducted

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About the Author

Herlina Hadia, SSpS, is a member of the Mission Congregation Servants of the Holy Spirit (SSpS). She holds a Master of Arts and Licentiate in Missiology from the University of Santo Tomas, Philippines. Her academic interests include inculturation, women's roles in mission, and interreligious dialogue in Indonesian context. She has published in several academic journals on these themes. Currently, she is pursuing her PhD in Theology, focusing on Interreligious Dialogue, at the University of Divinity–Yarra Theological Union in Melbourne, Australia. Her research aims to explore dialogical engagement between Christian and Muslim communities in Indonesia.



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Original Article

Toward an Authentic Indian Theology: Inculturation, Liberation, and the Cry of the Poor in the Light of *Dilexi te*

Sebastian Mathew Mittathanickal, OFM Cap. 

Capuchin Vidya Bhavan Theological College, Thellakom, Kottayam, Kerala, India

Correspondence: sebanmathew@gmail.com

Abstract

This study explores the emergence of an authentic Indian theology rooted in inculturation, interreligious dialogue, and the preferential option for the poor in the light of Dilexi te (I have loved you). It argues that theology in India must move beyond inherited Western frameworks and become a contextual, lived reflection shaped by religious plurality, cultural diversity, and socio-economic realities. While significant contributions have been made by Asian theologians and ecclesial bodies, a clear research gap remains in integrating inculturation, dialogue, and liberation within a unified theological framework grounded explicitly in the primacy of divine love. By engaging this gap, the study proposes a holistic vision of theology as transformative praxis, revealing Christ within Indian contexts and responding to the cry of the poor through love, justice, and solidarity.

Keywords: *Inculturation, Indian Theology, Interreligious Dialogue, Liberation, Preferential Option for the Poor*

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Introduction

The Church in Asia will be a Church of the poor, a Church of dialogue with Asia's cultures and religions. The local Church is deeply rooted in the community, reflecting both indigenous and inculturated characteristics. In Evangelization in Modern Day Asia, the Church engages in a continuous, humble, and loving dialogue with the living traditions, cultures, and religions of the people. Essentially, the Church connects with all aspects of life in the areas where it is present, embracing the community's history and experiences (Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences [FABC], 1974, no. 12). This foundational vision, articulated by the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences, provides a compelling starting point for reflecting on the task of doing theology in contemporary India. It challenges theologians to move beyond mere repetition of inherited Western traditions or abstract doctrinal formulations, and instead calls for a living, dynamic theology deeply rooted in the realities of Asian, particularly Indian, life.

The task of doing theology in India today is both a profound challenge and a vital opportunity. In a context marked by religious plurality, socio-economic inequality, and complex cultural dynamics, theology cannot remain a repetition of inherited traditions or abstract doctrines. Rather, it must become a living reflection that engages the concrete realities of the people. The historical shaping of Christianity through Western missionary and colonial influences has at times led to its perception as foreign, highlighting the urgent need for a theology rooted in the cultural, spiritual, and social fabric of Indian life.

At the same time, India's rich religious heritage provides fertile ground for theological reflection. In this setting, theology must be contextual, dialogical, and liberative, engaging diverse religious traditions while responding to the cries of the poor. The insights of Asian theologians, along with the vision of the Second Vatican Council and the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences, emphasize a theology rooted in lived experience and oriented toward transformation.

In this light, *Dilexi te* offers a unifying foundation by affirming the primacy of God's love as the source of all theology. As the document reminds us, the Heart of Christ is the living sign of that love which is at the origin of everything and which transforms our lives (Pope Leo XIV, 2025, no. 103). This profound insight situates theology not merely as an intellectual exercise but as a response to the dynamic and transformative love of God revealed in Christ. It calls for a lived praxis that integrates inculturation, interreligious dialogue, and the preferential option for the poor. Thus, this study proposes an authentic Indian theology that is deeply rooted in local realities, in which theology becomes a transformative journey revealing Christ in the cultures, religions, and struggles of the people and contributing to justice, dignity, and human flourishing.

Discussion

The Importance of Theology in the Indian Context

Indians live in a profoundly multicultural and multi-religious context. Although Christianity originated in Asia (today's West Asia), and several Asian Christian communities trace their origins to the apostolic age, Christianity in India has largely developed through Western missionary activity. Consequently, the proclamation of Christ has often been perceived as a Western imposition, closely associated with colonial structures and cultural alienation. For a long time, ecclesial

leadership and missionary initiatives remained under foreign control, thereby embedding a colonial ethos that distanced the Church from the lived realities of the people.

This sense of “foreignness” is not merely because Christianity originated outside India, nor because it professes a distinct faith. Indian society has historically embraced religious diversity, as seen in the acceptance of traditions like Buddhism across Asia without perceiving them as alien. Rather, Christianity has often been viewed as foreign because the local Church, at times, failed to sufficiently identify with the cultural, social, and historical experiences of the people. During the Portuguese missionary period, Western ecclesiastical practices were frequently imposed, and indigenous traditions were discouraged or suppressed, particularly during the Synod of Diamper (1599), widening the gap between faith and culture (Neill, 1984, pp. 230–245).

As John L. Allen Jr. observes in *The Future Church*, “Southern Catholics also tend to believe that the theological agenda set in the West sometimes doesn’t address their pastoral concerns” (Allen, 2009, pp. 2–3). This insight highlights the urgent need for a theology that arises from the Indian context itself, one that resonates with the people’s aspirations, struggles, and religious sensibilities.

India’s long spiritual heritage, as the birthplace of major world religions, reflects a continuous dialogue with the ultimate mystery of God. In such a context, theology cannot remain abstract or imported; it must become contextual, dialogical, and experiential. Asian theologians have consistently emphasized that inculturation and contextualization are not optional but essential for the Church’s mission. The Gospel must encounter cultures in a mutually enriching way, allowing faith to take root in local traditions. Contextualization, or inculturation, in the Indian context is often referred to by Indian theologians as the “Indianization of Christianity.” The term ‘Indianization’ was coined following the example of African theologians who speak of ‘Africanization of Christianity’ when addressing the issue of Inculturation in the African context (*African Ecclesiastical Review [AFER]*, 1975, pp. 322–328). This process calls for a theology that is deeply rooted in the life, culture, and values of the Indian people.

In this regard, the Apostolic Exhortation *Dilexi te* (2025) by Pope Leo XIV offers a significant contemporary affirmation. The document underscores that divine love is inseparable from concrete solidarity with the poor and marginalized, especially in the face of new forms of poverty and widening economic inequality. It reiterates the Church’s call to a preferential option for the poor, insisting that authentic Christian witness must be embodied in compassionate action and justice (Pope Leo XIV, 2025, no. 39, see also 98). This teaching strongly resonates with the Indian context, where poverty, social exclusion, and inequality remain pressing realities.

Furthermore, theologians such as Aloysius Pieris and Samuel Rayan have emphasized that theology in Asia must integrate religious depth with commitment to the poor. Pieris speaks of the need for theology to pass through both the richness of Asian religiosity and the harsh reality of Asian poverty, while Rayan insists that God’s self-revelation is encountered in the struggles of the people for dignity and justice (Pieris, 1988, pp. 71–85; Rayan, 1978, pp. 203–231). The vision of *Dilexi te* deepens and universalizes this insight by grounding it explicitly in the mystery of divine love.

Thus, the importance of theology in the Indian context lies in its ability to become a living, liberative, and incarnational reality, one that bridges faith and culture, dialogue and proclamation, contemplation and action. Only such a contextual theology can overcome the perception of foreignness and enable the Church in India

to truly participate in the life, struggles, and hopes of its people, becoming a genuine sign of God's love in history.

The Indian Cultural Context and the Impact of the Missionaries

India is a profoundly pluralistic and multicultural society where diverse faiths and belief systems shape the daily lives of its people. Over centuries, numerous religious traditions, both indigenous and foreign, have not only taken root but have flourished in dynamic interaction. Religion is not merely a private reality in India; it is an integral dimension of cultural and social identity. As a secular state, India's constitution upholds the equal dignity of all religions, fostering an environment where plurality is not only tolerated but also respected.

This rich diversity makes India a privileged context for theological reflection. The Indian people's long-standing engagement with the ultimate mystery of God provides fertile ground for a theology that is dialogical and experiential. However, despite Christianity's ancient presence in India, the faith has often been perceived as foreign due to its historical association with Western missionary expansion and colonial structures. The imposition of Western cultural forms, especially during the Portuguese period, led to a rupture between faith and indigenous traditions, thereby alienating Christianity from the people's cultural life (Neill, 1984, pp. 230–245).

In response to such historical realities, the need for a contextual and inculturated theology has become increasingly evident. The Second Vatican Council marked a decisive turning point in this regard. The Council emphasized that the Church must engage deeply with the “joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties” of the people, recognizing that divine revelation unfolds within human history and culture (Second Vatican Council, 1965, no. 1). This vision calls for a theology that is not imposed from the outside but grows organically within the life context of the people.

Building on this vision, the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) has consistently emphasized the need for a threefold dialogue: with cultures, religions, and the poor. In the Asian, particularly Indian, context, theology must emerge from this dialogical engagement, recognizing the presence of God already at work in the religious traditions and struggles of the people (Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences [FABC], 1974). Similarly, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India (CBCI) has stressed that the Church in India must become truly indigenous by promoting inculturation, interreligious harmony, and a preferential option for the marginalized.

This theological direction finds a powerful contemporary affirmation in the Apostolic Exhortation *Dilexi te* by Pope Leo XIV. The document highlights that the love of God is inseparable from concrete solidarity with the poor, especially in a world marked by growing economic inequality and new forms of exclusion. It calls the Church to renew its commitment to the preferential option for the poor, insisting that authentic faith must be expressed through justice, compassion, and transformative action (Pope Leo XIV, 2025, nos. 101, 110). In the Indian context, where caste-based discrimination, poverty, and social marginalization persist, this teaching becomes particularly urgent and relevant.

Contemporary theologians further deepen this perspective. Aloysius Pieris insists that Asian theology must be rooted in both the spiritual heritage of Asia and the concrete experience of poverty, while Stephen B. Bevans affirms that all theology is necessarily contextual, shaped by culture and history (Pieris, 1988, pp. 71–85; Bevans, 2002, pp. 3–15). These insights resonate strongly with the vision of *Dilexi te*, which grounds theological reflection in the lived experience of divine love manifested in service to the marginalized.

Therefore, the Indian cultural context, marked by religious plurality and socio-economic challenges, calls for a theology that is inculturated, dialogical, and liberative. Such a theology moves beyond inherited Western frameworks and becomes a living expression of the Gospel within Indian realities. In fidelity to the vision of Vatican II, the FABC, the CBCI, and the call of *Dilexi te*, Indian theology must embody God's love in action, becoming a transformative force that bridges faith and life, and that reveals the presence of Christ in the cultures, religions, and struggles of the Indian people.

The Problem of Foreignness in Indian Christianity

The problem of foreignness in Indian Christianity is deeply rooted in the Church's historical and cultural experience in India. Although Christianity is traditionally traced to the apostolic mission of St. Thomas the Apostle, its later development was significantly shaped by Western missionary movements, particularly under the influence of the Portuguese Empire. During this period, the proclamation of the Gospel became closely associated with colonial power structures, and converts were often expected to abandon their indigenous customs and adopt Western cultural forms. This created a profound divide between faith and culture, leading Christianity to be perceived not as a faith rooted in Indian soil, but as an imported and alien tradition (Neill, 1984, pp. 302–305). The prolonged foreign control over Church leadership and theological formation further reinforced this perception, distancing Christianity from the lived experiences and cultural identity of the Indian people. While Western missionaries played a significant role in bringing the Gospel to India, many hold that authentic spirituality must be indigenous, deeply rooted in the soil, culture, and lived realities of the people themselves (Athyal, 2003).

However, the sense of foreignness cannot be explained merely by Christianity's external origin or its doctrinal distinctiveness. Indian society has historically demonstrated a remarkable openness to religious diversity, as seen in its reception of Buddhism across Asia. The real issue lies in Christianity's failure, at certain points in history, to sufficiently engage with and incarnate itself within India's cultural, social, and historical realities. As John L. Allen Jr. observes, many Christians in the Global South experience a disconnect between theological frameworks developed in Western contexts and the concrete pastoral realities they face (Allen, 2009, pp. 112–115). This highlights the urgent need for a contextual theology that emerges from within the Indian milieu and resonates with the aspirations, struggles, and spiritual sensibilities of its people. Without such a rooted theology, Christianity risks continuing to be perceived as foreign, regardless of its long-standing presence in the country.

In this context, the Apostolic Exhortation *Dilexi te* (2025) offers a significant theological and pastoral turning point by providing a pathway to overcome this enduring challenge. Rather than addressing foreignness merely at the level of external adaptation, the exhortation proposes a deeper method of inculturation grounded in lived experience. By calling for a Church that is fundamentally “for, with, and of the poor,” it shifts the focus from inherited institutional forms to the concrete realities of people's lives. Its emphasis on listening to the “cry of the poor” and recognizing the marginalized as active subjects of theological reflection invites the Church to rediscover its mission at the very heart of society. By her very nature, the Church stands in solidarity with the poor, the excluded, the marginalized, and all those considered outcasts of society, embodying this mission as an essential expression of her identity and vocation (Pope Leo XIV, 2025, no. 111). This vision is particularly relevant in the Indian context, where poverty, caste-based exclusion, and social

marginalization remain pressing concerns. Many of those most affected by these realities, including Dalits and tribal communities, are also among those in whom Christianity has taken deep root; yet they continue to bear the stigma of foreignness. India's independence from British rule and the departure of Western missionaries coincided with a growing effort among Indian theologians to shed this label and to discover an authentically Indian face of Christ. In this context emerged the profound recognition that the Christ reality transcends the boundaries of formal Christianity, that Christ is present, though often unacknowledged, within the religions and cultures of Asia, thereby opening new pathways for inculturation and interreligious dialogue (Abraham, 2012, p. 43).

By rooting itself in the struggles, hopes, and cultural expressions of these communities, the Church in India can move beyond the legacy of colonial associations and become authentically indigenous. In this way, the problem of foreignness, the need for contextual theology, and the vision articulated in *Dilexi te* are not separate concerns but interconnected aspects of a single theological journey. The exhortation ultimately offers not just a response to social issues but also a transformative framework for inculturation, enabling Indian Christianity to emerge as a faith deeply rooted in its own context while remaining faithful to the universal message of the Gospel (Amaladoss, 1990, pp. 45–52).

Pluralism, Poverty, and the Call to Love: An Indian Theological Reflection in the Light of *Dilexi te*

India's uniqueness lies in its profound religious plurality and spiritual depth. It is the birthplace of several major world religions, Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism, and has been a fertile ground for the growth of Islam and Christianity. In this context, religion is not merely a private or individual affair but an all-encompassing reality that shapes culture, identity, and social structures. The Indian worldview is deeply marked by openness to the transcendent, expressed through a rich diversity of rituals, philosophies, and spiritual practices. This pluralistic ethos invites dialogue, mutual enrichment, and a search for truth that transcends exclusivist boundaries (Amaladoss, 2003, pp. 62–65).

However, this spiritual richness exists alongside stark socio-economic realities. India continues to struggle with widespread poverty, caste-based discrimination, gender inequality, and systemic marginalization. Millions are deprived of basic human dignity, and social hierarchies often perpetuate injustice and exclusion. The contradiction between deep religiosity and persistent injustice poses a serious challenge: how can a society so spiritually inclined tolerate structures that deny the fundamental dignity of human persons? (Wilfred, 2000, pp. 45–47)

In such a context, theology in India cannot remain abstract, speculative, or disconnected from lived realities. Rather, it must become a dynamic reflection on faith as lived in history. Indian theology is called to listen attentively to the “cry of the poor” and to interpret the Gospel in ways that respond meaningfully to the suffering and aspirations of the marginalized. This gives rise to a contextual and liberative theological approach that seeks not only to understand God but also to participate in God's transforming action in the world (Soares-Prabhu, 1999, pp. 112–115).

The vision of liberation finds renewed depth when viewed in the light of *Dilexi te*, the recent theological reflection attributed to Pope Leo XIV. As Pope Leo XIV emphasized in *Dilexi te*, all Christians are called to recognize the profound connection between Christ's love and the summons to care for the poor; thus, the document underscores the primacy of God's love as the foundation of all Christian life and mission (Pope Leo XIV, 2025, no. 3). Liberation, in this perspective, is not merely

socio-political emancipation but a holistic transformation rooted in divine love. In this light, the Church emerges as a true mother of the poor, a compassionate community that offers welcome, protection, and a space where justice is actively pursued (Pope Leo XIV, 2025, no. 39). Rooted in the love of Christ, the Church is called not only to console but also to transform social realities. God's love, revealed in Christ, is both tender and demanding: it reaches out in mercy to the suffering while at the same time calling for justice, reconciliation, and the full restoration of human dignity. Thus, the Church's mission becomes a living expression of this divine love, embodying both care for the marginalized and a prophetic commitment to justice.

In the Indian context, *Dilexi te* challenges theologians to ground their reflection in a spirituality of love that is both contemplative and active. Liberation theology, therefore, must avoid becoming purely ideological or reductionist. Instead, it must remain anchored in the experience of God's unconditional love, which empowers believers to stand in solidarity with the poor and to work for structural change. In this view, if the Church genuinely wants to be Christ's Church, it must become a Church of the Beatitudes. This means creating space for the marginalized and walking alongside the poor in solidarity, giving them a special place of honor, as emphasized in Jas. 2:2–4 (Pope Leo XIV, 2025, no. 21). The love of Christ thus becomes the motivating force behind the struggle for justice, transforming it into a sacred mission rather than a mere social project.

Furthermore, *Dilexi te* invites a rethinking of interreligious dialogue within a framework of love. In a pluralistic society like India, liberation cannot be confined to a single religious tradition. The recognition of God's universal love opens the possibility for collaboration across religious lines in the pursuit of justice, peace, and human flourishing. Indeed, to the extent that Christ reigns within us, the life of society itself becomes a setting for universal fraternity, justice, peace, and dignity. Both Christian preaching and Christian life are thus called to have a transformative impact on society, as they participate in the realization of (Pope Leo XIV, 2025, no. 97). Thus, theology becomes not only a reflection on Christian faith but also a bridge for dialogue and cooperation in a diverse society.

In this light, the Indian context of pluralism and poverty calls for a theology that is both deeply rooted in spiritual tradition and courageously engaged with social realities. In the light of *Dilexi te*, liberation is understood as a response to God's loving initiative, a call to transform the world through compassion, justice, and solidarity (Gutiérrez, 1988, pp. 173–175). Such a theology does not merely interpret reality but seeks to change it, embodying the Gospel message in the concrete struggles and hopes of the people.

In such a context, theology cannot remain abstract or detached. It must engage with the concrete realities of life, particularly the suffering of the poor and marginalized. Theology must become a reflection on faith as lived in history, responding to the cries of the oppressed and the search for meaning in a pluralistic society.

Contextual Theology: Inculturation and Dialogue in the Light of *Dilexi te*

The emergence of contextual theology represents a significant shift in theological methodology. Theology is no longer understood as a static body of doctrines but as a dynamic process that engages culture, history, and human experience. In the light of *Dilexi te*, this shift can be seen more profoundly as a response to God's loving initiative in history, where theology becomes a living reflection on how divine love encounters diverse human situations (Pope Leo XIV, 2025, nos. 2–3).

As Stephen B. Bevans affirms, all theology is inherently contextual, shaped by the particular social and cultural realities in which it is articulated (Bevans, 2002, pp. 3–5). However, recognizing this inherent contextuality is not the same as engaging in theology that is consciously and explicitly contextual. As Angie Pears observes, since the mid-twentieth century, theological reflection that intentionally draws on specific situations, cultural settings, socio-economic conditions, and political experiences as sources for doing theology has emerged as a more prominent and active strand within Christian theology (Garner, 2014, p. 21). This insight resonates deeply with the vision of Pope Leo XIV in *Dilexi te*, where the universality of God’s love does not erase cultural differences but rather embraces and transforms them (Pope Leo XIV, 2025, nos. 10–12). It challenges the dominance of purely Western theological frameworks and opens the way for authentic expressions of faith rooted in local cultures.

In the Indian context, contextual theology finds concrete expression in inculturation and interreligious dialogue. From the perspective of *Dilexi te*, inculturation is not merely a methodological adaptation but a living manifestation of divine love entering the heart of a culture, affirming what is good, healing what is wounded, and purifying what is unjust. In this light, unjust structures must be both recognized and transformed, not through coercion but through the compelling power of the good. This transformation calls for a renewal of mindsets and attitudes, as well as the responsible use of science and technology in shaping effective policies that promote authentic and lasting societal change (Pope Leo XIV, 2025, no. 97). The Gospel, when incarnated in local traditions, becomes a living and transformative presence, revealing Christ in ways that are meaningful to the people.

Similarly, interreligious dialogue assumes a deeper theological significance in light of God’s universal love. *Dilexi te* invites Christians to recognize that divine love is not confined to the visible boundaries of the Church but is mysteriously at work among all peoples and religions. This vision is reflected in the First Epistle of John 3:17: “How can God’s love remain in anyone who has the world’s goods, sees a brother or sister in need, and refuses to help?” (Pope Leo XIV, 2025, nos. 28–30). Such a perspective fosters a spirit of humility, openness, and mutual respect, where dialogue becomes an expression of love that seeks truth together, rather than a confrontation of differences. This perspective fosters a spirit of humility, openness, and mutual respect, where dialogue becomes an expression of love seeking truth together rather than a confrontation of differences.

The vision of the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences, particularly its concept of the “triple dialogue” with cultures, religions, and the poor, finds a renewed theological foundation in *Dilexi te* (Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences [FABC], 1974, no. 12). This approach reflects the conviction that God’s love is encountered in the concrete realities of life, especially among the marginalized. Thus, theology in Asia must emerge not only from intellectual reflection but from a compassionate engagement with people’s lived experiences.

In this light, contextual theology becomes a theology of love in action, one that listens, dialogues, and transforms. Rooted in the vision of *Dilexi te*, it calls the Church in India to embody a faith that is culturally meaningful, interreligious in spirit, and deeply committed to the dignity and liberation of all (Amaladoss, 2003, pp. 70–72).

Liberation and the Preferential Option for the Poor in the Light of *Dilexi te*

A central dimension of Indian contextual theology is its enduring commitment to liberation, understood not merely in socio-political terms but as a profound participation in God’s saving love within history. Theologians such as Aloysius Pieris

and Samuel Rayan have consistently emphasized that theology in Asia must hold together deep religious experience and an uncompromising commitment to the poor. Pieris famously argues that Asian theology must pass through both the “Jordan of Asian religions” and the “Calvary of Asian poverty,” a metaphor that captures the dual challenge of engaging religious plurality while confronting the harsh realities of socio-economic injustice (Pieris, 1988, pp. 70–72; Phan, 2016). Likewise, Rayan insists that God’s self-revelation is encountered in people’s struggles for dignity, justice, and liberation (Rayan, 1978, pp. 25–30).

From the perspective of *Dilexi te*, this commitment to liberation is rooted in the very nature of divine love, which is never abstract or distant but always concrete, compassionate, and transformative. God’s love is revealed most clearly in closeness to human suffering, especially in the lives of the poor and marginalized. In a Church that recognizes in the poor the face of Christ and in material goods the instrument of charity, the thought of Augustine of Hippo remains a sure and enduring light. For Augustine, the authenticity of Christian faith is measured not merely by doctrinal correctness but by the practice of love expressed in concrete acts of service. From this perspective, patristic theology was profoundly practical, oriented toward shaping a Church that is both poor and for the poor. It reminds us that the Gospel is rightly proclaimed only when it leads us to touch the very flesh of the least among us, and that doctrinal rigor without mercy risks becoming empty, lifeless discourse (Pope Leo XIV, 2025, nos. 45–48).

This insight naturally leads to a deeper theological affirmation: the preferential option for the poor is not simply a sociological concern but a constitutive dimension of Christian faith. Rooted in the very heart of Christ, who identifies himself with the least and the marginalized (cf. Mt. 25:40), this option calls the Church to embody a love that is both contemplative and active. Thus, the Church’s mission is fulfilled not only in proclaiming truth but in living it through compassion, solidarity, and a transformative commitment to justice that makes visible the love of Christ in the world.

Seen in this way, the same theological vision naturally extends into the insights of liberation theology and Indian contextual theology, where this commitment to the poor finds a deeper grounding. The transformation of unjust structures becomes an expression of participating in God’s own loving action in the world. Love, therefore, stands as both the source and the goal of liberation, challenging injustice, healing brokenness, and restoring human dignity. Consequently, theology is not limited to interpreting reality but is called to actively participate in its transformation, guided by a love that is both contemplative and committed.

Magisterial Foundations: Vatican II, FABC, and CBCI in the Light of *Dilexi te*

The vision of contextual and liberative theology is strongly supported by the magisterium of the Church. The Second Vatican Council marked a decisive turning point by emphasizing the Church’s engagement with the modern world. *Gaudium et Spes* calls the Church to share in the “joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties” of humanity, thus situating theological reflection within the concrete realities of human life (Second Vatican Council, 1965, no. 1). Building on this vision, the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences has consistently emphasized the importance of inculturation, interreligious dialogue, and solidarity with the poor. The Catholic Bishops’ Conference of India has similarly called for the Indian Church to become truly indigenous and pastorally responsive to the lived realities of its people

(Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences [FABC], 1990; Catholic Bishops' Conference of India [CBCI], 1969).

This trajectory finds further affirmation in the teaching of Pope Benedict XVI, who, in his apostolic exhortation *Sacramentum Caritatis*, underscores that “in order to foster this participation, provision may be made for a number of adaptations appropriate to different contexts and cultures” (Benedict XVI, 2007, no. 54). See also Eballo (2022, p. 10). In this way, the call for inculturation and contextual adaptation emerges not merely as a pastoral strategy but as a continuation of the Church's conciliar commitment to engage authentically with diverse human situations. These developments reflect a growing recognition that theology must be rooted in lived experience and oriented toward transforming society.

From the perspective expressed in *Dilexi te*, this magisterial vision can be understood more deeply as grounded in the primacy of God's personal and initiating love. God's love is not abstract or distant but intimately addressed to each person and community, entering into their history, culture, and struggles. This divine initiative becomes the foundation for the Church's mission: to mirror that same love in its engagement with the world.

Thus, the call of the Council, the FABC, and the CBCI is not merely pastoral or sociological but profoundly theological. The Church's commitment to inculturation, dialogue, and the preferential option for the poor flows from its experience of being first loved by God. In this light, contextual and liberative theology emerge as concrete expressions of responding to that love, seeking to make it visible in diverse cultural settings and in the struggle for justice and dignity. Theology, therefore, becomes a living response to *Dilexi te*, where the Church, having received God's love, is sent forth to embody it in history through solidarity, compassion, and transformative action.

The Contemporary Relevance of *Dilexi te*

The Apostolic Exhortation *Dilexi te* offers a compelling contemporary affirmation of the Church's enduring commitment to love as the foundation of all theological reflection and action. It underscores that divine love is never abstract but is always embodied in concrete solidarity with the poor, especially in the face of new forms of poverty, economic inequality, and social exclusion (Pope Leo XIV, 2025, nos. 9, 12). In continuity with the broader tradition of Catholic social teaching, the document highlights that love must take visible form in justice, compassion, and active concern for the marginalized.

In a globalized world marked by widening disparities, *Dilexi te* calls the Church to renew its commitment to the preferential option for the poor. It insists that authentic Christian faith cannot remain confined to personal piety or doctrinal affirmation but must be expressed through transformative engagement with the realities of suffering and injustice. Each Christian and every community is thus called to be an instrument of God for the liberation and inclusion of the poor, attentive and responsive to their cry. As the Scriptures make clear, God continually hears the cry of the poor, and this divine attentiveness becomes the foundation and urgency of the Church's mission (Francis, 2013, no. 187). In this sense, the exhortation deepens the insights of contextual and liberation theologies by grounding them explicitly in the primacy of God's initiating love, *Dilexi te*, which calls forth a loving and responsible response from believers.

In the Indian context, this teaching acquires particular urgency. The persistence of poverty, caste discrimination, and various forms of social marginalization demands a theology that goes beyond reflection to active transformation (Catholic Bishops' Conference of India [CBCI], 1969, secs. 3–5). The

vision articulated in *Dilexi te* resonates strongly with the concerns of Indian contextual theology, reinforcing the call for a Church that is deeply rooted in the lived experiences of the people. It invites the Church in India to embody a love that is contemplative and liberative, standing in solidarity with the oppressed, challenging unjust structures, and working toward the restoration of human dignity (Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences [FABC], 1990, pp. 12–14).

Thus, *Dilexi te* serves as a vital contemporary lens through which the Church's mission can be understood anew: as a participation in God's own loving action in history. It calls theology to remain grounded in love and oriented toward liberation, ensuring that faith becomes a transformative force in the pursuit of justice, peace, and human flourishing.

Conclusion

The journey toward an authentic Indian theology is both a necessary and ongoing task, shaped by India's unique religious plurality, cultural richness, and socio-economic challenges. This study has shown that theology in India cannot remain confined to inherited Western frameworks or abstract doctrinal expressions. Rather, it must emerge as a living, contextual, and transformative reflection deeply rooted in the lives, struggles, and aspirations of the people.

The persistent perception of Christianity as foreign highlights the urgent need for inculturation, an engagement in which the Gospel genuinely takes flesh within Indian cultures. At the same time, the reality of poverty, caste-based discrimination, and marginalization calls for a theology that is not only reflective but also liberative. In this regard, the insights of Indian and Asian theologians, together with the vision of the Church expressed through Vatican II, the FABC, and the CBCI, provide a strong foundation for a theology that is dialogical, participatory, and oriented toward justice.

In the light of *Dilexi te*, this theological task finds its deepest unity and meaning in the primacy of God's love. Divine love is not an abstract principle but a dynamic and transformative force that calls the Church to be in solidarity with the poor, to engage in genuine dialogue with other religions, and to incarnate the Gospel within diverse cultural contexts. Inculturation, interreligious dialogue, and the preferential option for the poor thus emerge not as separate concerns but as interconnected expressions of responding to God's initiating love.

Ultimately, an authentic Indian theology must become a theology of love in action, one that listens to the "cry of the poor," enters into the richness of Indian spiritual traditions, and courageously confronts structures of injustice. Such a theology does not merely interpret reality but participates in its transformation. Rooted in the love of Christ, it enables the Church in India to move beyond the legacy of foreignness and to become truly indigenous: a living sign of God's presence, compassion, and justice in history.

Declaration on the Use of AI

The author acknowledges the use of AI-assisted tools, specifically ChatGPT and Grammarly, to enhance the readability, grammar, language clarity, and overall presentation of the manuscript. These tools were used solely for editorial and language improvement and did not influence the study's original ideas, data analysis, interpretations, or conclusions. The author confirms that all analyses, interpretations, and scholarly judgments were conducted independently and are the sole responsibility of the author.

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About the Author

Sebastian Mathew Mittathanickal, OFM Cap. is a Franciscan Capuchin priest belonging to the Province of St. Joseph, Kottayam, Kerala, India. He has successfully completed his Doctorate in Theology at the Graduate School of the University of Santo Tomas Philippines.



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




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Original Article

Perspectives of Senior High School Students on Religious Education at Saint Mary's University

Charles Ron V. Capin , John Carlo F. Armando , Lady Valen Charon A. Dela Peña , Harold J. Padilla , Pedelina D. Bulligan , Arnold Viller W. Villanoza , and Dan E. Del Rosario 

Saint Mary's University, Bayombong, Nueva Vizcaya, Philippines

Correspondence: chcapin@smu.edu.ph

Abstract

This study investigates the perspectives of Senior High School students at Saint Mary's University, Bayombong, Nueva Vizcaya, Philippines on Religious Education, locally implemented as Christian Living and Values Education (CLVED), with the aim of informing curriculum enhancement. Grounded in student-centered learning and participatory pedagogy, the research employs a descriptive approach and integrates quantitative survey data with qualitative thematic analysis. Findings reveal that students demonstrate a highly positive orientation toward core Catholic beliefs, particularly regarding prayer, belief in God, and moral living. However, areas such as doctrinal depth and trust in Church authority received relatively lower affirmation, indicating emerging gaps in catechetical understanding and institutional perception. Qualitative findings highlight key student needs, including moral guidance, mental and spiritual well-being, the practical relevance of lessons, and interfaith awareness. Furthermore, CLVED is perceived as contributing significantly to students' holistic development, particularly in fostering character formation, spiritual maturity, and social responsibility. Despite these strengths, some responses suggest the need for greater engagement and contextualization of learning experiences. The study underscores the necessity of a more responsive, learner-centered Religious Education curriculum that integrates doctrinal fidelity with contemporary relevance. It advocates for pedagogical innovation, enhanced teacher formation, and the inclusion of psychosocial and intercultural dimensions to ensure that CLVED remains transformative in addressing the evolving realities of today's youth.

Keywords: Catholic Faith, Participatory Pedagogy, Religious Education, Spiritual Formation, Student-Centered Learning

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Introduction

Religious Education (RE) has long been a fundamental component of the curriculum in Catholic institutions (Baring, 2015). The Catholic Church consistently emphasizes its role in the mission of evangelization, as reflected in various magisterial documents. *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (Paul VI, 1975), *Gravissimum Educationis* (Vatican II, 1965), and the General Directory for Catechesis (Congregation for the Clergy, 1997) underscore the essential function of RE in fostering Christian formation. Pope Francis (2013) further affirms this in *Evangelii Gaudium*, stating that "Education and catechesis are at the service of this growth in Christ" (#163). This perspective has influenced the revision of the Directory for Catechesis (Pontifical Council for Promoting the New Evangelization, 2020), which seeks to address the challenges posed by contemporary historical, social, and cultural contexts.

As an academic discipline, RE aspires to deepen students' understanding and commitment to their faith. Historically, RE traces its origins to the Church's catechetical tradition, initially aimed at evangelization and conversion. However, over time, the objectives of catechesis have evolved, shifting toward a more holistic approach that integrates faith formation, moral development, and critical engagement with religious traditions (John Paul II, *Catechesi Tradendae*, 1979).

The Impact of Religious Education

A growing body of research has examined the effectiveness of Religious Education across various dimensions of human development. Estrada et al. (2019) found that engagement in RE significantly contributed to students' mental well-being, fostering resilience and psychological stability. Similarly, Batool et al. (2021) explored the relationship between RE and ethical behavior among university students, demonstrating that those who had taken RE courses exhibited higher moral integrity compared to their counterparts who had not.

In the Philippine context, Baring et al. (2024) provided empirical evidence suggesting that RE serves as a catalyst for environmental consciousness, positively influencing students' attitudes and behaviors toward ecological stewardship. Furthermore, Burrus et al. (2023) identified a correlation between RE and economic ideology, indicating that students educated in Catholic schools and raised in Catholic families tend to support capitalism more than those who were not. This finding has significant implications for students' beliefs regarding private property and economic freedom.

Challenges in the Implementation of Religious Education

Despite its numerous contributions, RE continues to encounter significant challenges across various contexts. Mąkosa (2023) observed a growing disillusionment with religious instruction in Poland, highlighting that the catechetical and evangelistic objectives of RE are only partially achieved. Furthermore, many societies report a decline in religious engagement, particularly among young people. The effectiveness of RE is also shaped by socio-cultural and legal factors, as demonstrated in comparative studies of Ireland and South Korea.

Cho et al. (2023) analyzed the differing approaches to RE in these two nations, revealing key contextual challenges. In Ireland, Catholic schools are legally permitted to implement a denominational religious curriculum prioritizing faith formation. However, educators' religious affiliations vary, and an increasing number express discomfort teaching content that contradicts their personal beliefs. Consequently, there is a growing movement among Irish educators advocating for a more inclusive RE curriculum that explores multiple religious traditions. In contrast, South Korea

adheres to a government-mandated neutral approach to RE, reflecting the country's religious pluralism, where Catholicism is a minority faith. Consequently, Catholic schools in South Korea—often staffed by clergy—tend to diverge from national policies to uphold their own religious missions. This comparative analysis underscores the influence of legal frameworks and cultural contexts on the pedagogical approaches and overall effectiveness of RE.

Empirical studies further highlight the limitations of RE in achieving religious literacy. Conroy et al. (2011) found that many students exhibit a fundamental lack of understanding of basic religious concepts, attributed to factors such as conflicting expectations, inadequate resources, and limited time allocation for the subject. Additionally, the practice of integrating examination and non-examination students within the same classroom presents further instructional challenges. The effectiveness of RE is also highly dependent on local conditions and the competency of educators, resulting in inconsistencies in its implementation across different settings.

In the Philippines, similar concerns have been raised regarding the efficacy of RE in Catholic institutions. Cornelio (2017) examined the declining religiosity among Filipino youth, presenting a complex picture through an analysis of myriads of studies that either support or challenge this thesis. The Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCP, 1993) has long expressed concern over the apparent disconnect between Catholic education and the lived faith of its graduates, noting that many individuals fail to internalize and apply Christian values in their daily lives. Peckson (2017) attributed this issue to the overemphasis on Church law, doctrine, and abstract theological concepts, which often render RE inaccessible and unengaging for students. Learning is often centered on rote memorization rather than critical engagement, leading to passive reception rather than meaningful integration of faith.

Del Rosario (2017) further critiqued the pedagogical approach to RE in Catholic universities, arguing that there is a fundamental misalignment between the curriculum and the principles of inclusivity, intercultural understanding, and interfaith dialogue. His critical discourse analysis of RE curricula revealed a lack of responsiveness to contemporary socio-religious realities. Cornelio (2018) similarly highlighted the pedagogical challenges of RE, noting that traditional methods often fail to resonate with modern learners. Del Castillo and Cacho (2023) reinforced these observations, emphasizing that centralized decision-making processes in the Philippine education system hinder efforts to adopt more student-centered approaches. They advocate for a shift towards more participatory and inclusive pedagogies that incorporate student perspectives, ultimately fostering a more transformative and meaningful engagement with faith.

Religious Education in Saint Mary's University

The education apostolate has always been regarded by the Congregation of the Immaculate Heart of Mary (CICM) as a fundamental means of fulfilling its missionary mandate. In every parish, establishing a mission school was considered an essential aspect of this mission (Aduca et al., 2018). Integral to this educational apostolate is the emphasis on Religious Education, which is viewed as a vital component of CICM's missionary activity. Religious Education facilitates the integral Christian formation of students, a commitment exemplified by the efforts of the CICM Philippines Provincial Committee on Education. This commitment was evident in the development of a Religious Education textbook for the tertiary level, ensuring alignment with the mission of CICM schools.

However, the introduction of the Senior High School (SHS) program in the Philippine education system presented an unforeseen challenge for CICM schools. The absence of an established Religious Education curriculum specifically designed for SHS students necessitated the adoption of the textbook originally intended for tertiary education as the primary instructional material for SHS Religious Education courses. This adaptation eventually led to the development of additional Religious Education textbooks across various departments within CICM schools.

The first set of textbooks, covering aligned topics within CICM institutions, was published in 2013 and revised in 2018. The selection of topics was based on the commonality of Religious Education subjects taught across CICM schools, reflecting a predominantly top-down pedagogical approach characteristic of many Catholic universities. While the CICM Religious Education pedagogy was patterned from the See-Discern-Act paradigm, the underlying approach remained hierarchical, focusing primarily on preserving Catholic identity, which may limit broader engagement with contemporary religious and social issues.

Given these circumstances, this study aims to explore the perspectives of Senior High School students at Saint Mary's University regarding their experiences with Religious Education. In CICM basic education, this is known as Christian Living and Values Education (CLVED); in higher education, it is called Christian Formation Education (CFE). Importantly, there is a scarcity of research on CLVED within CICM schools, making this study one of the first to systematically examine students' perspectives in this context. Although data collection was limited to a single institution, the findings are intended to inform the broader CICM Philippine Schools Network (CICM PSN), which comprises five interrelated CICM schools. Specifically, the study seeks to (1) examine students' understanding of the fundamentals of the Catholic faith, (2) identify the needs they believe Religious Education should address, and (3) assess how CLVED contributes to their holistic development—encompassing moral, spiritual, intellectual, psychological, and social dimensions. By providing student-centered evidence, the study aims to guide the CICM PSN in reviewing and updating the CLVED curriculum, including potential textbook revisions, ensuring it remains responsive, engaging, and transformative for students across the network.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on Student-Centered Learning theories. Geraldine O'Neill and Timothy McMahon (2005) provided a broad definition of this approach in their article. According to them, Student-Centered Learning (SCL), as described by various scholars they cited, centers on the idea that students actively construct their own knowledge while teachers serve as facilitators rather than mere transmitters of information (Kember, 1997; Rogers, 1983b). Rogers emphasized the importance of trust in learners' abilities and granting them meaningful choice in their learning process, a view also supported by Burnard (1999). Harden and Crosby (2000) highlighted that the focus should be on what students do to learn, rather than what teachers do to teach. Lea et al. (2003) outlined key principles of SCL, such as active learning, deep understanding, autonomy, and mutual respect, while Gibbs (1995) expanded on students' decision-making roles in what, how, and when to learn. Brandes and Ginnis (1986) stressed equal learner relationships and integration of affective and cognitive domains.

The theoretical underpinnings of SCL are mainly rooted in constructivist (Carlile & Jordan, 2005), cognitive (Cobb, 1999), and social constructivist theories (Bredo, 1999), which together emphasize the value of activity, reflection, and community in the learning process. These views were also shared by Jeanetta Jones

Miller as expressed in her work *The student-centered classroom: Transforming your teaching and grading practices* (Miller, 2020) and was also highlighted in a publication by Teaching Excellence in Adult Literacy ((TEAL Center Staff, 2008) and mentioned in *Student-centered learning: An insight into theory and practice* by Attard et al. (2010).

This framework is also connected to participative pedagogy, as cited and used by Del Castillo and Cacho in the research. Participatory pedagogy aims to promote the ideals of equity, equality, and co-agency, modelling these effectively in our classrooms so that they reflect and spread across the school community and wider society (Del Castillo & Cacho, 2023). Rooted in Freire's (1970) Pedagogy of the Oppressed, this approach challenges the traditional "banking model" of education, where students passively receive information from teachers. Instead, participatory pedagogy encourages learners to be co-creators of knowledge through discussions, critical reflection, and experiential learning. In the context of religious education, this approach allows students to connect religious teachings with their personal experiences, making faith formation more meaningful and relevant to their lives (Del Castillo & Cacho, 2023). By fostering an interactive learning environment, participative pedagogy empowers students to take ownership of their faith journey rather than merely memorizing doctrines.

SCL recognizes the importance of student readiness and development, suggesting that learners absorb knowledge best when they are internally motivated and developmentally prepared. By prioritizing the student needs, interests, and learning styles, SCL fosters not only academic achievement but also moral growth, emotional intelligence, and social awareness—making it highly relevant to subjects like Christian Living Education (CLVED), which aim to shape both the mind and character of learners.

To put this framework into practice in Religious Education, the study used a questionnaire developed by Del Castillo and Cacho (2021). The instrument examined students' understanding of the fundamentals of the Catholic faith, the needs they believe Religious Education should address, and how the subject contributes to their holistic development and engagement in faith-based learning. The information gathered from this tool is intended to guide improvements and contextual updates to the Religious Education (CLVED) curriculum.

To address these objectives, the following research questions were formulated:

1. What are the perceptions of Senior High School students of Saint Mary's University on the fundamentals of the Catholic faith?
2. What are the needs of Senior High School students of Saint Mary's University that the Religious Education (CLVED) curriculum should address?
3. How does Religious Education (CLVED) contribute to the holistic development of senior high school students?

Methodology

This study employed a descriptive quantitative survey design to examine students' perceptions of the fundamentals of the Catholic faith within the Christian Living and Values Education (CLVED) curriculum. The primary data were gathered through structured survey items and analyzed using statistical methods to identify trends and patterns.

To supplement the quantitative data, the questionnaire included two open-ended questions: one to determine the students' perceived needs that Religious Education should address, and another to explore how CLVED contributes to their

holistic development. These responses were used to provide additional insights and support the interpretation of the quantitative findings.

The research was conducted at Saint Mary's University Senior High School (SMU-SHS) in Bayombong, Nueva Vizcaya. As a Catholic institution under the Congregation of the Immaculate Heart of Mary (CICM), the school provides an appropriate setting for examining faith formation within a structured Religious Education program. The participants in the study were Grade 12 students ($N = 418$), representing the exit level of the basic education Religious Education curriculum.

A purposive sampling technique combined with self-selection (voluntary response) was employed. All Grade 12 students were invited to participate to ensure inclusive representation across age groups (17–18 years old). From the total population, 129 students voluntarily completed the survey. To determine statistical validity, Slovin's Formula $n = \frac{N}{1+Ne^2}$ was applied, resulting in a margin of error of 7.32%, which is acceptable within the 5%–10% range for descriptive research. The instrument demonstrated high reliability with a Cronbach's Alpha of .963, indicating excellent internal consistency.

Grade 12 students were selected due to their developmental maturity and cumulative curricular experience. As graduating students, they are capable of critical reflection and uniquely positioned to evaluate the effectiveness and relevance of the CLVED subject. Profile variables, such as prior school background, were included only for descriptive purposes and not as selection criteria.

The study utilized a three-part survey questionnaire. Part I consisted of a 22-item Likert-scale instrument adapted from Del Castillo and Cacho (2023) to measure students' perceptions of the fundamentals of the Catholic faith, using a 4-point scale to eliminate neutral responses. Part II included an open-ended question asking students about the needs they believe Religious Education should address, while Part III featured another open-ended question assessing how Christian Living and Values Education (CLVED) contributes to their holistic development. Although the instrument was originally developed for college students, no modifications were made, as the items reflect foundational Catholic teachings and moral values consistently covered from elementary through Senior High School, making it appropriate for the current respondents.

To ensure validity and reliability, the quantitative instrument underwent face validation to confirm clarity, coherence, and alignment with core Catholic teachings. A pilot test with 30 students excluded from the final sample yielded a Cronbach's Alpha of .963, categorized as "excellent" reliability. The two qualitative items were content-validated to align with the study's objectives and to elicit reflective responses about students' perceived needs and the formative impact of CLVED, thereby ensuring relevance for the secondary-level context.

Data collection was conducted with the school principal's approval and administered via a secure online platform. Participation was voluntary, with an initial screening question requiring students' consent before proceeding. Students aged 18 and above provided implied consent, while parental consent was obtained for those under 18. The survey was administered after final examinations to reduce bias. All responses were collected anonymously, and confidentiality was maintained at all times.

Data analysis followed a mixed-methods approach. Quantitative data were analyzed using frequency and percentage distributions for demographic profiling, and weighted mean and standard deviation to assess students' perceptions. Qualitative data were analyzed through thematic analysis, involving inductive coding, identification of recurring patterns, and clustering into themes. The analysis focused

on two key areas: (1) students' Religious Education needs and (2) the role of CLVED in holistic development. The interpretation of quantitative results followed this scale: 3.26–4.00 (Strongly Agree/Highly Positive), 2.51–3.25 (Agree/Positive), 1.76–2.50 (Disagree/Negative), and 1.00–1.75 (Strongly Disagree/Highly Negative).

Ethical standards were strictly observed throughout the study. Participation was voluntary, with no coercion, incentives, or penalties involved. Participants were fully informed of the study's purpose and their right to withdraw at any time. Anonymity and confidentiality were ensured by not collecting personal identifiers, and the timing of data collection after final examinations minimized potential academic pressure, ensuring that responses reflected genuine student perceptions.

Results

The results and data analysis are presented below.

Table 1: Profile of Student Respondents based on the Demographic profiles

	f (n=129)	%
Gender		
Male	41	31.78
Female	83	64.34
Prefer not to say	5	3.88
Age		
17 and below	20	15.50
18	107	82.95
19 and above	2	1.55
Religion		
Roman Catholic	94	72.87
UECFI	3	2.33
UCCP	1	0.78
Pentecostal	1	0.78
Methodist	5	3.88
Lutheran	1	0.78
Iglesia Ni Cristo	5	3.88
Baptist	4	3.10
Evangelical	1	0.78
Espiritista	1	0.78
Born Again	13	10.08
Educational Background		
Attended JHS Private School with Religious Education Classes	84	65.12
Attended JHS Private School without Religious Education Classes	2	1.55
Attended JHS Public School with Religious Education or Catechetical Classes	7	5.43
Attended JHS Public School without Religious Education or Catechetical Classes	36	27.91

The study analyzed a sample of 129 respondents, with a female majority (64.34%) and a predominant age of 18 years (82.95%), indicating a group transitioning into tertiary education. Religious affiliation is notably centered on Roman Catholicism (72.87%), followed by Born Again Christians (10.08%). Furthermore, 65.12% of respondents attended private Junior High Schools that offered formal religious education. This demographic profile suggests that the respondents' perceptions of faith are likely shaped by a combination of strong

Catholic doctrinal influences and prior systematic exposure to faith-based curricula in private institutional settings.

Table 2: Senior high school students' perception of the fundamentals of the Catholic faith

Statements	Mean	SD	QI
Belief in the Holy Trinity/Triune God	3.29	0.82	Very Positive
Belief in Jesus as the Christ (or Savior)	3.54	0.75	Very Positive
Belief in God as creator and source of life on earth	3.49	0.77	Very Positive
Belief in God's constant presence in one's life through the Holy Spirit	3.43	0.75	Very Positive
Belief in Jesus' resurrection from the dead	3.40	0.75	Very Positive
Belief in the Church as a sacrament of God's presence in the world	3.40	0.77	Very Positive
Belief in the Sacraments of the Church as essential to Christians' relationship with God	3.42	0.78	Very Positive
Belief in Jesus' second coming	3.29	0.82	Very Positive
Belief in the necessity of the Bible in developing one's faith as Christian	3.37	0.75	Very Positive
Belief in faith that does justice and participates in social transformation	3.40	0.76	Very Positive
Belief in the integrity of Bishops, Priests, and Religious Authorities as leaders of the Church	3.23	0.79	Positive
Responding to the call of the Church in showing active concern for the poor and the marginalized	3.45	0.75	Very Positive
The need to integrate one's beliefs into the practical/ethical aspects of daily life	3.39	0.82	Very Positive
Belief in the Saints' intercessory role in the Church	3.20	0.80	Positive
Belief in the important role of Mary in Salvation history	3.31	0.80	Very Positive
Belief in the power of prayer	3.57	0.75	Very Positive
Belief in the blessings obtained when celebrating the sacraments with the Church	3.46	0.77	Very Positive
Faith in God's pure positivity and kindness toward people and the rest of creation	3.54	0.77	Very Positive
Faith and good works as necessary for salvation	3.50	0.74	Very Positive
Faith is a personal and private matter	3.33	0.84	Very Positive
Faith in God (or religious faith) as a powerful means to living sound ethical principles	3.50	0.75	Very Positive
Faith in the resurrection of the dead and life everlasting (make it in first person)	3.36	0.79	Very Positive
OVERALL	3.40	0.78	Very Positive

Legend: 3.25-4.00 (Very Positive); 2.50-3.24 (Positive); 1.75-2.49 (Negative); 1.00-1.74 (Very Negative)

Table 2 presents the senior high school students' perceptions of the fundamentals of the Catholic faith, with an overall mean of 3.40 (SD = 0.78), indicating a "Very Positive" qualitative interpretation. The highest level of agreement was observed in the belief in the power of prayer (M = 3.57, SD = 0.75), followed closely by belief in Jesus as the Christ (M = 3.54, SD = 0.75) and faith in God's pure positivity and kindness (M = 3.54, SD = 0.77). These results indicate that students hold a deep conviction regarding the personal and relational aspects of spirituality.

Conversely, although still yielding positive results, the lowest mean scores were recorded for belief in the Saints' intercessory role (M = 3.20, SD = 0.80) and for the integrity of Bishops, Priests, and Religious Authorities (M = 3.23, SD = 0.79). These were the only two items to fall within the "Positive" range rather than "Very Positive". This suggests a slight variance between the students' strong adherence to core theological doctrines and their relatively more cautious perception of the Church's hierarchical and intercessory traditions. Overall, the data reflect a robust foundation in Catholic faith fundamentals among the respondents

Table 3: Themes and Sample Responses on Students' Needs in Religious Education

Theme	Sample Responses	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Moral Guidance & Decision-Making	"Help and guide me in making my decisions, especially when I'm confused or pressured."	34	26.36%
	"Developing strong values such as respect, honesty, and compassion."		
	"Religious education should address our need for guidance in making good decisions and understanding what is right and wrong..."		
Mental & Spiritual Well-being	"In giving me comfort and the feeling of calmness through the teachings instead of fear and more anxiety."	27	20.93%
	"mental and spiritual well- being"		
	"Probably need for hope and resilience, like helping me cope with struggles, fears, and uncertainties."		
Practical Relevance & Relatability	"Use Jesus' experiences and parables to connect religion with real life... without forcing religion into them."	15	11.63%
	"Start using videos... almost all students nowadays prefer visual learning."		
	"Include activities that strengthen an individual's faith. For us to engage and better understand the faith we believe in."		

Interfaith Awareness & Diversity	"Cultivate cultural understanding and tolerance, enabling us to appreciate diverse beliefs." "Teachers should include other religions. Do not just focus on Catholic." "The awareness about other religious beliefs."	8	6.20%
Non-Substantive / Already Addressed	"None, since it provides all the things I should know." "It's addressed enough." "N/A"	45	34.88%
TOTAL		129	100%

The qualitative analysis of Table 3 identifies the specific areas where students seek further growth, revealing a clear shift from "learning about" religion to "applying" it to the complexities of modern life. Most significantly, the largest portion of the respondents (34.88%, f=45) indicated that they had no further needs or were already satisfied. This high frequency suggests that the current CLVED program is successfully meeting the fundamental spiritual needs of more than one-third of the student body, validating the "Very Positive" quantitative results reported in Table 2.

Among the students seeking further development, the most prominent active need identified is Moral Guidance and Character Formation (26.36%, f=34). This indicates that senior high school students view Religious Education as a practical "moral compass," directly supporting the high quantitative mean in Table 2 regarding faith as a means to sound ethical principles (M=3.50). Students are explicitly asking for a curriculum that helps them navigate peer pressure, ethical dilemmas, and the transition into adulthood.

Furthermore, a notable trend emerged regarding the need for Mental Support and Spiritual Formation (20.93%, f=27). Students are increasingly looking to Religious Education for "comfort," "calmness," and "hope" amidst stress and anxiety, indicating that the value of religion is shifting toward psychological resilience and emotional well-being.

The demand for Practical Relevance and Relatability (11.63%, f=15) highlights a request for modern pedagogical methods. Students in this category seek a move away from "preaching" toward dialogue and visual learning, suggesting that traditional delivery can feel detached from the "Gen Z" context, particularly where faith intersects with science and politics. Finally, the need for Interfaith Awareness (6.20%, f=8) reflects the institution's multicultural reality. Even in a Catholic setting, students expressed a desire to appreciate diverse beliefs and to move beyond a purely denominational focus, aligning with the student body's diverse demographic. Collectively, these findings suggest that students desire a holistic, relatable, and emotionally supportive religious experience.

In Table 4, the qualitative data reveal that 89.15% of Senior High School students recognize a specific positive impact of Religious Education on their lives, suggesting the subject is a vital component of their identity formation rather than a mere academic burden. The most dominant contribution identified is Character and Moral Integrity (43.41%), which students describe as the "moral glue" that instills honesty, respect, and better decision-making. This is closely followed by Spiritual

Maturity (27.91%), which marks a shift from rote learning of religious facts to a personal, purposeful relationship with God.

Table 4: Perspectives of the respondents to the Contributions of Religious Education to students' holistic development

Theme	Sample Responses	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Character & Moral Integrity	"It teaches me important values that shape my character and guide my behavior toward others."	56	43.41%
	"...helps me reflect on my values and reminds me to stay humble, responsible, and respectful."		
Spiritual Development	"Helps students form a personal relationship with God rather than just educating."	36	27.91%
	"It deepens my faith that builds a stronger relationship between God and me." By strengthening my faith		
Non-Substantive (None/NA)	"None," "N/A," "na"	14	10.85%
Social Responsibility	"Encourages me to be a better person who contributes positively to society."	10	7.75%
	It teaches me to trust in God, take care of his creation, and respect others		
	It enables me to be of service to others and helps me develop a sense of faith		
Cognitive Perspective	"It makes us reflect... and pushes us to be more critical thinkers and compassionate beings."	10	7.75%
	"Religious education opens new perspectives on life that leads to better outcomes"		
	"For me, religious education contributes to my holistic development because it helps me think critically about values, reflect on my own beliefs, and understand others with respect. It guides me in making moral decisions, strengthens my empathy, and teaches me to live with integrity. Through it, I grow not only in knowledge but also in character, becoming more responsible, compassionate, and purposeful in life."		
Psychological Resilience	"It provides a sense of inner peace, resilience, and direction as I face academic pressures."	3	2.33%

"It sometimes helps me cope."

It helped me reflect all throughout the year whether I'm struggling or enjoying. It also helped me appreciate eucharistic celebrations, parables, and other religious activities more

TOTAL

129

100%

Beyond individual character, the subject fosters "outer growth" through Social Responsibility (7.75%) and Cognitive Perspective (7.75%). These themes indicate that Religious Education encourages students to look outward with empathy and think critically about their actions, developing them into well-rounded graduates who are both socially aware and intellectually curious.

Interestingly, while the frequency is lower in this specific table, faith also serves as a "stability factor" through Psychological Resilience (2.33%), acting as a support system that offers inner peace against academic stress. Although 10.85% of the responses were non-substantive, the overwhelming majority of the feedback underscores that Religious Education is perceived as a foundational element in shaping the students' holistic development—spiritually, morally, and socially.

Discussion

Perceptions of SHS Students on the Fundamentals of Catholic Faith

The findings indicate that senior high school students in a CICM school demonstrate a *very positive* perception of the fundamentals of the Catholic faith ($M = 3.40$, $SD = 0.78$). Among the indicators, the highest-rated belief is the power of prayer ($M = 3.57$), underscoring its central role in students' spiritual lives. This supports the findings of Del Castillo, Del Castillo, and Koenig (2023), who characterize prayer among Filipino Christian youth as a deeply personal and meaningful practice that provides comfort and emotional stability, particularly in times of distress. In contexts where access to formal mental health services may be limited, prayer functions as a significant coping mechanism.

This result, however, contrasts with Del Castillo and Cacho (2023), where faith was largely perceived as a private matter. Such divergence may be explained by contextual differences, as rural populations tend to exhibit stronger adherence to traditional religious practices compared to their urban counterparts (Nikkhah et al., 2015). The high ratings for beliefs such as Jesus as the Christ ($M = 3.54$) and faith in God's goodness ($M = 3.54$) further reinforce a strong orientation toward relational spirituality, where faith is experienced as personal and dynamic rather than merely doctrinal.

Moreover, the data reveal a clear integration of faith and ethical living. The high ratings for faith as a guide to moral decision-making ($M = 3.50$) and the necessity of good works ($M = 3.50$) indicate that students perceive religion as central to their moral framework. This supports the findings of Baring et al. (2024) and Madrigal et al. (2020), which emphasize the role of religious education in shaping value formation and moral responsibility among Filipino youth.

However, comparatively lower ratings on beliefs such as the intercession of saints ($M = 3.20$), trust in Church authorities ($M = 3.23$), and the Second Coming ($M = 3.29$) point to areas of relative uncertainty. These patterns suggest gaps in doctrinal understanding and a degree of ambivalence toward institutional authority. This is consistent with broader trends among Filipino youth, who increasingly demonstrate

selective religiosity and critical engagement with Church structures (CBCP News, 2019).

A Thematic Analysis of Students' Needs in Religious Education

To identify the specific areas where students seek further growth and support, the researchers employed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis. This systematic process facilitated the identification of recurring patterns in the qualitative data, ensuring that the resulting themes accurately reflect the students' lived experiences and expectations. By coding the data and reviewing candidate themes, five distinct categories emerged from 129 responses, reflecting a collective call for a curriculum responsive to contemporary challenges.

1. Moral Guidance and Decision-Making

Representing the most significant substantive need, 26.36% of students view Religious Education as a practical "moral compass" for navigating real-life challenges. Students explicitly expressed the need for guidance when feeling "confused or pressured," particularly in developing values such as honesty and compassion. This reinforces earlier findings showing that students rely on faith as a foundation for ethical decision-making.

From a developmental perspective, these responses suggest that students are still developing their moral judgment. Drawing on Kohlberg's framework, many appear to operate at the Conventional Level, where decisions are influenced by social expectations and the desire to act appropriately within given norms. However, the reported sense of "confusion" when facing contemporary issues indicates not weakness, but a form of cognitive tension that signals readiness for more advanced moral reasoning.

This is where the role of Religious Education becomes critical. Using Vygotsky's concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), students can be understood as being on the threshold of higher-level moral thinking but requiring guidance to progress. In this process, educators function as More Knowledgeable Others (MKOs), providing scaffolding through discussion, reflection, and real-life application. Such support enables students to move beyond simply following rules toward developing moral autonomy grounded in internalized and reasoned values (Anwar et al., 2024).

2. Mental and Spiritual Well-being

The second most prominent need, cited by 20.93% of participants, positions the CLVED classroom as a vital source of psychological support. Students expressed a desire for a learning environment characterized by "comfort and calmness" rather than "fear and anxiety," and emphasized the need for "hope and resilience" to cope with the uncertainties of adolescence. These responses indicate that learners are not only seeking cognitive or moral guidance but also emotional security within the context of Religious Education.

This finding aligns with Del Castillo and Aliño (2020), who observed that Filipino Catholic youth frequently rely on faith as a primary coping mechanism in times of stress and uncertainty. In this light, Religious Education functions as a space where students can process personal struggles through a spiritual lens. To respond effectively to this need, the curriculum may benefit from emphasizing a "theology of comfort," which presents faith as a source of strength, healing, and accompaniment rather than fear or judgment (Estrada et al., 2019).

Such an approach can help students internalize religious values that not only guide behavior but also support emotional well-being, ultimately fostering long-term psychological resilience.

3. Practical Relevance and Relatability

Accounting for 11.63% of the responses, this theme reflects students' desire for a shift from passive, lecture-based instruction toward a more experiential or "lived faith" approach. Participants suggested the use of "videos" and reflections on "Jesus' experiences" as ways to make lessons more relatable, emphasizing that faith should be connected to real-life situations without being "forced" upon them. These responses indicate a preference for pedagogical approaches that are engaging, contextualized, and personally meaningful.

This finding supports Del Castillo and Cacho's (2023) assertion that Religious Education must be dynamic and grounded in the lived realities of students. Rather than relying solely on traditional instruction, there is a need to adopt more interactive and student-centered strategies. Integrating multimedia resources, case-based discussions, and contextualized reflections can help bridge the gap between doctrinal content and the realities of contemporary, digital-age life.

By making learning more participatory and relevant, CLVED can foster deeper engagement and enable students to experience faith not merely as a set of teachings, but as a lived and meaningful practice.

4. Interfaith Awareness and Diversity

Reflecting an awareness of a pluralistic society, 6.20% of students expressed a desire to understand and appreciate religious traditions beyond Catholicism. This highlights a growing need for global religious literacy, which can reduce misconceptions, promote empathy, and encourage respectful engagement with diverse beliefs (Adjani et al., 2024). In the Philippine context, integrating interfaith dialogue into the CLVED curriculum has the potential to transform exclusivist attitudes into a commitment to communal harmony and mutual understanding (Cornelio & Salera, 2012).

Such an approach not only broadens students' cognitive and moral horizons but also equips them to navigate increasingly multicultural environments. By fostering awareness and appreciation of diverse religious perspectives, Religious Education can cultivate both tolerance and active social responsibility, reinforcing its role in forming well-rounded, ethically and socially competent individuals.

5. Non-Substantive / Already Addressed

The largest single category, comprising 34.88% of responses, consists of students who either expressed satisfaction with the current curriculum ("It's addressed enough") or provided non-substantive answers (N/A).

While this suggests that the existing program effectively meets the immediate moral needs of a substantial portion of the student body, it may also indicate a limited awareness of the broader dimensions of faith formation. This presents an opportunity for educators to challenge "satisfied" students by expanding the curriculum into more complex areas of social justice, systemic ethics, and deeper theological inquiry.

Overall, the findings indicate a growing demand among senior high school students for a Religious Education (RE) curriculum that is responsive to their lived experiences and immediate needs. This does not suggest that RE educators should set aside the core doctrines and tenets of the Catholic faith; rather, it emphasizes the

importance of meeting students where they are in their spiritual and personal journeys. Addressing their concerns, such as the need for moral guidance, mental health and spiritual well-being, and a relevant, relatable pedagogy to help them better engage in classroom discussion, can serve as an entry point for deeper theological engagement. This is their *locus theologicus* (Gutierrez, 1988, pp. 6-7). Recognizing students' current realities offers educators an opportunity to guide them toward a more meaningful and transformative encounter with God.

A Thematic Analysis of the Contributions of CLVED to Students' Holistic Development

Using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis, the study identified five core dimensions through which Religious Education (CLVED) facilitates students' holistic growth. The following discussion interprets these findings in light of the frequency data and existing literature.

1. Character and Moral Integrity

Character and Moral Integrity emerged as the most dominant theme, cited by 43.41% of the respondents. Students consistently identified the course as a key driver of behavioral change, noting that it *“teaches important values that shape my character”* and reminds them to *“stay humble, responsible, and respectful.”* These responses suggest that Religious Education serves as a moral compass, guiding attitudes and actions. Wenas and Verana (2025) emphasize that Christian Religious Education raises moral consciousness, establishes spiritual principles, and helps individuals navigate social challenges. It fosters a Christ-centered identity, strengthens responsible decision-making, and promotes engagement in meaningful social activities through the teaching of God's Word.

Similarly, Religious Education extends beyond doctrinal instruction to cultivate ethical behavior and character grounded in values such as honesty, responsibility, and integrity (Del Castillo & Cacho, 2023). Students' responses indicate that these principles are internalized and applied beyond the classroom in daily decision-making. This aligns with Astin et al. (2011), who argue that values-based education is most effective when learners bridge the gap between reflective learning and lived experience. By internalizing virtues such as honesty and respect, students demonstrate a transition from cognitive understanding to ethical praxis, highlighting the transformative role of Religious Education in shaping morally grounded individuals.

2. Spiritual Development

The second most significant contribution of CLVED is **Spiritual Development**, identified by 27.91% of the respondents. Students emphasized that the course goes beyond “just educating,” helping them to “form a personal relationship with God” and “deepen my faith.” This indicates a pedagogical shift from mere religious literacy—where faith is understood at a cognitive or doctrinal level—to authentic spiritual maturity, characterized by a lived and relational encounter with the Divine. Such a transition reflects the core vision of Second Plenary Council of the Philippines (PCP II, 1991), which advocates for a “renewed catechesis” that is explicitly Christ-centered, experiential, and transformative rather than purely informative.

The findings suggest that the CLVED curriculum is not confined to the transmission of theological content but actively cultivates students' interiority, fostering practices such as prayer, reflection, and discernment that deepen their sense

of transcendence. In this sense, spiritual development emerges as an integrative process that shapes not only belief but also identity and purpose. Supporting this, Galenka, Ozora, and Amarise (2024) found that students who actively engage in Christian religious education programs demonstrate stronger prayer practices, more sustained spiritual reflection, and a heightened awareness of divine presence—indicators of a more interiorized and dynamic faith.

This perspective is further reinforced by the findings of Imron et al. (2023), who concluded that consistent engagement with religious teachings, liturgical participation, and ethical reflection significantly enhances students' spiritual development. Although situated within an Islamic educational context, their conclusions point to a broader pedagogical principle: authentic religious education, regardless of tradition, functions as a formative discipline that integrates cognition, affect, and praxis. It does not merely inform students about God but facilitates an encounter that shapes their worldview, moral reasoning, and existential orientation.

Thus, the convergence of these findings highlights that CLVED operates not only as an academic subject but as a formative space for spiritual encounter—one that nurtures a coherent inner life, strengthens moral consciousness, and ultimately guides students toward a more meaningful and purpose-driven existence.

3. Social Responsibility

Identified by 7.75% of the respondents, this theme reflects the outward projection of internal values as recognized by the respondents. Students noted that the subject *“encourages me to be a better person who contributes positively to society,” teaching them to trust in God, care for creation, and respect others.* It enables students to serve others while strengthening their faith. The current CLVED curriculum already incorporates community outreach and advocacy programs, in which students are tasked with identifying real problems in their communities and proposing possible solutions. This practical component allows students to apply their faith and ethical principles in real-life contexts.

Supporting this, Katili, Harefa, and Kimki (2023) found that integrating eco-theology and social ethics into religious education fosters a holistic discipleship model in which students engage in environmental projects, social advocacy, and contextual biblical reflection. Activities such as tree planting, waste management, and community service, combined with action-reflection learning cycles and service-learning, significantly enhance students' ethical reasoning, empathy, and civic engagement, demonstrating that connecting faith to practical action cultivates socially responsible and morally grounded individuals.

4. Cognitive Perspective

Tied with Social Responsibility at 7.75%, this dimension highlights the intellectual rigor fostered by the CLVED course. Respondents noted that the subject *“makes us reflect” and “pushes us to be more critical thinkers and compassionate beings,”* indicating that students recognize its role in developing both analytical and affective capacities. This finding supports Wright's (2004) framework on Critical Religious Education, which posits that religious studies should equip learners to reason critically, evaluate truth claims, and construct a nuanced worldview. Although less frequently cited than moral and spiritual themes, this dimension demonstrates that CLVED contributes meaningfully to students' reflective and critical thinking skills.

However, the relatively low frequency suggests that this aspect remains underdeveloped and presents an opportunity for curricular enhancement. In an era

marked by misinformation and ideological manipulation, strengthening critical thinking within Religious Education is not merely beneficial but necessary. This concern is echoed in Go's (2018) study, which underscores the ongoing challenge in Catholic education of balancing faith formation with critical inquiry. The students' reported experiences of increased reflection suggest a positive shift toward addressing this tension, aligning with Go's call for pedagogical re-examination.

Given this, Senior High School CLVED should further prioritize the practical and social relevance of belief systems, enabling students to critically engage with contemporary realities, including what may be described as "death-dealing systems" in society. By integrating more structured reflective and analytical activities, the curriculum can better cultivate informed discernment and social awareness. Such an approach not only deepens personal faith but also empowers students to translate belief into responsible action, effectively bridging the gap between personal piety and transformative social engagement.

5. Psychological Resilience

The final theme, Psychological Resilience, was identified 2.33% of the respondents. Although its frequency is relatively low, its qualitative significance is substantial. Students described the course as providing a "*sense of inner peace, resilience, and direction,*" helping them cope with academic pressures and personal challenges. These responses suggest that CLVED functions not only as a formative academic subject but also as a source of emotional support and psychological stability.

This finding aligns with Shodiq et al. (2025), who found that religious education can moderate the impact of high-stress environments on students' mental health. For these respondents, the subject serves as a protective factor, fostering emotional resilience and a sense of purpose during tough times. Moreover, this pattern is consistent with broader research on adolescent religiosity. Del Castillo and Alino (2020) observed that Filipino Catholic youth frequently engage in positive religious coping strategies, such as seeking spiritual support and practicing benevolent religious reappraisal, which contribute to more favorable psychological outcomes. Their findings indicate that young people often turn to faith when faced with stressors such as academic pressure, financial difficulties, family conflict, bereavement, and relationship struggles.

Grounded in Catholic teachings on suffering and the Church's spiritual tradition, students can interpret adversity through a lens of meaning and hope, seeking forgiveness, discerning purpose in hardship, and finding comfort in prayer. This demonstrates that CLVED, while not primarily designed as a mental health intervention, nonetheless plays a meaningful role in supporting students' psychological resilience by integrating faith-based coping mechanisms into their everyday lives.

6. Non-Substantive Responses:

A notable 10.85% of the respondents provided non-substantive answers such as "*None,*" "*N/A,*" or "*na.*" While these responses do not indicate a specific area of growth, they are significant in offering a more holistic view of the findings and point to a "neutrality gap" in which the curriculum may not effectively resonate with students' personal experiences.

Drawing on Freire's (2000) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, this lack of perceived relevance may be understood through the lens of the "banking" model of education, in which knowledge is passively transmitted rather than actively constructed through dialogue and critical engagement. The presence of such responses suggests that, for a

minority of students, CLVED may be experienced as mere doctrine transmission rather than as a “problem-posing” form of education that engages with the concrete realities and challenges of contemporary life.

This finding highlights a critical area for curricular reflection. To address this gap, Religious Education must move beyond rote reception and foster participatory, dialogical, and contextually relevant learning experiences. By doing so, CLVED can better ensure that its content is not only understood cognitively but also experienced as meaningful and transformative in the lives of all students.

Taken together, these findings highlight that while CLVED is effectively fostering moral, spiritual, social, cognitive, and psychological development among Senior High School students, there remain areas where the curriculum could be more responsive to students lived realities. The presence of non-substantive or “neutral” responses underscores the importance of engaging learners more actively, ensuring that the content moves beyond passive transmission to meaningful, contextually relevant, and transformative experiences.

By integrating practical applications, reflective activities, and participatory pedagogies, Religious Education can remain a dynamic space where students internalize values, build resilience, and connect their faith to both personal and societal challenges. Ultimately, the study affirms that CLVED has the potential not only to impart doctrinal knowledge but also to nurture well-rounded individuals who are morally grounded, spiritually mature, socially responsible, intellectually reflective, and emotionally resilient.

Conclusion

This study affirms that Religious Education, as implemented through CLVED in a CICM school, remains a significant formative force in the lives of Senior High School students. The findings demonstrate that students possess a strong foundational belief in core Catholic teachings, particularly those emphasizing a personal and relational understanding of faith, such as prayer, trust in God, and moral responsibility. These results confirm that Religious Education continues to serve as an effective source of ethical orientation and spiritual grounding.

However, the study also identifies areas that require pedagogical and curricular attention. Lower levels of affirmation toward complex doctrines and Church authority suggest a need to deepen theological engagement and address questions of institutional credibility in ways that are dialogical and context sensitive. Furthermore, students expressed needs in moral decision-making, mental and spiritual well-being, and the practical application of faith, indicating that Religious Education must move beyond content transmission toward a more integrative and experiential approach. The strong recognition of CLVED’s contribution to character formation, spiritual maturity, and social awareness highlights its role in holistic education. Yet, the presence of non-substantive or disengaged responses suggests that the curriculum does not resonate equally with all learners, reinforcing the need for differentiated and participatory strategies.

In sum, while CLVED is effective in preserving Catholic identity and promoting core values, its transformative potential can be further enhanced through contextualization, inclusivity, and responsiveness to students' lived realities. To this end, it is recommended that this study be expanded to include all Basic Education students across CICM schools, providing broader insights to guide curricular revisions. Such revisions should incorporate student-centered, dialogical, and interdisciplinary approaches to ensure that CLVED classes remain relevant,

meaningful, and impactful in forming morally grounded, spiritually mature, and socially responsible individuals in contemporary society.

Declaration on the Use of AI

The authors declare that artificial intelligence (AI) tools, such as ChatGPT and Grammarly, were used solely to assist with grammar checking, sentence refinement, and language improvement in the preparation of this manuscript. All ideas, analyses, interpretations, and final content were developed and conducted by the authors. The manuscript was carefully reviewed and revised to ensure accuracy, originality, and academic integrity.

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About the Authors

Charles Ron V. Capin currently serves as the Learning Area Coordinator of the CLVED Department, alongside Harold J. Padilla, Arnold Viller W. Villanoza, Dan E. Del Rosario, and Pedelina G. Bulligan, who are all CLVED teachers in the Senior High School Department of Saint Mary's University. Meanwhile, John Carlo F. Armando serves as the Learning Area Coordinator of the Mathematics and Research Department, while Lady Valen Charon D. Asuncion previously served as a Senior High School Research and English teacher and formerly held the position of Learning Area Coordinator of the Research Department.



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Original Article

Reframing Service-Learning (SL) as a Pedagogy of Care (PoC): Toward a Humane Framework for Religious and Theological Education

Paulo Antonio Aton¹, Joemel Buencibello², Elmgay Valeriano³, & Gracita Perez⁴

The Academy, De La Salle University, Manila, Philippines^{1,2}

Office of Student Leadership, Involvement, Formation and Empowerment, De La Salle University, Manila, Philippines³

Lasallian Pastoral Office, De La Salle University, Manila, Philippines⁴

Correspondence: paulo.aton@dlsu.edu.ph

Abstract

This study contends that Service-Learning (SL) must be systematically grounded in the Pedagogy of Care (PoC) to foster humane and transformative education in the 21st century. While SL is recognized for cultivating civic responsibility, cultural humility, and sustainability, it risks becoming transactional, lacking care, and privileging outputs over relationships while neglecting socio-emotional needs. Using a conceptual-theoretic approach, this paper synthesizes care ethics and SL scholarship to propose the CARES (Connect-Analyze-Respond-Extend-Self Evaluate) Framework, inspired by See-Discern-Act-Celebrate-Evaluate, as a structured pathway for embedding attentiveness, relationality, and responsibility into SL design, mentoring, and reflection. Through CARES, learners see community realities with empathy, discern needs through dialogue, act responsibly in solidarity, celebrate shared growth, and evaluate outcomes with accountability. In the fragile and anxious conditions of the BANI landscape, this integration positions care as the ethical foundation of humane 21st-century learning, transforming SL into a vital pedagogy for resilience, empathy, and global citizenship.

Keywords: Empathy, Global Citizenship, Humane Education, pedagogy of care, Service-Learning

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Introduction

Education in the 21st century is increasingly shaped by global disruptions such as the COVID-19 pandemic, climate crises, and rapid digital transitions (Cheng, 2024; UNICEF, 2025; Forkosh-Baruch et al., 2024). Earlier frameworks, such as Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, and Ambiguity (VUCA), attempted to capture these challenges, but recent scholarship argues that the Brittle, Anxious, Nonlinear, Incomprehensible (BANI) paradigm better reflects the emotional fragility and structural instability of contemporary life (Menaria, 2024; Schlegelmilch, 2023). Within this context, learners face heightened anxiety, disconnection, and vulnerability, underscoring the need for pedagogies that prioritize not only cognitive rigor but also emotional security, empathy, and relational depth (Halil et al., 2025).

Traditional educational reforms have emphasized adaptability, employability, and digital integration (Cascio, 2020; Shahzad et al., 2024). While these remain important, they often neglect socio-emotional dimensions of learning, leaving students without the relational support necessary for resilience and holistic growth (Ramli et al., 2025; Aldrup et al., 2022). The Pedagogy of Care (PoC), articulated by Noddings (1984) and expanded by Tronto (1993), offers a corrective by foregrounding attentiveness, responsiveness, and responsibility in educational practice. Care is not merely interpersonal but systemic, requiring institutions to embed compassion and ethical responsibility into structures of teaching and learning.

Service-Learning (SL), defined as the integration of academic study with community engagement (Bringle et al., 1999; Felten et al., 2011), has been widely recognized as a transformative pedagogy that cultivates civic responsibility, cultural humility, and ethical awareness. However, scholarship cautions that SL does not automatically embody care. Without intentional integration of care principles, SL risks becoming transactional, privileging outputs over relationships and neglecting socio-emotional needs (Mitchell, 2008; Sabo et al., 2015).

This study, therefore, advances the argument that the PoC must serve as the guiding foundation for SL. Unlike prior scholarship that highlights civic engagement and sustainability, this paper foregrounds care ethics as the missing dimension that transforms SL into a humane pedagogy. By embedding care into the design, mentoring, and reflective processes of SL, education can move beyond market-driven goals to cultivate empathy, solidarity, and global citizenship. In the conditions of the BANI landscape, integrating care into SL offers a pathway toward resilience and humane 21st-century learning.

Research Problem

SL has long been recognized for cultivating civic responsibility, cultural humility, and ethical awareness through reciprocal partnerships and critical reflection, distinguishing it from mere volunteerism and aligning it with transformative pedagogy (Bringle et al., 1999; Felten et al., 2011).

However, scholarship cautions that without the deliberate integration of care, SL risks becoming transactional, prioritizing outputs over relationships and neglecting socio-emotional needs (Mitchell, 2008; Sabo et al., 2015). Care ethics, as articulated by Noddings (1984) and expanded by Tronto (1993), foreground attentiveness, responsiveness, and responsibility not only at the interpersonal level but also within institutional structures, reframing SL as a humane and accountable

practice. Evidence from the Philippine context reinforces this gap: while studies highlight gains in faith formation, social responsibility, and sustainability, they also reveal constraints in relationship-building, affective formation, and pastoral support. The central problem, therefore, is that SL's transformative potential remains inconsistent because care principles, though theoretically aligned, are not systematically embedded in its design, mentoring, and reflective processes.

Methodology

This study employs a conceptual-theoretic analysis guided by the dialectical method to examine how the Pedagogy of Care (PoC) can be embedded in Service-Learning (SL) as a foundation for humane 21st-century education. Rather than relying on empirical program data, the approach synthesizes philosophical foundations and contemporary challenges to generate a new conceptual framework. The procedure unfolds in three stages:

First, the seminal works of Nel Noddings (1984) and Joan Tronto (1993) provide the foundational theory of care ethics. Noddings foregrounded attentiveness, responsiveness, and relational presence between the “one-caring” and the “cared-for,” while Tronto expanded care into systemic and institutional dimensions, identifying phases of care that situate it as both interpersonal and civic responsibility.

Second, modern scholarship on SL acknowledges its transformative potential in cultivating civic responsibility, cultural humility, and sustainability. However, critics caution that without deliberate integration of care, SL risks becoming transactional, privileging outputs over relationships and neglecting socio-emotional needs (Mitchell, 2008; Sabo et al., 2015). This tension exposes the gap between SL's promise and its inconsistent practice.

Finally, from the interplay of these perspectives emerges a new conceptual understanding: SL reimaged through the PoC. By embedding care principles, attentiveness, relationality, and responsibility into SL's design, mentoring, and reflection, the pedagogy is transformed into a humane, responsive, and globally conscious practice. This synthesis positions SL not merely as civic engagement but as a pathway for resilience, empathy, and solidarity in the fragile and anxious conditions of the BANI educational landscape.

Through this dialectical process, the study advances a conceptual framework that integrates care ethics into SL, ensuring that education responds to both cognitive and emotional needs while fostering humane 21st-century learning.

Foundations of the Pedagogy of Care

A brief background for Service-Learning

SL is a relatively recent development in American higher education, but its roots are connected to older traditions of civic formation, public purpose, volunteerism, social activism, and experiential education. The term *service-learning* was first coined in 1967 in relation to an internship program sponsored by the Southern Regional Education Board, where college students received academic credit and/or federally funded financial remuneration for community-based work (Sigmon, 1979). During this early stage, SL was still limited to a small number of participants and was often associated with volunteerism, civic exposure, and practical community involvement. Care was already present in these engagements, especially in the

interpersonal encounter between students and communities, but it was not yet systematically theorized as a pedagogical principle.

The conceptual foundations of SL may be traced to several traditions in American higher education. Jacoby (1996) situated SL within higher education's long-standing commitment to public purpose, while Morton and Saltmarsh (1997) linked its emergence to the civic and social traditions represented by figures such as Jane Addams, Dorothy Day, and John Dewey. These antecedents show that SL did not simply appear as a curricular innovation; rather, it grew from a broader educational aspiration to connect knowledge with action, academic learning with public responsibility, and institutions with communities. Liu (1999) similarly described SL as part of an ongoing movement to bring theory and practice, schools and communities, and thought and action closer together. From the perspective of the PoC, this historical grounding is important because it shows that SL has always carried an implicit concern for human needs, social responsibility, and relational engagement, even before care was explicitly named as its ethical foundation.

By the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s, SL became more prominent and more clearly distinguished from ordinary community service because of its deliberate integration of service with academic study. This distinction is significant: community service may focus mainly on helping or volunteering, but SL requires structured learning, reflection, reciprocity, and curricular connection. In this period, higher education institutions increasingly embraced civic responsibility as part of their public mission. Ehrlich (1996) emphasized that SL in higher education should cultivate civic responsibility by linking academic learning with meaningful community engagement. Jacoby (1996) likewise framed SL as a pedagogy that combines academic study, community service, and reflection. In this sense, SL became more than an extracurricular activity; it became a legitimate academic practice that could form students intellectually, morally, and socially.

This institutional growth was also connected to the wider movement for civic renewal in higher education. Hollander and Hartley (2000) argued that colleges and universities had to reclaim their civic mission by building stronger networks and institutional commitments for democratic engagement. SL became one of the central vehicles for this renewal because it allowed students to encounter social realities directly while reflecting critically on their roles as citizens. In this stage, care became more visible through the language of civic responsibility, community partnership, and democratic participation. However, care still often remained implicit. It was assumed that because students were serving communities, care would naturally emerge. This assumption later became problematic because service activities could still become transactional if they prioritized completion, outputs, or institutional requirements over genuine relationship-building and community voice.

By the 2000s, SL scholarship began to critique models that treated service as a one-way act of helping. Mitchell (2008) argued that traditional SL could become transactional when it emphasized student learning outcomes without sufficiently addressing power, privilege, and structural inequality. She proposed critical service-learning as an alternative model grounded in social justice, authentic relationships, and the redistribution of power. Sabo et al. (2015) similarly warned that SL may reproduce inequities if community engagement remains superficial or charity-based. These critiques are important because they reveal that SL does not automatically produce care, justice, or transformation. Without intentional design, mentoring, and reflection, SL may unintentionally reinforce the very inequalities it seeks to address.

Viewed through the lens of care ethics, the historical development of SL reveals a movement from incidental care toward intentional care. In its early

volunteer-oriented forms, SL encouraged empathy and civic exposure, but it did not always provide mechanisms for reciprocity, accountability, or sustained relationships. In its institutionalized form, SL gained academic legitimacy through reflection and curricular integration, but it still risked becoming compliance-driven when care was not explicitly embedded. In its critical form, SL moves closer to the PoC because it recognizes that meaningful service requires attentiveness to community realities, responsibility for ethical action, responsiveness to partner voices, and relational accountability.

Therefore, the history of SL supports the need for a care-oriented framework such as CARES. If SL is to become a humane and transformative pedagogy, care cannot remain an assumed byproduct of service. It must become the organizing principle of the whole learning process. The CARES Framework responds to this need by embedding care into each stage of SL: connecting with communities through attentive listening, analyzing needs through critical reflection, responding through responsible action, extending relationships beyond project completion, and self-evaluating with accountability. In this way, SL is reframed not merely as academic engagement or civic participation but as a PoC that forms learners to act with empathy, justice, and solidarity.

On the Ethics of Care in Education: Noddings (1984) and Tronto (1993)

The PoC is rooted in Nel Noddings' influential work *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (1984). Noddings emphasized that education must be grounded in attentiveness, responsiveness, and relational presence between teacher and learner. For her, care was not a peripheral concern but a moral obligation that affirms the dignity of students.

Noddings (1929–2022), an American philosopher of education and professor at Stanford University, reshaped moral and educational theory by centering ethics on relationships rather than abstract principles. She argued that genuine teaching requires attentiveness and responsiveness, with teachers actively listening, observing, and engaging with learners rather than remaining detached. Her ideas generated both acclaim and critique. Tronto (1993) broadened the framework by situating care within systemic and institutional contexts, describing it as the collective effort to sustain and repair the world for better living. Lynch, Baker, and Lyons (2007) cautioned that framing care as emotional labor risks reinforcing gendered expectations. Stone (2017), however, praised Noddings as a reformer who shifted educational discourse toward empathy and relationality. Hoagland (1990) offered a strong critique, arguing that Noddings' model lacked reciprocity and risked perpetuating oppressive structures. She highlighted the reliance on mothering as the paradigm of care, which naturalized gender roles and placed disproportionate responsibility on women. Hoagland also noted that the framework lacked mechanisms for evaluating or transforming the values embedded in caring relationships, leaving it vulnerable to sustaining hierarchies rather than promoting liberation.

Noddings' ethics of care emerged in the early 1980s amid dissatisfaction with dominant rationalist and justice-oriented moral theories such as Kantian deontology and Rawlsian liberalism. These traditions emphasized abstract principles over lived relationships, while Noddings positioned care as an alternative grounded in human interdependence. Her perspective was shaped by feminist critiques of abstract ethics, her own experiences as a mother and educator, and broader debates on educational reform. Scholars have described her work as timely, emerging during a period when discussions of education and welfare were shifting toward relational and community-based approaches (Stone, 2017). Ultimately, *caring* advanced a paradigm shift in

moral education by grounding ethics in relationships rather than detached reasoning. Ann Diller (1996) described this as a “new paradigm” in the ethics of care, highlighting its innovation in prioritizing empathy and relational presence in teaching. While critics warned of its potential reinforcement of traditional gender roles or neglect of systemic injustice, Noddings’ enduring contribution lies in redefining pedagogy as relational practice, encouraging educators to foster environments where moral growth is sustained through care, dialogue, and responsiveness rather than standardized outcomes (Diller, 1996; Lynch et al. 2007).

Joan Tronto (1993) broadened the scope of care ethics by embedding it within systemic and institutional contexts. She outlined four interconnected phases [caring about, taking care of, caregiving, and care-receiving], which illustrate that care is not only interpersonal but also civic, forming a foundation for democratic participation and social justice. Together, Noddings and Tronto established care ethics as a philosophical framework for reimagining education as relational, ethical, and socially responsive.

Tronto, a leading American political theorist and feminist scholar, reframed care as a political and democratic practice rather than a private or gendered morality. Her scholarship emphasizes care as a universal human activity essential for sustaining life and justice, positioning her as one of the most influential voices in feminist political theory (Parra Jounou & Tronto, 2024). In *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care* (1993), she responded to late 20th-century feminist debates and the rise of neoliberal individualism by insisting that care must be understood politically. She highlighted how marginalized groups [women, working-class communities, and people of color] were disproportionately burdened with care work, which remained undervalued socially and economically. Against the backdrop of neoliberal policies and the erosion of collective responsibility, Tronto argued that care must be defended as a democratic value.

Applied to education, Tronto’s framework underscores the relational and reciprocal nature of teaching and learning. Her four phases of care encourage educators to recognize students’ needs, assume responsibility for their learning, teach as a form of caregiving, and remain responsive to feedback. By framing care as a political practice, she calls for democratizing education, embedding care into its processes to promote student-centered learning, inclusive classrooms, and holistic approaches that prioritize attentiveness, responsibility, and reciprocity over technocratic or purely outcome-based models. In this sense, care becomes a practice that sustains and nurtures learners while also advancing equity and justice.

Positioning the PoC within SL highlights both continuity and expansion. Noddings’ foundational claim that care is the moral bedrock of education resonates strongly with SL, which naturally embodies reciprocal relationships of attentiveness and responsiveness between students and communities. Her insistence that teachers must be attentive, responsive, and never indifferent aligns with SL pedagogy, in which educators guide students to listen to and respond to community needs rather than impose predetermined, abstract solutions.

The departure point lies in SL’s extension of care beyond interpersonal classroom relationships into systemic and institutional dimensions. While Noddings’ paradigm was rooted in mothering and personal encounters, SL requires addressing structural inequalities, building community partnerships, and engaging with social justice concerns. Scholars such as Diller (1996) and Lynch et al. (2007) have critiqued Noddings for insufficiently engaging with these broader contexts. SL responds to these critiques by framing care not only as an ethical stance but also as a civic responsibility. In this way, the PoC in SL transforms Noddings’ interpersonal ethic

into a praxis that integrates community engagement, equity, and institutional accountability, expanding care from the personal to the societal level.

On Extending Care Ethics in Educational Contexts

Subsequent scholarship has applied and critiqued Noddings and Tronto's frameworks in diverse educational contexts. Lynch et al. (2007) warned against reducing care to emotional labor, which risks reinforcing gendered expectations. Lynch et al. (2007) provide a crucial expansion and critique of both Noddings' frameworks by situating care within broader structures of inequality. Their central argument is that while Noddings (1984) emphasized interpersonal caring relationships [particularly the dyad of the one-caring and the cared-for], this focus risks reducing care to emotional labor, which historically has been feminized and undervalued. They caution that if care is framed only as a private, affective practice, it reinforces gendered expectations that women should bear the burden of caregiving, thereby perpetuating injustice rather than challenging it. In relation to Noddings, Lynch et al. (2007, pp. 5–7) argue that her reliance on *mothering* as a paradigm, though philosophically rich, inadvertently naturalizes women's caregiving roles and neglects the systemic redistribution of care responsibilities.

This critique aligns with Tronto's (1993, pp. 102-103) insistence that care must be understood as a political and social practice rather than merely an interpersonal ethic. Tronto's framework of care as a democratic responsibility resonates with Lynch et al.'s call for affective equality, which demands that love, care, and solidarity be recognized and distributed fairly across society. Thus, while Noddings provides the philosophical foundation for care in education, Lynch et al. extend the discourse by highlighting the institutional and structural dimensions of care, warning against its reduction to individualized emotional labor. Their articulation corroborates Tronto's systemic perspective and critiques Noddings' interpersonal emphasis, making their work a pivotal bridge between relational ethics and social justice in education.

Antrop-González et al. (2006, p. 413) advanced the concept of critical care by extending traditional care ethics [focused on interpersonal attentiveness] toward broader commitments to justice, inclusivity, and accountability. Their research, rooted in urban schools serving marginalized communities, highlighted that care cannot be reduced to emotional support alone. Instead, it must be enacted as a deliberate practice of equity and advocacy, particularly in contexts where students face systemic challenges such as poverty, racial discrimination, and limited access to resources. In educational practice, critical care calls teachers to move beyond simply listening and responding to individual student needs. It requires recognizing the structural conditions that shape those needs and actively dismantling barriers to learning. This involves cultivating culturally responsive classrooms that are inclusive of diverse identities and accountable to students' lived realities. In this way, critical care reframes teaching as both relational and political, combining empathy with a commitment to social justice so that care becomes transformative rather than passive. The articulation of critical care by Antrop-González et al. (2006) is especially relevant to the PoC in SL. While Noddings emphasized relational presence and Tronto situated care within civic responsibility, Antrop-González et al. (2006) underscore the necessity of embedding care within struggles for equity and inclusion. SL, by design, engages students with communities that often experience systemic disadvantage. Critical care provides the framework for ensuring that these engagements are not merely empathetic gestures but practices of accountability, where educators and learners commit to justice-oriented action, inclusivity, and responsiveness to community voices.

This perspective also resonates with trauma-informed pedagogy (Brunzell et al., 2016), which draws on care ethics to create safe and supportive environments for learners experiencing fragility and anxiety. Brunzell et al. (2016) emphasize that trauma-informed pedagogy must integrate care ethics with positive psychology to create safe and supportive learning environments for students who have experienced adversity. They argue that education should not only repair the deficits associated with trauma, such as disrupted attachment and difficulties in emotional regulation but also build strengths like hope, resilience, and connectedness (pp. 65–66). This dual-continua approach ensures that learners are supported holistically, addressing both vulnerability and potential. Their framework resonates with the PoC in SL because both prioritize attentiveness, responsiveness, and relational presence as central to educational practice. Noddings (1984) underscores the importance of teachers being attentive and responsive to the needs of the cared-for, while Tronto (1993) expands care into systemic and civic dimensions. Brunzell et al. (2016, p. 70) complement these perspectives by highlighting the need for classrooms to be safe spaces where fragility and anxiety are acknowledged and addressed, thereby enabling learners to thrive. In SL, this translates into designing projects that are sensitive to trauma while fostering resilience, empowerment, and community engagement, making care both interpersonal and civic in scope.

By embedding critical care into SL, this study positions care ethics as a living praxis that unites attentiveness with structural transformation. In doing so, it underscores how education can nurture individual growth while simultaneously advancing social justice. The PoC thus emerges not merely as a theoretical construct but as a guiding framework for cultivating resilient learners and equitable communities.

Defining and Contextualizing Service-Learning

Service-Learning and its Transformative Potential

Service-Learning (SL) is widely recognized as a transformative pedagogy that integrates academic study with community engagement (Álvarez-Vanegas et al., 2024, pp. 4–6; Salam et al., 2019, pp. 574–576). Bringle and Hatcher (1999, pp. 179–185) defined SL as a credit-bearing educational experience deliberately structured through reciprocal partnerships and critical reflection. Their framework emphasized that communities must be co-educators rather than passive recipients, while reflection served as the bridge between experience and theory, enabling students to connect service activities with disciplinary knowledge and broader social issues. In the late 1990s, this model legitimized service-learning within higher education, moving it beyond informal volunteerism toward a pedagogy embedded in the curriculum and aligned with universities' civic responsibilities.

Felten et al. (2011, pp. 75–84) expanded this vision by highlighting SL's role in cultivating civic responsibility, cultural humility, and ethical awareness. They argued that reflection is central, transforming service from charity into a high-impact pedagogy that integrates personal growth with civic and academic learning. Through structured reflection, students confront cultural differences with humility, sharpen their ethical awareness, and learn to see themselves as responsible citizens engaged in democratic life.

Mitchell (2008), however, cautioned that traditional SL risks becoming transactional, focusing on outputs rather than relationships and thereby neglecting socio-emotional needs. She argued that such approaches reduce service to a checklist of activities, leaving little room for authentic engagement. To counter this, Mitchell proposed a critical service-learning model that foregrounds social justice, power

redistribution, and authentic relationships (pp. 50–55). In this model, reflection interrogates privilege and inequality, centering relational depth and socio-emotional needs as essential to transformative pedagogy.

Sabo et al. (2015, pp. 137–139) corroborated Mitchell's (2008) critique of traditional service-learning by showing how transactional approaches fail to address deeper socio-emotional and justice-oriented dimensions of engagement. Their study framed SL as a vehicle for building health equity and eliminating health disparities, but they cautioned that when implemented superficially, SL risks reproducing inequities rather than dismantling them. Much as Mitchell argued that traditional SL reduces service to outputs and neglects relational depth, Sabo et al. emphasized that genuine transformation requires authentic partnerships with communities in which power is shared and socio-emotional needs are acknowledged. They argued that health equity cannot be advanced through one-sided, charity-based models; instead, service-learning must cultivate mutual trust, cultural humility, and reflection to interrogate systemic inequalities. In this way, their work reinforced Mitchell's call for critical SL, insisting that SL must move beyond transactionalism to become a justice-oriented pedagogy that empowers both students and communities.

Therefore, these perspectives illustrate the evolution of service-learning discourse: from Bringle and Hatcher's legitimization of SL as a credit-bearing academic practice to Felten and Clayton's emphasis on civic, cultural, and ethical transformation and finally to Mitchell's critique of transactional tendencies and call for critical, justice-oriented engagement. This synthesis underscores the global recognition of service-learning as a transformative pedagogy while also revealing tensions between traditional and critical models. Such insights provide a hinge for examining how these global frameworks resonate within and are adapted to the Philippine context, where SL must navigate local cultural realities, socio-economic disparities, and institutional missions rooted in community engagement.

Service-Learning in the Philippine Context

In the Philippine context, SL was introduced through a combination of institutional community engagement traditions, Catholic and civic formation, and later, national policy mechanisms that encouraged student participation in community development. One of the earliest documented examples was Ateneo de Manila University's *Theory and Practice of Social Development* or Economics 177, introduced by its Economics Department in 1975, which integrated classroom learning with community-based development work (Sescon & Tũaño, 2012; Abenir et al., 2024). This indicates that Philippine SL did not emerge merely as volunteer work but as a course-based pedagogy connecting academic theory with social realities. Its wider adoption was later strengthened by higher education's commitment to extension and civic formation, especially after the passage of Republic Act No. 9163 or the National Service Training Program (NSTP) Act of 2001, which required tertiary students to undergo civic, literacy, or military service formation as part of nation-building (Republic Act No. 9163, 2001). Although NSTP is not identical to SL, it helped normalize structured student engagement with communities, creating a policy environment where SL could develop more intentionally within universities. In recent years, Philippine institutions such as Ateneo de Manila University, De La Salle University, Silliman University, and the University of Santo Tomas have further institutionalized SL through curriculum-based community engagement, online service-learning, sustainability-oriented projects, and reflection-driven formation programs (Anorico, 2019; Camarines et al., 2024; De La Salle University, 2013).

Camarines et al. (2024, pp. 12–15) examined *Online Service-Learning* (OS-L) during the pandemic, showing that while it nurtured faith, civic responsibility, and social awareness, the virtual format constrained deep relationship-building and emotional accompaniment. Their best practices included structured online reflection, values integration, and creative digital tools to sustain communication, underscoring SL's resilience in adapting to crises. Similarly, Eballo (2025, pp. 47–55) demonstrated that SL can advance the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) when strategically integrated into the curriculum, enabling students to connect academic learning with global priorities such as poverty alleviation and environmental sustainability.

Abenir et al. (2023/2024, pp. 3110–3115) further explored how institutions adapted SL to digital platforms through their CARE-full online SL framework. They argued that while online modalities sustained SL during the pandemic, they also introduced risks of transactional interactions. To counter this, they proposed practices centered on trust-building, empathy, and community partner empowerment, ensuring that even in virtual spaces, communities remain co-educators and relationships are authentic. Basco (2023, pp. 4–7) investigated SL at Republic Central Colleges, affirming its role in values formation and civic responsibility but noting inconsistencies in sustaining long-term partnerships. He argued that continuity and reciprocity are essential for SL to generate lasting community impact. Finally, Cantel and Rha (2023, pp. 5–8) presented a case study on integrating SL into information literacy education, showing how SL bridges academic knowledge with community practice. However, they identified challenges in aligning institutional priorities with community needs, echoing global debates on reciprocity and underscoring the need for collaborative project design.

Therefore, these local studies illustrate that SL in the Philippine context is transformative yet unevenly implemented. Online adaptations (Camarines et al., 2024; Abenir et al., 2023/2024) highlight resilience but also relational risks, while curriculum-based initiatives (Eballo, 2025; Cantel & Rha, 2023) demonstrate alignment with global goals yet expose gaps in affective and reciprocal dimensions. Basco (2023) underscores the importance of sustainability and institutional support to ensure long-term impact. Collectively, these findings point to a common thread: Philippine SL must deliberately embed care principles, reciprocity, and socio-emotional accompaniment to preserve its transformative character. This recognition provides a natural transition to the next discussion, which seeks to address these gaps by grounding SL in practices that prioritize authentic relationships, holistic student formation, and community empowerment.

Introducing a Care-Oriented Framework for Service-Learning

Within the local educational landscape, service-learning has been implemented with evident strengths and challenges. This dual character resonates with the pastoral cycle of *See-Judge-Act*, first articulated by Joseph Cardijn in the early 20th century through his work with the Young Christian Workers. As Zotti (1990) notes, Cardijn began applying the method of *Observe-Judge-Act* in 1912 with small groups of young workers in Laecken, Belgium, enabling them to critically examine their realities, discern them in light of the Gospel, and take action for change (pp. 387–388). Cardijn later formalized this approach in *Reflections on the Enquiry* (1956) and was later endorsed by Pope John XXIII in *Mater et Magistra* (1961) as part of Catholic Social Teaching (CST). Over time, this cycle evolved into a widely used pastoral framework in education and social action, emphasizing experiential

observation, critical discernment, and transformative commitment. One Catholic university in the Philippines has indigenized this cycle into a reflection framework of *Masid-Danas*, *Suri-Nilay*, and *Taya-Kilos*, or simply known as the Lasallian Reflection Framework (LRF), which grounds SL in conscious immersion, structured reflection, and committed action (De La Salle University, 2011; Eballo, 2025). Eballo (2025) explains that the curricular integration and implementation of SL in Christian Living and Values Education uses the LRF as its guiding structure, composed of *Masid-Danas* or *See-Experience*, *Suri-Nilay* or (Analysis-Reflection), and *Taya-Kilos* or (Commitment-Action) (p. 50). In practice, *Masid-Danas* introduces students to the realities of partner communities through conscious experiencing, exposure, needs assessment, and encounter with community concerns. This phase asks students to attend to what is happening, who is affected, and what realities, problems, and hopes are voiced by the community (Eballo, 2025, p. 50). *Suri-Nilay* then deepens the experience through critical analysis and theological reflection, asking why the situation is happening, how different factors are connected, who the key actors are, and how Scripture, Catholic Social Teaching, Lasallian principles, and institutional values help interpret the experience (Eballo, 2025, pp. 51–52). Finally, *Taya-Kilos* moves students toward committed action, where projects are implemented in response to the needs discerned with partner communities. This phase is anchored in concrete forms of response such as direct service, education, awareness-raising, advocacy, mobilization, and faith formation (Eballo, 2025, p. 52). Eballo further shows that this process is embedded across the Senior High School Christian Living and Values Education curriculum, where CLVE 4 is aligned with *Masid-Danas*, CLVE 5 with *Suri-Nilay*, and CLVE 6 with *Taya-Kilos* (Eballo, 2025, pp. 52–53). The file also notes that the integration of SL in the Christian Living and Values Education subject gradually developed during the pandemic through orientations, training sessions, syllabus recalibrations, and the eventual introduction of community partners.

This structure demonstrates that SL is not treated as a one-time outreach activity but as a curricular process that gradually moves learners from exposure, to reflection, to action. However, it also reveals a limitation that is important for the present study. While the LRF provides a strong formation-oriented pathway for SL, its operational emphasis tends to culminate in project implementation. Eballo (2025) describes *Taya-Kilos* as the phase that asks, “How do we respond?” and lists possible responses such as direct service, education, awareness-raising, advocacy, mobilization, and faith formation (p. 52). This shows that action is strongly foregrounded in the SL process. Evaluation is present in the broader discussion of SL outcomes, but it is not given the same explicit pedagogical weight as the three major phases of seeing, reflecting, and acting. Likewise, celebration or communal recognition of shared growth is not deliberately articulated as a distinct operational phase within the process. This gap is significant because, from the perspective of the PoC, SL should not end with the completion of a project. It must also include intentional spaces for celebrating reciprocal growth, honoring community partnership, and evaluating the ethical, relational, and affective impact of the engagement. This is where the CARES Framework extends the LRF by making Extend and Self-Evaluate explicit components of care-oriented SL, ensuring that students do not only implement projects but also sustain relationships, recognize shared transformation, and assess whether the engagement was truly attentive, responsive, and accountable.

Buencibello et al. (2024; 2025) proposed embedding care into religious education through the pastoral cycle of *See–Judge–Act–Celebrate–Evaluate*, which

they describe as a holistic learning process that integrates faith, reason, and action. In their paper, the framework begins with *See*, in which learners critically observe ecological realities and injustices, such as environmental degradation and the misuse of biblical texts. The *Judge/Discern* stage then evaluates these realities in light of Scripture and Church teaching, particularly *Laudato Si'*, reframing stewardship as responsibility rather than domination. The *Act* stage translates insights into concrete initiatives, such as integrating ecological values into religious education and community action. *Celebrate* emphasizes communal rituals and recognition of small victories, reinforcing hope and gratitude, while *Evaluate* ensures accountability and continuous improvement. This cycle becomes a strong model for SL because it grounds students in real-world contexts, fosters critical reflection, and moves them toward transformative action that is both sustainable and justice-oriented. It also embodies the PoC by aligning attentiveness (*See*), responsibility (*Judge*), competence (*Act*), responsiveness (*Celebrate*), and continuity (*Evaluate*) with the elements of care. In doing so, the framework humanizes SL, ensuring that ecological and social justice are not abstract ideals but lived practices that cultivate empathy, solidarity, and enduring habits of responsibility toward both the Earth and marginalized communities (Buencibello et al. 2024; 2025, pp. 82-83; ECCE & CBCP, 2007, par. 353).

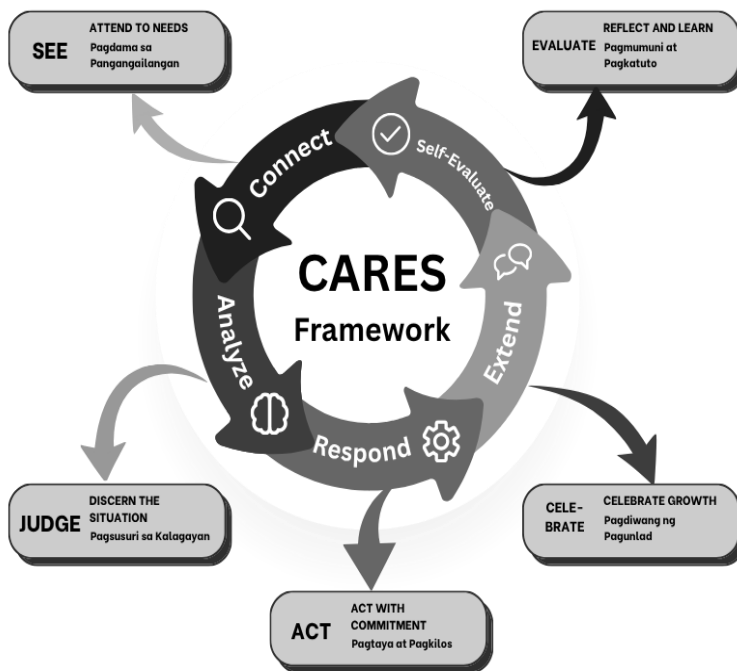


Figure 1: CARES Framework

This framework of Connect–Analyze–Respond–Extend–Self-Evaluate is inspired by See-Discern/Judge-Act-Celebrate-Evaluate by the Episcopal Commission on Catechesis and Catholic Education (ECCE), & Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines (CBCP)

Applied to SL, this framework operationalizes care principles at every stage: attentiveness in seeing realities of ecological and social crises; ethical discernment in

judging these realities through Scripture and Church teaching; responsibility in acting through concrete initiatives such as ecological catechesis or community solidarity projects; and hope in celebrating outcomes that nurture resilience and compassion. By integrating this cycle, SL becomes not only academic engagement but also a humane pedagogy that cultivates empathy, accountability, and solidarity in the fragile BANI landscape.

The researchers developed the CARES Framework, aligned with the pastoral cycle of *See–Judge–Act–Celebrate–Evaluate*, which can be powerfully articulated through its synergy with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 4 Quality Education, SDG 13 Climate Action, and SDG 16 Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions (United Nations, n.d). These goals deepen the framework’s relevance for researchers and practitioners by situating care ethics within global educational and ecological commitments (Buencibello et al. 2024; 2025).

Table 1: Tabular Presentation of CARES Framework

CARES Framework	Term Application	Concrete Example
Connect Phase (See) <i>Pagdama sa Pangangailangan</i> [Sensing / Recognizing Community Needs]	Term 1 Needs Assessment	Students conduct surveys and interviews with partner communities (e.g., <i>barangay</i> leaders, public school teachers) to identify pressing needs such as literacy gaps or lack of environmental awareness.
Analyze Phase (Discern) <i>Pagsusuri at Pag-unawa</i> [Analysis and Understanding]	Term 2 Project Proposal & Implementation	Learners critically reflect on findings, prepare proposals addressing systemic issues (e.g., waste management, lack of reading materials), and present them to faculty and community leaders for validation.
Respond Phase (Act) <i>Pagkilos na may Pakikipag-ugnayan</i> [Action through Collaboration / Engagement]		Students implement initiatives such as mangrove reforestation, climate education workshops, or literacy tutorials, ensuring actions are responsive to community-identified needs.
Extend Phase (Celebrate) <i>Pagpapatuloy ng Ugnayan</i> [Sustaining Relationships / Partnerships]	Term 3 Culminating Activity (end of Term 3) or SL Expo & Post-Implementation Reflection	A Service-Learning Expo (SL Expo) is organized where students and community partners showcase outputs (e.g., literacy gains, climate action projects), share testimonies, and celebrate achievements, reinforcing reciprocity and long-term partnership.
Self-Evaluate Phase (Evaluate) <i>Pagsusuri at Pagbabago</i> [Reflection, Assessment, and Transformation]		Learners and faculty conduct structured reflection sessions, documenting lessons learned, assessing impact on empathy and civic responsibility, and identifying areas for improvement in future SL cycles.

* *In a trimester school year, this framework can be operationalized by spreading it into each term.*

The *CARES Framework* concretely advances the SDGs by aligning its stages with specific educational, ecological, and civic practices. In the *Connect Phase*, students begin by listening to community partners, for instance, by conducting needs assessments in local schools, which help ensure inclusive and equitable learning environments that directly contribute to SDG 4, Quality Education. In the *Analyze Phase*, learners critically reflect on systemic issues such as unequal access to resources or corruption in governance, thereby strengthening accountability and civic responsibility in line with SDG 16 Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions. The *Respond Phase* emphasizes responsible action rooted in solidarity and ecological awareness, exemplified by service-learning initiatives such as mangrove reforestation, climate education workshops, or waste segregation drives, which align with SDG 13, Climate Action. Through the *Extend Phase*, students sustain authentic relationships with partner communities, such as continuing literacy tutorials or health awareness campaigns beyond the project period, reinforcing trust, reciprocity, and long-term impact that support both SDG 4 and SDG 16. It is also a phase where students and members of the partner community can celebrate the fruitfulness of their partnership and collaboration through the sharing of their experiences and feelings, culminating in the SL process throughout the school year. Finally, the *Self-Evaluate Phase* embeds accountability and transformation, as learners assess their growth in empathy, resilience, and civic responsibility, ensuring that SL remains aligned with care ethics while operationalizing the SDGs in concrete, community-responsive ways.

Integrating SL in General Education Subjects or Institutionally Mandated Courses

In Senior High School Religious Education

Service-Learning may be intentionally integrated into Senior High School Religious Education subjects, such as Christian Living, Christian Formation, Christian Life Education, or Values Education. Since these courses are commonly offered across strands, they provide a strategic space for SL because they already address academic learning, spiritual formation, moral discernment, character development, and social responsibility. Catholic education is oriented toward the integral formation of the human person and the common good, preparing learners to participate responsibly in social life (*Gravissimum Educationis*, 1965, para. 1). Likewise, Catholic schools are understood as educational communities where learning connects research, reflection, life experience, and Christian spiritual heritage (Congregation for Catholic Education, 2014, para. 1). This holistic orientation makes Religious Education a fitting home for SL because both seek to connect knowledge, reflection, action, and community engagement.

Although many Catholic schools already offer Christian Living or similar formation subjects, SL is not always deliberately embedded as a structured pedagogical component. In some cases, community engagement remains limited to outreach activities, donation drives, or one-time volunteer work rather than a sustained learning process connected to course outcomes, reflection, and community partnership. This paper therefore recommends integrating SL into Religious Education courses because these subjects naturally invite learners to translate faith into action, recognize human dignity, respond to social realities, and participate in community transformation. Jia's study on Christian values education and holistic child development supports this claim by showing how Christian values education contributes to the formation of learners across holistic development domains, including faith, reconciliation, stewardship, hope, perseverance, obedience, and service (Jia, 2021, pp. 86–100).

In practice, SL may be integrated by linking course themes to community-based engagements. Lessons on Catholic Social Teaching, human dignity, solidarity, preferential option for the poor, stewardship, care for creation, and mission may be connected to projects with partner communities. Students may begin with social analysis and community listening, proceed to theological and moral reflection, implement a response with the community, and conclude with guided reflection on personal growth, faith response, and community impact. This prevents Religious Education from becoming purely conceptual and allows learners to encounter real social issues through faith-informed and responsible action.

This recommendation is supported by existing Philippine Lasallian practice. Eballo (2025) shows that SL can be embedded in Christian Living and Values Education through the Lasallian Reflection Framework, particularly through *Masid-Danas*, *Suri-Nilay*, and *Taya-Kilos* (pp. 47–61). Through this process, learners move from experiencing community realities, to reflecting on them, and finally to acting through concrete responses. However, this paper further recommends that SL should not end with project implementation alone. It should include deliberate spaces for relational continuity, celebration of shared growth, and careful evaluation of ethical, affective, spiritual, and community outcomes. The proposed care-oriented framework strengthens Religious Education by ensuring that SL is not reduced to compliance or output production but becomes a humane pedagogy of empathy, accountability, solidarity, and care.

In Higher Education Theology Courses

SL may also be visibly embedded in higher education theology courses by treating community engagement as a course-based theological learning experience, not merely as an optional outreach activity. Since theology courses are often required across programs in Catholic higher education, they offer a strong platform for integrating faith, reason, moral discernment, social responsibility, and concrete action. This aligns with the mission of a Catholic university, which seeks not only to pursue knowledge but also to promote human dignity through research, teaching, and service to local, national, and international communities (John Paul II, 1990, para. 12). Theology also helps other disciplines reflect on meaning, ethical implications, and the relationship between faith and life (John Paul II, 1990, para. 19). SL can therefore make Theology more formative by allowing students to encounter social realities, interpret them through Scripture and Church teaching, and respond through service with partner communities.

In practical terms, SL may be embedded in Theology courses through a structured process of community exposure, theological reflection, project implementation, and post-engagement evaluation. For instance, a Theology course on Catholic Social Teaching may engage students with partner communities on issues related to poverty, education, ecological care, peacebuilding, migration, or human dignity. Students may begin with listening and immersion, followed by theological analysis using themes such as solidarity, preferential option for the poor, stewardship of creation, justice, and the common good. Their response may take the form of tutorials, advocacy campaigns, ecological initiatives, parish-based formation, community education, or support for marginalized groups. After implementation, students should evaluate not only the project output but also how the experience shaped their faith, empathy, ethical responsibility, and understanding of social issues.

This recommendation is aligned with the renewal of ecclesiastical and theological studies. *Veritatis Gaudium* emphasizes that theological formation must listen to the cry of the poor and the earth and give concrete expression to the social

dimension of evangelization (Francis, 2017, para. 4a). It also calls for dialogue as an essential requirement for understanding truth and its practical implications (Francis, 2017, para. 4b), as well as interdisciplinary and cross-disciplinary approaches in responding to contemporary issues (Francis, 2017, para. 4c). These principles support SL in Theology because SL brings theological reflection into dialogue with communities, cultures, and lived social realities.

To make SL visible at the institutional level, theology departments should include it in course syllabi, learning outcomes, assessment tasks, rubrics, and community partnership plans. A common SL template may also be developed to identify the partner community, theological theme, expected output, reflection guide, ethical safeguards, and evaluation tool. This ensures that SL is not dependent only on individual instructors but becomes part of the institution's theological formation program.

Finally, Theology-based SL should be guided by the PoC. Its purpose is not simply to require students to "serve," but to form persons who can listen, discern, accompany, respond, and evaluate responsibly. Without care, SL may become another compliance requirement or one-time charity activity. With care, it becomes a concrete expression of theological education: faith seeking understanding, and understanding becoming compassionate action.

Conclusion

This study argued that SL becomes more humane and transformative when it is intentionally grounded in the PoC. While SL has historically developed from volunteerism and civic exposure into a recognized academic pedagogy, its transformative promise remains incomplete when care is treated only as an assumed outcome of service. The discussion showed that SL may cultivate civic responsibility, cultural humility, and ethical awareness, but it may also become transactional when it prioritizes outputs, compliance, or project completion over authentic relationships, reciprocity, and accountability.

By bringing care ethics into conversation with SL, this paper reframed care not as a sentimental addition to community engagement but as its ethical foundation. Noddings' emphasis on attentiveness, responsiveness, and relational presence, together with Tronto's broader view of care as a civic and institutional responsibility, helps clarify what SL must become in practice: a pedagogy that listens before acting, discerns before implementing, responds responsibly, sustains relationships, and evaluates its impact with honesty. In this sense, care deepens SL by ensuring that students and communities are not reduced to performers and recipients of projects but are treated as co-learners, co-formators, and partners in transformation.

The Philippine and Lasallian context further reveals both the strength and limitation of existing SL practice. The Lasallian Reflection Framework (LRF), through Masid-Danas, Suri-Nilay, and Taya-Kilos, already provides a meaningful pathway from experience, to reflection, to action. However, the discussion also surfaced an important gap: SL practice often culminates in implementation, while the celebration of shared growth and the evaluation of ethical, relational, affective, spiritual, and community outcomes are not always deliberately foregrounded as distinct phases. This is significant because a care-oriented SL process should not end when the project is completed. It must also ask whether relationships were sustained, whether community voices were honored, whether students grew in empathy and

accountability, and whether the engagement truly responded to the needs and dignity of the partner community.

The CARES Framework responds to this gap by extending SL into a more explicit cycle of care: Connect, Analyze, Respond, Extend, and Self-Evaluate. Through this framework, SL begins with attentive listening, moves into critical and theological reflection, proceeds to responsible action, sustains community relationships beyond implementation, and closes with honest evaluation of learning, impact, and transformation. In doing so, CARES strengthens existing SL models by making celebration and evaluation visible parts of the learning process rather than incidental or peripheral activities.

This paper therefore recommends that SL be more deliberately integrated into Senior High School Religious Education and higher education Theology courses, especially in Catholic institutions where formation is already oriented toward academic, spiritual, moral, social, and personal development. These courses provide a natural home for SL because they invite learners to connect faith with life, doctrine with action, and moral reflection with concrete responsibility for others. When guided by the PoC, SL in these courses can move beyond outreach or compliance and become a structured formation process that cultivates empathy, solidarity, accountability, and hope.

Ultimately, the contribution of this study lies in its insistence that the true measure of SL is not only the completion of projects but the quality of relationships, reflections, and transformations it makes possible. In the fragile and anxious conditions of contemporary education, SL must become more than an academic requirement or civic activity. It must become a humane PoC, one that forms learners to see more attentively, judge more responsibly, act more compassionately, celebrate shared growth, and evaluate their commitments with humility and accountability.

Declaration on the Use of AI

In preparing this article, artificial intelligence tools were employed to support the research and writing process. Google Gemini was utilized to assist in analyzing the review of related literature, particularly in identifying thematic connections across sources. Microsoft Copilot was used to visualize the CARES framework diagram, providing a clear, structured representation. However, the final layout and design were arranged and refined personally by researchers using Canva. Grammarly was also used to refine the manuscript's grammar, clarity, and readability. These tools served as aids to enhance efficiency and precision, while the authors retained full responsibility for interpreting the findings, integrating insights, and making the study's overall scholarly contribution.

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About the Authors

Paulo Antonio L. Aton is a faculty member and Service-Learning Mentor at the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences (HUMSS), under the Senior High School program of The Academy, De La Salle University. He earned his Bachelor of Arts in Philosophy from the Divine Word Mission Seminary, where he also completed his Master of Arts in Philosophy, magna cum laude. He pursued Professional Education at the Mariano Marcos State University – College of Teacher Education and is a Licensed Professional Teacher.

Joemel B. Buencibello is a licensed professional teacher, and a permanent faculty member of De La Salle University – The Academy, Manila. He holds a bachelor's degree in Religious Education and Values Education from the University of San Carlos and a master's degree in Systematic Theology from the St. Vincent School of Theology at Adamson University. He has presented his research outputs at both local and international conferences and is actively involved in the academic community through teaching, research publication, service-learning, and curriculum development.

Elmgay M. Valeriano is a Student Affairs Specialist and educator with over a decade of experience in Catholic education and student formation. She coordinates Special Groups under SLIFE at De La Salle University Manila and is pursuing her PhD in Educational Leadership and Management at St. Paul University Manila. Her work centers on student formation, values education, service-learning, and Catholic education research. She has presented and published widely and currently chairs the CEAP-NCR Student Affairs Committee.

Gracita S. Perez is a licensed professional secondary teacher, pastoral worker, and formator at De La Salle University Manila. He holds a bachelor's degree in Education major in English from Adamson University and a master's degree in Religious Education major in Catechetics from Don Bosco Center of Studies, Parañaque City. His academic and professional work includes writing modules and facilitating retreats and recollections, with several years of experience in student formation and religious education.



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Original Article

The Church of the Poor in the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines (PCP II): Its Concrete Expression in Basic Ecclesial Communities

Maria Lourdes S. Antonio  & Fred Jr. F. Antonio 

University of Santo Tomas – Institute of Religion, Manila, Philippines

Correspondence: msantonio@ust.edu.ph

Abstract

This study examines the vision of the “Church of the Poor” as articulated in the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines (1992) and its concrete expression through Basic Ecclesial Communities (BECs) in the Philippine context. Grounded in the enduring realities of poverty and inequality, the paper situates the Church’s mission within the broader call to justice, solidarity, and integral human development. It draws theological foundations from the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), particularly its vision of a renewed, participatory, and mission-oriented Church, alongside the principle of the preferential option for the poor. Employing a theological and critical interpretive approach, the study explores the nature, structure, and mission of Basic Ecclesial Communities (BECs), grassroots communities characterized by communion, participation, and mission. It argues that Basic Ecclesial Communities (BECs) embody a participatory ecclesiology in which the poor are not merely recipients but active agents of evangelization and social transformation. Central to this dynamic is Renewed Integral Evangelization, which integrates catechesis, liturgical life, and social apostolate, fostering both personal conversion and communal renewal. The study concludes that Basic Ecclesial Communities (BECs) provide a vital and transformative model for realizing the Church of the Poor in the Philippines. By promoting lay participation, inculturation, and a socially engaged faith, Basic Ecclesial Communities (BECs) serve as concrete expressions of ecclesial renewal, despite ongoing challenges in implementation across diverse local contexts.

Keywords: Basic Ecclesial Communities (BECs), Church of the Poor, Ecclesiology, Inculturation, Lay Participation, Preferential Option for the Poor, Renewed Integral Evangelization, Second Plenary Council of the Philippines (PCP II)

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Introduction

Poverty continues to beset the Filipino nation. Preliminary results of the Family Income and Expenditure Survey conducted around 2023-2024 showed that 10.9 percent of Filipino families were registered in the poverty sector, while the individual rate was 15.5 percent. Today, about 21 percent of Filipinos, or 23 million people, experience poverty and vulnerability (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2024). While the Philippines has economically progressed, reducing the poverty rate from the past years, many Filipino families uncomfortably sit just above the poverty line.

Improvement in material conditions does not reach the poor and the marginalized, as indicated by unemployment, illiteracy, malnutrition and poor health, lack of job opportunities, housing problems, and many other forms of deprivation. Consequently, this “situation where economic wealth and political power are concentrated in the hands of a few is judged to be an affront to human dignity and solidarity” (Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines [CBCP], 1991). Inequality still exists across different aspects of human life with visible effects such as powerlessness, despair, depression, and the like. Thus, a large number of people are still living in various forms of dehumanizing conditions (Philippine Daily Inquirer, 2016). While it is important to understand the root causes of poverty, it is equally important to turn our gaze toward those most affected by this problem. This phenomenon poses tremendous challenges and calls for a greater effort not just on the part of the poor, but also on the entire community. It challenges the Filipino nation to respond collectively to promote human development in the spirit of justice and solidarity, and to uphold human dignity, thus uplifting the very lives of the “least of our brethren.”

The Church is likewise aware of this reality and realizes the need to be responsive. As *Gaudium et Spes* declares, “the joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts. For theirs is a community composed of men” (*Gaudium et Spes*, 1965, par. 1).

The plight of the poor has always been a major concern of the Church. If we trace the foundations of why it has become an imperative part of the Church’s endeavor, it is because Jesus, whose identity and mission are the core of our being as a Church, has spoken loudly and worked tirelessly for the poor. His vision of the Reign of God, his life and ministry, as found in the Scriptures, is thus the root of our mission of preference for the poor. Since the vision and praxis of Jesus must be the vision and praxis of the Church, this preference for the poor that Jesus exemplified has been adopted by the Church and expressed in PCP II as the “Church of the Poor.”

Before the opening of the Second Vatican Council in 1962, John XXIII, on his radio message, said, “As it faces the underdeveloped countries, the Church presents itself as it is and wishes to be, as the Church for all, and principally, the Church of the Poor” (Lagarejos, 1999). In the attempt for *aggiornamento* (Gomez, 2013), the attention is directed to the renewal of our identity and mission as a Church. This term, “Church of the Poor”, inspired many Church leaders and pastors, especially those in developing countries, thereby highlighting the spirit of “option for the poor” in the documents they promulgated.

This was picked up by the Second General Conference of Latin American Bishops in 1968, held in Medellin (Second General Conference of Latin American Bishops, 1968, no. 9), strongly expressing its evangelizing mission and becoming those that “effectively give preference to the poorest and most needy sectors and to those segregated for any cause whatsoever.” This endeavor was further strengthened

when they met again for their third conference in Puebla in 1979 and used the term ‘preferential option for the poor’ as an overarching theme of the call to conversion in Latin America. Another was the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conference, held in Manila in 1970. The said conference envisions the Church in Asia as the “Church of the Poor,” a guiding principle to lead the people on the way of Christ amidst the growing challenges of the time (Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences, 1997). They wanted to intensify the call for the Church of the Poor as concrete expressions of justice and peace, and to defend the rights of people, especially those on the sidelines in this contemporary time (Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences, 1992).

In the same way, the vision of becoming the Church of the Poor has been stressed in the various social teachings of the Second Vatican Council and continues to be so. It continues to echo across theological and ecclesiological discourses on being the Church, anchored in the vision and mission of Christ. Although the Church has been strong in its desire to give special attention to and reach out to the poor, as emphasized in its themes, there were no specific guidelines or provisions to implement the “Church of the Poor.”

It was at the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines (PCP II), 30 years after the call for *aggiornamento* by the Second Vatican Council, that the Philippine Church sought to integrate and concretize that vision. In its attempt to understand the current situation, the Church examined the various spheres of society. Interestingly, PCP II highlighted the economic and political context that Philippine society faces (Second Plenary Council of the Philippines, 1992). And it felt the need to put greater examination on how it can enrich its involvement to alleviate the ever-growing problem of poverty in our country. Because the Church believes that this concern has deep moral implications for its identity as a community of disciples and its mission to evangelize.

Ever since the Acts and Decrees of PCP II were approved by John Paul II in 1992 and were promulgated, they have become obligatory (Dagmang, 2016). From the formulation stage down to the implementation phase, it underwent a conscientious process of producing acts and decrees whose direction is toward renewal, which suits the “conciliar framework whose focus is Christ, whose orientation is pastoral, whose spirit is evangelization, and whose context is the Filipino.” That is the definitive and distinct mark of PCP II: identifying the four directional areas that set the overview and mood of the entire document. This conciliar framework presents to the Filipino Catholics the “structural features” (Basas, 2019) on how to become a “visible sign of renewal in electing to be a Church of the Poor” Second Plenary Council of the Philippines (1992). Being the local Church that it ought to be, the identity and direction must be in a symbiotic relationship to achieve the vision and the renewed Church it desires to be.

Following the conciliar document, PCP II introduced the expression of renewal of faith through the Basic Ecclesial Communities (BECs). In other words, BECs are the concrete expression and manifestation of the “Church of the Poor” vision. As a result, many people are more attracted to parishes, including those from marginalized sectors of society (Dagmang, 2016). Consequently, the more marginalized people come to local churches to actively engage in building Christian communities, the more we see tangible manifestations of the vision of the Church of the Poor. To put it simply, the Church of the Poor finds its localization in BECs, and through it, the teachings of the Church are translated into reality. “It is in and through the BECs that the Church becomes a Church of the Poor. The BEC, as a basic assembly or unit of the local church, would not only be a living community serving the poor, but, most especially, a community formed mainly by the poor’s presence and

participation. Enactments fostering BECs produce empowering spaces that bring the poor together, unite the poor as shapers of worlds.” We now recognize them not just as recipients but also as active agents of concretizing the Church of the Poor. In the words of PCP II: “The circle is being broken. And it is being broken in those dioceses and parishes where the very ‘unchurched’ have been challenged to form themselves into little communities of faith, and they begin to respond positively...

The Church of the Poor dares to be inclusive, a model that shows all members of the Church, especially the poor, a shared responsibility to proclaim Jesus Christ across the different spheres of human life. That means the poor become agents of evangelization, too.

With all of these in mind, this study aims to provide an exposition and critical interpretation of the vision of the Church of the Poor articulated in the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines, as a concrete response to the call to evangelization, embodying the spirit of renewal and conversion. Central to this vision is the recognition that the poor are not merely recipients of the Church’s mission but active participants in it. In this light, the study situates the Ecclesiology of Basic Ecclesial Communities (BECs) as a concrete and lived expression of this vision. BECs manifest the Church of the Poor at the grassroots level, where faith is lived, shared, and inculcated within small communities.

This paper thus posits how BECs are indeed a concrete local expression of PCP II’s Church of the Poor. It discusses the emergence of the Basic Ecclesial Communities in the Philippines and the pivotal role that it plays in the local, ecclesial grounds which fill the gap between theory and practice, of why it is often called the new way of being Church. The significance and purpose of BECs over the years of its implementation are briefly presented in order to give the readers a glimpse of BEC as a key factor in realizing the identity of the church as a community of disciples with its vision of renewal and mission of evangelization.

The nature of BECs highlights a participatory and communitarian Church, where relationships are characterized by a “subject-subject” dynamic rather than a hierarchical “subject-object” framework. As a sign of renewal, BECs embody the Church’s ongoing conversion by fostering active lay participation, co-responsibility, and a renewed sense of discipleship. Their missionary thrust further reflects the Church’s outward orientation, as members are empowered to proclaim the Gospel not only within their communities but also in wider social contexts.

Moreover, BECs draw their theological grounding from the lived experiences of the faithful, particularly the poor, recognizing contextual realities as a *locus theologicus*, a privileged place for encountering God and discerning His action in history. In this way, the paper underscores how BECs concretize the vision of PCP II by promoting a Church that is truly a “community of disciples,” where all members, especially the poor, are agents of evangelization who join hands and work together toward genuine social transformation.

Methodology

This study employs a historico-theological method as its overarching approach. It integrates critical literature review and interpretive inquiry to examine the development, context, and implications of PCP II’s understanding of Basic Ecclesial Communities.

The paper analyzes the key points of why Basic Ecclesial Communities is an avenue toward concretization of the thrust of PCP II. This is mainly presented in the Discussion section of the article. Meanwhile, Results and Findings are integrated within the Discussion, consistent with theological qualitative research conventions.

Primary sources include the official conciliar texts and documented proceedings of PCP II. These are complemented by relevant secondary literature, both online and print, from various stakeholders who participated in or have critically engaged with the Council and its outcomes. The selection criteria for such secondary resources are based on their relevance to the theory.

Discussion

The Ecclesiology and Nature of BECs

Basic Ecclesial Communities have come a long way as an integral part of the church's life in the Philippines, influenced by cultures and traditions of different regions. But what makes BECs across the Philippines cohere with the Universal Church amidst their pluralities is the faithfulness of its nature, identity, and structure to the distinctive marks of the Church as one, holy, catholic, and apostolic.

The words that make up the term “Basic Ecclesial Community” can serve as a point of reference to understand what it means: community, ecclesial, and basic. First, they are a community by virtue of having the nature of communion and participation. They live a shared experience of reality, mutually supporting and nurturing one another. They desire to improve interpersonal relationships within the community and encourage participation, especially in decision-making amongst the laity, and are not totally dependent on the clergy. The term “community” emphasizes BECs not only as ‘associations’ but as communities whose members live in close spatial and social proximity and who regularly interact with one another (Holden, 2009). Second, it is ecclesial. A living common faith is crucial, for it fosters internal growth and links it to the institutional church. The term “ecclesial” emphasizes the character of the BECs as a church-gathering in and around the person and vision of Jesus. “They are a way of being a church that is realized, located, and experienced at the grassroots and would not be ecclesial if it were not united organically with other BECs, with the parish, with the diocese, and with the universal church” (Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences, 1977). This involves the paramount significance of the Word of God and the Eucharist, which is directly given by the pastors. As Sullivan says, what makes the nature of the Church “ecclesial” are the things we hold in common: the sharing of the faith, baptism, and the sacraments, and our belonging to the community (Sullivan, 1988). Third, as a gathering of lay people, a basic community with a small number of people, enough to know and relate well with one another. BECs are at the “base,” where most members are at the grassroots, open to the grace of God in receiving the necessities of life and in maximizing their potential (Azevedo, 1985). The expression “grassroot community,” according to Power (1980), is a community that recognizes the baptized and their charisms and whose ministerial structuring is found on that basis. “Further, BECs offer a concrete way for the laity to live out their baptismal vocation and engage in the transformative mission of the Church” (Mutia, Jr. et al, 2023). Similarly, the base community is characterized as the basic cell of the Church, embodying the basics of Christianity, relating to the base of society—the poor, and empowering the base of the Church—the laity (Hebblethwaite, 1994).

In the Filipino context and to abridge this elucidation of the term, PCP II describes Basic Ecclesial Communities (BECs) as small communities of Christians, characterized as a domestic Church emerging from the grassroots, united with their pastors but ministered by lay leaders regularly. They gather around the Word of God and celebrate liturgical life, especially the Eucharist. They consciously integrate faith and daily life, guided by regular catechesis, and are concerned with the sharing of material and spiritual goods. They have a strong sense of belonging and responsibility

for one another, and they act towards justice. In the same vein, Gabriel identified four important components of the definition of BECs: rootedness in the sacrament of the Word; discernment and transformative action; active participation in the mission of Christ; and pastoral care of the parish. (Gabriel, 2008). Azevedo also notes the two-fold emphasis of the ecclesiology of BECs: First, that human beings are, by the saving power of Jesus Christ, an active party in carrying on the process of salvation and liberation in history; and second, BECs are communities of poor people who see themselves as the primary subjects in setting in motion and actuating this process of realizing salvation through the transformation of sin's consequences.

Accordingly, the ecclesiology of BECs is an interesting reality that does not, in any way, contradict the nature of being an institutional, universal Church. In fact, the flexibility of BECs justifies the Church's characteristic of being both diverse and united. Truly, BECs are a new way of being a local Church without deviating from the institutional or universal nature of the Church. For Kamonchak, on the other hand, generative principles such as the Word, Spirit, Eucharist, and apostolic ministry are what make the local church the Catholic Church” (Evans, 2002). Bausch also has a substantial thought regarding this matter. He harmonizes the pyramidal ecclesiology with the *Koinonia* ecclesiology. He argues that a community still has room for institutions. The church has levels ranked in the sense that pivotal people are pivotal in their function, serving as “conjunctors that hold the fabric of the Church together without necessarily implying trickle-down impositions or unilateral apartness from the Body of Christ” (Bausch, 2000). “It is the local churches and communities that can discern and work out the way the Gospel is best proclaimed, the Church is set up, and the values of God's Kingdom are realized in their own place and time. This local Church, the acting subject of mission, is the people of God in each milieu: the whole Christian community, laity, religious, and clergy. It is the whole diocese, the parish, the Basic Ecclesial Community, and other groups” (Kroeger, 2003). With the Church's openness to more inclusive participation, the faithful can find their place in the Church, where a genuine sense of belonging has taken shape. It becomes a space for acts of mutual giving and receiving.

In fact, BECs reverberate not just the communion nature of the Church but also its apostolic character. Schillebeeckx claims that the church must maintain its apostolic origin, and this orientation speaks to the ministry embedded in the totality of services needed to build the community of God. Those who hold the office, in solidarity with the whole community, have their own “unalienable responsibility for preserving the community in its apostolic identity and the authenticity of the Gospel. Proclamation of the Word, Liturgy, and *diakonia* are then apostolic characteristics of the ‘community of God. Further, Schillebeeckx relates the apostolic nature of the Church with the presence of the poor and said, “Ministry in the Church is not a status or state but a service, a function within the community of God and therefore a gift of the Holy Spirit. Suffering solidarity with the poor and insignificant is an essential mark of the apostolicity of the ministry, since it is an apostolic mark of the whole community of Jesus” (Schillebeeckx, 1986).

Thus, the local church characterizes the catholicity and apostolicity of the church. Such characteristics, which embody the spiritual reality of the whole people of God, confirm and resound the observance of BECs to the ecclesiological character of Vatican II's call for renewal.

BECs as Signs of Renewal

This holistic vision of Church renewal, according to PCP II, is concretized through Basic Ecclesial Communities. It declares: “Our vision of the Church as

communion, participation, and mission, about the Church as priestly, prophetic, and kingly people, and as a Church of the Poor, a Church that is renewed, is today finding expression in one ecclesial movement. This is the movement to foster Basic Ecclesial Communities” (Second Plenary Council of the Philippines, 1992). Analyzing the vision of PCP II reveals that the description of BEC aligns with its ecclesiological theme. Moreover, one can affirm that BECs substantiate the Church’s teachings and translate them into reality while animating the social values espoused by Jesus Christ in our time. As such, faith becomes more relevant in one’s life, especially for the poor. At the marrow of BECs is the dialogue of faith and life. Living the faith and critical reflection of societal issues, as constitutive elements, become instrumental to fully achieve the goal of the Church’s renewal through BECs. In this dialogue, BEC formation entails a multidisciplinary approach that considers other fields of social sciences as partners in understanding the ecclesiology of the Church; for they employ tools to comprehend the humanity of the Church, provided that these tools are open to the truth of God (Tagle, 2000, January 3–12).

Thoroughly, “BECs take people where they are, understand their needs, and identify their resources. All this is done not to satisfy purely sociological curiosity but to discover the above ‘within’ the below” (Gabriel, 2008). As some would say, BEC becomes a way of “doing theology” in the context of the poor's situation. FABC notes: “From our experience of dialogue emerged the conviction that dialogue was the key we sought not dialogue in the superficial sense in which it is often understood, but as witnessing to Christ in word and deed, by reaching out to people in the concrete reality of their daily lives, in their particular cultural context, their own religious traditions, their socio-economic conditions” (Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences, 1999, April). People's responses shape BECs, especially how they approach life. This affirms the dialogue of faith and life. In fact, community lay leaders, for example, testify that the closest way for them to experience and express their faith was through church activities, such as the BEC (Tutor & Gambong, 2023).

Accordingly, BECs emerged as a palpable current for the poor amid their seemingly hopeless or impoverished situation. It is not merely a socio-political movement; it is ecclesial and an expression of becoming the Church of the Poor. In fact, BEC is a “new” way of being Church (Azevedo, 1985), as contemporary missiologists describe it. This ties well to what FABC recognized as a sign of renewal in doing mission in Asia, noting that in some countries the multiplication of grassroots ecclesial communities enliven genuine Christian fellowship amidst diversity in charism and ministry. And these are the “new missionary activities” (Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences, 1999).

The newness that BECs bring to the Church’s ecclesiology and the mission does not abandon the old ways or call for their total abolition (Gabriel, 2008). For Tagle, BEC as a “new way” of being Church possesses three elements: first, it is the realization of Vatican II’s vision of a Church that listens to the Word of God. It teaches the Church to listen to the Word of God found in scripture, tradition, sacraments, creation, human history, cultures, and the poor; second, BEC calls for a church of communion-in-mission, which requires participation and responsibility. This gives special emphasis on the Sacrament of Baptism, which calls for the sharing of charisms by every baptized Christian, especially the laity; and third, it calls for a renewal of the ordained ministry. The integral role of the clergy in forming BECs needs to be reaffirmed so that they rediscover their role in the Church they minister to (Tagle, 2000). In so doing, BECs become an avenue for the Church to do its mission.

The Missionary Thrust of BECs

As a community of disciples, the church's mission has always been linked to evangelization. *Redemptoris Missio* encapsulates this thrust, which firmly characterizes BECs as a mirror of fraternal communion (*Koinonia*), which means to be of one heart and soul (Acts 4:32). Further, the document speaks, “Even before activity, mission means witness and a way of life that shines out to others” (*Redemptoris Missio*, 1990). As Jamison et al. put it, “the importance of BECs lies in their ability to create a sense of belonging and community among their members, as well as foster a deeper understanding of the church's evangelization mission.” (Jamison et al, 2024). It is the central task of the Church to proclaim the Gospel message to all people and unite all things in Christ. This mission of proclaiming Christ is an urgent task that demands to be shared in every aspect of human life. This is evangelization. But evangelization can only be realized when placed in the context of the challenges the world faces today—tremendous shifts and problematic issues across different areas of human activity. As Ilo appraises, the Gospel is more than just a heaven, light, or news. It is a powerful force that connects people and shapes society. It leads the poor to hope, healing, and a dignified life. It empowers them, helps them build their identities, and enables them to pursue a better life (Ilo, 2014).

This suggests that the Church finds appropriateness of her missionary endeavor in the formation of BECs, as it promotes a transformative mission through evangelization. Following the previously mentioned idea that BECs emerged in the grassroots, poverty centers people to commitment and shared responsibility. Their material deprivation, to a certain extent, coals spiritual hunger. And it is in BEC where they find the means, if not the solution, to address their concerns. The communities are formed and organized to respond to issues and problems affecting the exercise of faith and the demands of the Gospel. There is a conviction that faith is in communion with life, that is, the interplay between them makes the communities both evangelized and evangelizing (Gabriel, 2008). A Basic Ecclesial Community exists to proclaim the Gospel, especially to the poor, and to become a local base in doing the Church's mission. FABC, from an Asian region's perspective, also echoes the primacy of evangelization: “Our proclamation of Jesus must also be urgently directed towards the workers, the poor and needy, and the oppressed. However, here, it is not so much the words as the actions that count most. It is our preferential love and service for workers, the poor and needy, and all the oppressed, our standing with them, listening to them, and our efforts to help them speak out for themselves as they strive for development and for a just society, which will tell them best about the presence of Jesus in their midst” (Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences, 1999, April).

In the Philippine context, PCP II likewise remains steadfast in maintaining the missionary thrust of the Church, ardently thriving in our country. CBCP (1984) defines evangelization as “the proclamation, above all, of salvation from sin; the liberation from everything oppressive to man; the development of man in all his dimensions, personal and communitarian; and ultimately, the renewal of society in all its strata through the interplay of the Gospel Truths and man's concrete total life.” The abovementioned descriptions of evangelization prove three points: it must be Christ-centered; the recipients must be evangelized and be evangelizers themselves; and it must bear fruits of conversion and social transformation. Any form of evangelization must be centered on the person of Jesus Christ, without which all elements lose meaning. The life and teachings of Jesus Christ are the central piece of the evangelization process. But such a proclamation entails conversion. A credible preaching only happens when there is personal conversion. In becoming evangelized by the message, can the evangelized become an evangelizer? Such a dynamic process

helps a Christian become an agent of social transformation and a truly authentic witness of the Gospel.

On a communal level, the Gospel must also remain as the measure to which all activities flow, “the source of inspiration and conversion of BECs” (Gabriel, 2008). The goal of evangelization, which is Christ-centered, is to develop a spirituality that begins with conversion (Dulles, 1981). Dulles defines conversion as “a radical shift in a person's apprehensions and values, accompanied by a similar radical change in oneself, in one's relations with other persons, and in one's relations to God” (Kroeger, 2003). Accordingly, Gabriel explained that societal conversion is not limited to its religious dimension. It ought to be a paradigm shift in which grassroots people experience their faith in Jesus as they cope with and act on social issues affecting their lives, toward having a more dignified quality of life, one that reflects self-development and freedom from an oppressive level of human living (Gabriel, 2008).

The inseparable bond of evangelization and conversion is linked with social transformation. As Azevedo comments, “faith is a dynamic factor of personal conversion and societal transformation” (Azevedo, 1985). Conversion requires renouncing a sinful attitude, whether personal or communal. Because sinfulness is the root cause of problems at all levels of human life, it sets poverty and oppression in motion (*Populorum Progressio*, 1967). Naming and confronting sinful social structures is a task embedded in evangelization, because salvation and temporal liberation are linked. To achieve social transformation, we need to address sinfulness, the root cause of all sectoral problems in the community. The Gospel demands the need for “the transformation of a society whose organization is in itself unjust in many aspects and very much the source of their own poverty” (Azevedo, 1985). A well-thought-out remark of Maggay follows the same idea. She claims that there are human principalities that need to be confronted, because these life systems and structures cause the downfall of well-meaning efforts and devastate individuals who dare to transform them. Maggay went on and said:

“Some human institutions tend to develop internal contradictions and end up becoming the very opposite of what they ought to be. The reality of ‘principalities and powers,’ of complex social forces that perpetuate oppression and inequality, compels us also to deal with the structural causes of poverty. Subjective change in inner attitudes towards social status, wealth creation, and wealth sharing needs to be accompanied by objective changes in economic and social relations” (Maggay, 2008).

This will later imply the promotion of renewed relationships and social structures. Hence, only in forming a social conscience directed to the “struggle to build the Kingdom of God as a journey to truth and justice, to love and peace, a journey full of life” (Second Plenary Council of the Philippines, 1992) can social transformation be made possible.

This is what PCP II means by Renewed Integral Evangelization. PCP II believes that renewal can only transpire when the missionary thrust of evangelization is also renewed. There is a need to evangelize the immediate environment, the parish, and the wider communities (Ryłko, 2011) with new fervors, methods, and expressions. And for PCP II, this is done through the interrelationship of “renewed catechesis,” “renewed worship,” and “renewed apostolate,” which is consequently expressed in what we call Basic Ecclesial Communities:

- a. BECs pave the way for renewed catechesis. People from the grassroots develop a deeper love for Jesus Christ (inspired by the proclamation of the Word, aided by pastors) because instruction in the faith, through Bible study or the sharing of the Word, enables them to read, listen to, and understand the teachings of the Church. “It also enables the unevangelized and unchurched members of the laity to be actively involved in their own process of integrating faith into day-to-day living. They become ‘subjects’ and not just ‘objects’ of the Church’s missionary activity, and this happens in their own backyard, so to say” (Gabriel, 2008). As such, one becomes a reliable preacher of the Word not just in words but also in deeds. The laity, then, can weave the life and teachings of Jesus Christ into their respective socio-cultural, economic, and political setting, thus building a community where the values of the Gospel can permeate across spheres of human life, neither disintegrating pre-established set of beliefs in the community nor compromising the content of the Gospel message. It is the laity who can bring the Gospel to their concrete realities and announce liberation and denounce evil. This aspect aligns well with the Church’s prophetic mission.
- b. BECs promote renewed worship. Through the celebration of the sacraments (with the presence of the pastors) and other liturgical rites, the people grow into a deeper appreciation of the Sacrifice of Jesus on the cross, and they, too, become living and holy sacrifices pleasing to God. Through the gathering of the people before the Lord in the Eucharist, the glorification of God and sanctification of man are made real and visible. They also see the significance of the communitarian dimension of Christian life in their gathering at the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist. This is the priestly mission of the Church.
- c. BECs serve as a means of social apostolate. Sustainable programs that best meet the needs of the people are proposed and implemented to help alleviate poverty. Moreover, necessary assistance in line with their fight for justice and aid for other temporal concerns are provided in the community through the help of other sectors of society. “The present Church’s mission transcends spirituality and guidance to encompass economic justice. Based on principles such as love, compassion, and justice, the Church should be able to fight against injustice and call for a just distribution of resources” (Ndzi, 2025). Although it is worth noting that programs must not be restricted to economic concerns, they should instead stimulate activities geared toward temporal and spiritual formation. The temporal affairs, then, become a leaven for social transformation to proclaim the Kingdom of God. In this light, the Church’s kingly mission is promoted.

These three components of Renewed Integral Evangelization should be present and dynamically exercised for BECs to claim their success. As Gabriel reflects, “When people lack the basics of faith and know not the fundamental truths that they should live by, it is harder to tackle the problem of moral hunger and liberation. The truths about man, the Church, and our Lord Jesus Christ are the indestructible pillars that would support deeper beliefs and commitments” (Gabriel, 2008).

The reality of this missionary endeavor demands collective responsibility from both the institutional Church and the community of disciples. It is an incumbent task commanded by Jesus. Therefore, the local Church must be able to support the formation of BECs so that they continue to bring newness to the vitality of the Church

as a whole. FABC asserts that “the acting subject of mission is the local church living and acting in communion with the universal Church.

Contextual Realities as *Locus Theologicus*

The primary consideration of making BEC happen in any parish or community is the culture of the people. The missionary activity, as everyone knows it, can only be effective when it permeates the culture without altering the content of the Gospel message. This is where contextual theology comes in. As the Church is the Sacrament of Christ, BEC must consider the most effective way to share the Truth of Christ with the community. As Dagmang notes, the Gospel will remain abstract if it is taken out of context, and culture will remain “native” without Christian principles. They must mutually support each other in such a way that the interaction clarifies patterns of living and characterizes the identity of the community rooted in the very life and teachings of Jesus Christ (Dagmang, 2016).

However, this is not just a simple matter of feeding the people with the Word of God since culture is a boundless and multi-faceted factor; not that we say culture is a hindrance for the growth of Christian life in a locality but more of understanding that any given community has pre-established beliefs, rituals, organization, practices, and spaces which in more than ways than one, affect the integration of the Gospel into the lives of the people. As a matter of fact, contextual realities, according to FABC, are resources of theology, for they contain cultural resources which are “constellations of collective symbolic values, worldviews that touch the totality of life, human relationships, community, people's relation to nature, and people's beliefs, customs, etc. In a sense, culture is a people's way of being human and inter-human. It embodies the values of the human person and the community, esteemed virtues such as hospitality, compassion, faithfulness, a sense of the sacred, and society's institutions. It includes people's stories, myths, folk wisdom, etc. These are gifts of God and fruits of the Spirit. They too contain ‘germinative seeds of the Word’ sown by the Spirit” (The Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences, 2000).

Accordingly, Boff has the same line of thought and said that “human life is always cultural—just by being human; and human beings are no longer beings of nature because they become subjects “who have rights and duties, who originate practices that transform or conserve nature and society, and who originate symbols, significations, and values” (Boff, 1992). Based on this point, we see that culture should be given importance for effective evangelization. Boff considers this interplay of culture and Gospel as he presents four characteristics of evangelization: “to evangelize means to bear testimony to this vision of respect and acceptance of all cultures on account of God and the divine work within cultures; religion of the culture being evangelized must be accepted theologically; evangelization must produce, where it encounters cultures, that which its name proclaims: the good news; and to evangelize is to celebrate” (The Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences, 1989).

On a document, FABC avers the importance of dialogue of life since the worldview of the poor includes the humanizing elements of religio-cultural heritage, such as “simplicity of life, genuine openness and generous sharing, community consciousness and familial loyalty, perseverance and constancy in struggle, all of which resonate with the Gospel values. This reality affirms that the Gospel of the Kingdom is reign-shaped and lived in the reality of their lives and the Spirit of Jesus, the Liberator, is alive and in the world among them.” Above all, an important note should be kept in mind: just as we evangelize the Gospel in the language and culture of people, the Truth of Christ must never be compromised or altered in any way. The Gospel takes precedence in the evangelization of culture and inculturation of faith.

The grassroots approach allows us to look into the concrete realities of people, rather than merely reducing our perspective to academic theologizing. A sound social analysis and theological reflection are required. Moreover, the Second Vatican Council highlights the importance of social analysis for understanding the Church's relationship with the modern world (*Gaudium et Spes*, 1965, nos. 63–90) to foster an objective yet faith-laden discussion of the matter. This pastoral way of being a local church considers culture, alongside various socio-political geographies, as necessary tools for effectively communicating the Gospel. Culture shapes the formation of BECs and, to a certain extent, directs its programs and activities. Moreover, it is a challenge to affect people's culture with the Gospel that speaks of the Truth of Jesus Christ.

Ministerial Roles in BECs

The mutually life-giving role of the clergy and the laity in BEC culture is crucial. In the homily of Archbishop Legaspi delivered during the opening of PCP II in 1991, he emphasized that “the dynamism of the church calls for the complementary presence and support of the institutional and charismatic aspects of tradition and prophecy. There is no room for the promotion of a grassroots church running parallel and independently of the institutional Church, for it is through her that we remain in continuity with the apostolic tradition and with the universal dimension of the Church” (Second Plenary Council of the Philippines, PCP II, LXXVII-LXXVIII, 1992). As such, the symbiotic relationships of ministries are to be promoted.

On the one hand, it is to be affirmed that the Church remains an institution that needs a hierarchical structure and definitive magisterial teachings to govern and shepherd the People of God. Moreover, it is the clergy who fulfill such a task. The clergy acts on behalf of Christ, the head, in the community and before the community, with a special character configured to Christ (*Presbyterorum Ordinis*, no. 3, 1965). They act as servant-leaders in the community to which they are ordained. As such, they are to build and form a genuine Christian community rooted in the Word of God and celebrating the Eucharist to which all other activities of the community are directed (Second Plenary Council of the Philippines, nos. 519-524, 1992). It is the task of the clergy to make this Christian community a prophetic and serving community, to enliven the Good News in all aspects of human life, which requires critiquing attitudes and beliefs that oppose Gospel values. The pastor, who is a member of the clergy, leads the community to reach out with compassion to the marginalized and to exhibit preferential love for the poor. He is likewise commissioned to serve the community without favoring any party or ideology. His main role as a minister is to lead the people in performing acts of charity that foster the spiritual growth of each member of the community (Second Plenary Council of the Philippines, nos. 525-530, 1992).

On the other hand, the secular world, which has become the arena in which BECs are established, organized, and formed, cannot deny the need for the laity's active involvement. It is through lay participation in BECs that the Church of the Poor—which PCP II envisions—becomes a more tangible representation of Church renewal. And proper to their belonging in the community of disciples, the world becomes the place and the means for the lay faithful to fulfill their Christian vocation (*Christifideles Laici*, no. 15, 1988). Vatican II recognizes the essential role that the laity plays in the life of the Church as they are called to be a community of families, visible signs of Christian presence, instruments of service and evangelization, and agents of social transformation. They are to be provided with key leadership roles to empower them. Sullivan comments that, in realizing the true meaning of ecclesiology

of communion, the laity must not only be entrusted with ecclesial roles but also be considered as “full partners and not as hired help” (Sullivan, 1997).

Both ministerial roles, therefore, ought to realize that they are sent together as an integral part of the community of disciples, each fulfilling their vocation, grounded in their baptismal dignity.

Empowerment of the Poor

It is also essential to note that BECs, given their historical conditions, promote empowerment of grassroots participants. “The vision of BECs, as the Church of the Poor, emphasizes the call to empower the poor and enable them to actively participate in the liberating mission of the Church” (Picardal, 2008). With the supposition that BECs are mostly formed out of the wits of the lay faithful from the grassroots and supported by the institutional Church, empowerment of the poor becomes an essential dimension to solidifying active lay participation.

BECs become places for the faithful, especially those who are economically deprived, to fulfill their vocation, nourish their spirituality, and be assisted in their austere living conditions. We do not discount the fact that the poor have something to share in the community and are not simply recipients of the Church's aid. Simon suggests that, as a reflective activity, empowerment is initiated and sustained by the agents themselves, who seek self-determination while being aided by others who provide the climate, resources, and procedures to achieve such. It is respecting the potential of the agents—what they have and what they can produce from it (Simon, 1990). Recognizing that each member of the community has something to share, even the poor, invites them to participate actively and be empowered. The “activation of God-given charisms among the poor,” as PCP II puts it, elects them to be the modern workers of renewal. “The world of the poor,” according to Romero, “teaches us that liberation will arrive only when the poor are not simply on the receiving end of handouts from governments or from the church, but when they themselves are the masters of, and protagonists in, their own struggle and liberation, thereby unmasking the root of false paternalism, including ecclesiastical paternalism” (Romero, 1985).

This boils down to subsidiarity, which largely characterizes empowerment. There can be no empowerment if the poor are not given the chance to participate in the Church. Stephen Pope insists that empowerment must be pursued so that all parts can participate properly in the life of the whole community—a moral commitment to the priority of their needs within an ordering of social priorities (Pope, 1993). It means moral inclusiveness of all people in all dimensions of local communities. It is not merely a form of adaptation to the environment but rather an increase in the capacity of individuals and communities to “ameliorate social problems” (Gutierrez, 1990), especially in the fight against complex forces that bind the majority of people to poverty.

Conclusion

PCP II marks a decisive moment in the Catholic Church's evolution towards authentic renewal in the Philippines. Drawing inspiration from the spirit of Vatican II's *aggiornamento*, it redefines the Church as a dynamic, contextualized, and participatory community of disciples. This initiative has equipped Filipino Catholics with a revitalized ecclesial identity that is firmly grounded in the Gospel and highly responsive to the nation's historical, cultural, and social contexts. The vision of the Church of the Poor boldly calls for spiritual renewal and tangible transformation within society. The Church of the Poor serves as a powerful ecclesiological model,

urging the faithful to embrace the true essence of Christian discipleship as exemplified by Jesus—solidarity with the poor, compassion for the suffering, and an unwavering commitment to justice. While the Church's complete realization of this vision is an ongoing journey, it continues to shape pastoral priorities and compel communities to act as effective agents of social change. Central to this movement are the Basic Ecclesial Communities (BECs), which stand as living laboratories for this ecclesiology. They vividly showcase the Church's mission of communion-in-mission, where lay participation, shared leadership, and mutual care invigorate both faith and community life. By nurturing self-reliant and critically aware communities, BECs embody the spirit of PCP II and actively implement the Church's preferential option for the poor. Seen as a natural habitat where a conscious and collective effort is actualized among grassroots communities (the unevangelized, oppressed, poor, and marginalized) and other sectors of society, BECs become a breeding ground for authentic human development to come into fruition.

Declaration on the Use of AI

The researchers utilized the institution's Turnitin account to assess the similarity index and detect any AI-generated content. This was done to ensure that the manuscript is free from plagiarism and AI-generated text. In addition, the authors used the institution's Grammarly account to ensure accuracy in spelling, grammar, and overall writing quality.

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About the Authors

Maria Lourdes S. Antonio is an assistant professor at the University of Santo Tomas Institute of Religion. She holds a bachelor's degree in Religious Education from the University of Santo Tomas-College of Education and a Master's degree in Theology from the CICM Maryhill School of Theology. She is currently pursuing her doctorate at the UST Graduate School. She teaches specialization courses, including Ecclesiology, Articles of Faith, Retreat and Recollection, and Instructional Materials in Religious Education. Her research interests focus on ecclesiology, catholic social teachings, spirituality, and religious education and pedagogy.

Fred F. Antonio, Jr. is a college instructor at the University of Santo Tomas Institute of Religion, where he teaches Theology courses. He earned both his Bachelor's degree in Philosophy and his Master's degree in Religious Studies from Saint Louis University in Baguio. He is pursuing his doctorate at the UST Graduate School. Driven by a deep interest in how faith intersects with local culture, his academic research primarily focuses on inculturation, mariology, popular piety, and religiosity.



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Original Article

The Pedagogy of Encounter as Via Pulchritudinis: Humanizing 21st-Century Teaching-Learning through Education 5.0 and the Global Compact on Education

Ericka Mae B. Cunanan^{1,2}, Allan A. Basas², Joseph Renus F. Galang²

¹The Graduate School, University of Santo Tomas, Manila, Philippines

² Institute of Religion, University of Santo Tomas, Manila, Philippines

Correspondence: ebcunanan@ust.edu.ph

Abstract

Pope Francis champions accessible education as an act of hope, reminding educators that the distinctive feature of Catholic education is true humanization. Yet, the rise of Education 4.0, driven by digital learning, often lacks a coherent ethical, human-centered framework. This study investigates the ethical challenges posed by Education 4.0's reliance on AI, data analytics, and immersive technologies, aiming to evaluate these through Education 5.0 and Pope Francis' Global Compact on Education (GCE) to propose a theological-pedagogical framework that re-centers Catholic education on humanization. Employing qualitative textual analysis informed by the synodal methodology of listening, discernment, and participation, it explores three questions: (1) What are the pedagogical features of Education 4.0 and 5.0? (2) What opportunities ("lights") and challenges ("shadows") emerge when Education 4.0 is viewed through the GCE lens? (3) How can Education 5.0 and the GCE be synthesized into a theological-pedagogical framework for humanization? Findings show Education 4.0 enables AI-enhanced instruction, personalized learning, hybrid modalities, immersive tools, and collaboration, but risks dehumanization, bias, and digital divides. Integrating Education 5.0's human-centered innovation with the GCE, the study proposes the Pedagogy of Encounter as Via Pulchritudinis (Path of Beauty), a framework affirming beauty as a path to God and a means of proclaiming the Gospel. This offers Catholic education a principled, hopeful way to humanize teaching and learning in the 21st century.

Keywords: Catholic Education, Education 5.0, Global Compact on Education, Humanization, Pedagogy of Encounter, Via Pulchritudinis

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Introduction

As expressed in *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* (ECE), Catholic universities are vital to advancing Christian culture and human progress (ECE, 10). The Church has long emphasized education's role in building society. Pope Paul VI's *Gravissimum Educationis* urges gratitude to priests, religious, and laypeople for their dedication to pedagogy (GE, 12). Pope Benedict XVI affirms that "the true nature of education is to fully and authentically form the person by promoting a culture of listening, dialogue, and responsibility" (Dicastery for Culture and Education, n.d.). Pope Francis highlights accessible education as an act of hope, stressing humanization and encounter (Vatican News, 2024; Francis, 2013; Congregation for Catholic Education, 2022). In the same spirit, Pope Leo XIV calls universities the "pathway of the mind towards God" (Vatican News, 2025). Yet Education 4.0's rapid expansion raises pressing ethical questions.

Despite the rapid proliferation of technology-driven educational frameworks, particularly Education 4.0, there remains a lack of critical integration between these developments and a coherent anthropological and ethical vision of education. While Education 4.0 emphasizes innovation, efficiency, and data-driven learning, it often risks reducing education to functional and technological outcomes, thereby neglecting the holistic formation of the human person. In response, emerging discourse on Education 5.0 calls for a shift toward human-centered, value-oriented education. However, the conceptual relationship between Education 4.0 and 5.0 remains underdeveloped, particularly when examined through the lens of Catholic educational thought and the Global Compact on Education (GCE). This study therefore seeks to: critically examine the pedagogical features of Education 4.0 and Education 5.0; evaluate the opportunities ("lights") and limitations ("shadows") using the Seven Commitments of the GCE; and propose a synthesized framework, the Pedagogy of Encounter as *Via Pulchritudinis* that reorients education toward human dignity and integral formation.

In this study, Education 4.0 is examined as a technologically driven paradigm characterized by AI integration, personalization, and datafication, while Education 5.0 is analyzed as human-centered response that emphasizes ethical responsibility, relationality, and the common good. To operationalize the Pedagogy of Encounter as *Via Pulchritudinis*, the Seven Commitments of the GCE serve as practical pillars for rehumanizing teaching and learning, particularly within digital contexts. This study addresses a gap in current literature by showing how Education 5.0, when aligned with these commitments, can overcome the shadows of Education 4.0, namely dehumanization, depersonalization, algorithmic bias, and digital divides.

The Seven Commitments of GCE

These seven commitments exemplify the core mission of the broad educational alliance as they recalibrate education in a holistic and humanized way, extending beyond theoretical classroom knowledge to resolving major contemporary challenges. They are as follows: Primarily, a committed vigor to place the person at the center of every educational program, both formal and informal, expresses the primacy of the human person and their inherent and infinite dignity (Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, 2024). Next, to fully listen to the voices of children and young people requires genuine engagement, not merely consultation. By actively participating, young people become partners in shaping the future of education, rather than remaining passive recipients of knowledge (Global Compact on Education, n.d.). Also, a hearty encouragement of the full participation of girls and young women in education affirms gender equity as essential to meaningful

participation and strong leadership within educational contexts (Global Compact on Education, n.d.). In strongly establishing the family as the first and essential place of education recognizes that they are the primary educators of their children's values, habits, and worldviews (Global Compact on Education, n.d.). Echoing Pope Francis, Cardinal Giuseppe Versaldi, former Prefect of the Congregation for Catholic Education, emphasizes the family as the first educational community. He affirms that since love is the basis of education, all stakeholders, families, schools, and communities, should work together, animated by this shared and profound motivation (Vatican News, 2020). Moreover, educating ourselves toward openness to the most vulnerable and marginalized calls for a culture of inclusion instead of exclusion (Global Compact on Education, n.d.). In articulating a renewed vision for education toward 2030, UNESCO affirms that inclusion and equity in and through education are the cornerstones of a transformative educational agenda. Accordingly, it commits to addressing all forms of exclusion and insists that no educational goal can be considered achieved unless it is achieved by all learners (UNESCO, 2016). Significantly, finding new ways of understanding the economy, politics, growth, and progress calls for a fundamental reimagining of economic and political systems as structures meant to serve human flourishing and the common good (Global Compact on Education, n.d.). Ultimately, safeguarding and cultivating our common home encourages environmental stewardship, sustainable lifestyles, and reverence for creation. (Global Compact on Education, n.d.).

Methodology

This research employs a synodal hermeneutical framework grounded in listening, discernment, and participation, as articulated in the *Vademecum* for the Synod on Synodality (Synod of Bishops, 2021). Rather than functioning as an empirical methodology involving human subjects, the synodal approach serves here as an interpretive paradigm for textual analysis. The study examines a purposively selected corpus consisting of three categories: (1) Ecclesial documents, such as *Gravissimum Educationis* (GE), *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* (ECE), and the *Vademecum* of the Global Compact on Education (GCE), which provide theological and anthropological foundations; (2) International educational reports, including UNESCO's Education 2030 Framework for Action and Global Education Monitoring Report 2023, alongside World Economic Forum publications on Education 4.0; and (3) Scholarly literature on Education 4.0, Education 5.0, digital pedagogy, and critiques of data-driven learning. Texts were selected based on their relevance to Education 4.0, Education 5.0, GCE, and human-centered education, institutional or scholarly authority; and contribution to discussions on technology, ethics, and human formation. Within this framework, listening signifies attentiveness to diverse textual contexts, particularly the "lights and shadows" of Education 4.0; discernment entails theological and critical evaluation, especially in relation to Education 5.0 and the Global Compact on Education; and participation denotes the constructive synthesis of insights into a pedagogical proposal, namely the Pedagogy of Encounter as *Via Pulchritudinis* (Path of Beauty). In this way, the synodal methodology functions as a theologically grounded lens for textual interpretation, consistent with the Catholic tradition of reading contemporary realities as the "signs of the times."

Findings

As the Synod Fathers affirm, the term "lights and shadows" signifies both challenges and opportunities for conversion (Turkson, 2009). By carefully "listening" to these realities within Church life, immediate missionary fruits emerge (General

Secretariat of the Synod, 2023). In this perspective, the lights (opportunities) of Education 4.0 include advancing learning through AI and data analytics, implementing blended and hybrid models that integrate digital and face-to-face instruction, harnessing immersive tools such as VR/AR and gamification to enhance engagement, and fostering creativity and innovation through project-based and collaborative learning. Conversely, the shadows (challenges) of Education 4.0 involve the risk of dehumanization, where over-reliance on technology diminishes attention to the learner's inner life; depersonalization, as efficiency and automation overshadow holistic formation; algorithmic bias, whereby data-driven personalization reinforces stereotypes and inequities; and digital divides, evident in unequal access to devices and connectivity that exacerbate inequality. These "lights and shadows" through the lens of the Seven Commitments of GCE, therefore demand a thoughtful response that focus education on human dignity and authentic flourishing.

Viewed through the lens of "discernment", the integration of Education 5.0 and Pope Francis' Global Compact on Education (GCE) emerges as a comprehensive response, addressing the opportunities and challenges of Education 4.0 and guiding 21st-century teaching and learning toward a more humanizing path. First, in placing the human person at the center, Education 5.0 and the GCE embrace a holistic vision of learning: to know, to do, to live together, and to be, promote human-technology interaction, and advocate for human-centered digital education. Second, in listening to young people, they align with a dialogical orientation, emphasize learners' agency, voice, and co-agency, and highlight youth participation as essential for fostering democratic values and ethical engagement. Third, in advancing women, Education 5.0 and the GCE critique gendered and racial biases in AI systems, support inclusive design, encourage female participation in STEM and digital learning, and promote women's safe and meaningful engagement with technology. Fourth, in empowering families, they provide strategies for parental involvement (Epstein, 2018), support family access to digital resources, and emphasize mindful integration of technology in family interactions. Fifth, in welcoming the vulnerable and marginalized, Education 5.0 and the GCE analyze racial and social biases embedded in algorithms, promote digital literacy to counter echo chambers, and advance digital inclusion across diverse populations. Sixth, in finding new ways of understanding our world, they critique extreme individualism in neoliberal societies, advocate for equitable approaches to structuring work and professional life, and promote interdisciplinary, socially connected learning that fosters democratic participation. Seventh and finally, in safeguarding our common home, Education 5.0 and the GCE integrate digital literacy with sustainability, encourage ethical stewardship of resources, and highlight systems thinking that underscores the interconnection between humans and the environment.

Integrating all these in *Evangelii Gaudium*, it points that every form of catechesis would do well to attend to the way of beauty (*Via Pulchritudinis*). This "participation" is a renewed esteem for beauty as a means of touching the human heart and enabling the truth and goodness of the Risen Christ to radiate within it. So, a formation in the *Via Pulchritudinis* ought to be part of our effort to pass on the faith. (EG, 167). With the lights and shadows revealed in Education 4.0, researchers and educators are called to challenge the digital era by expressing truth, goodness, and beauty, which shine forth in fidelity to the Gospel message through the Pedagogy of Encounter as *Via Pulchritudinis*.

Discussion

Listening: The “Lights” of Education 4.0 through the Seven Commitments of GCE

Education 4.0 casts its light on making the human person the center, as seen in individualized learning paths enabled by technology (Hussin, 2018). This approach is necessary to cultivate the unique skills and potential of each student for the Fourth Industrial Revolution (Fisk, 2017). The concept that Education 4.0 is fundamentally about personalized and student-centric learning. It represents a move away from the “one-size-fits-all” industrial model of schooling. Pope Francis accentuates that education should be of service to the uniqueness and dignity of the human person (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1997).

Education 4.0 illuminates new ways of listening to the voices of children and young people as it fosters collaboration and project-based learning (PBL) as learners deal with solving complex problems, cultivating a sense of teamwork and group dynamics (World Economic Forum, 2026). Pope Francis calls for an alliance that includes young people as active protagonists, not passive recipients. The *Vademecum* explains that this commitment involves creating spaces where the dreams, ideas, and concerns of the youth are heard and taken seriously in the educational planning process (Congregation for Catholic Education, 2022).

Education 4.0 shines a light on advancing the role of women through utilization of digital platforms, online courses, and mobile learning (UNESCO, 2023). Educational Technology is seen as a vital solution for reaching girls in crisis-affected regions to ensure continuity of learning when traditional schooling is not an option (Malala Fund, 2020). Evidence of true involvement actively works to eliminate all forms of discriminatory acts and guarantees that girls and women have equal access to quality education, a primary path to their participatory democracy in society (Congregation for Catholic Education, 2022).

Education 4.0 brings light to empowering the family as the primary educator with the emergence of Learning Management Systems (LMS) and technologies that provide parents with real-time access to monitor children's progress, assignments, and learning materials (Hornby & Blackwell, 2018). Also, the commitment to “see in the family the first and indispensable educator” reflects a long-standing principle of Catholic social teaching, upholding that parents are the first and foremost educators of their children and that school institutions are partners who assist them in this role (Congregation for Catholic Education, 2022).

Education 4.0's light is focused on welcoming the most vulnerable and marginalized. It reframes the problem of marginalized communities, such as refugees, the poor, and those with disabilities, as an opportunity for solidarity (Congregation for Catholic Education, 2020). Refugees and displaced persons utilize language apps and skills-based courses that are delivered via smartphones, which are often one of the few possessions refugees retain. Assistive Technologies, such as screen readers and voice-to-text software, aid individuals with disabilities as they access digital learning materials (UNESCO, 2023). Lastly, the Open Educational Resources (OER) for those in impoverished or remote communities provide free digitalized textbooks and course materials that significantly reduce educational costs (International Federation of Catholic Universities, 2021).

Education 4.0 provides the light needed for finding new ways of understanding the economy and politics, explicitly designed to move beyond rote memorization to cultivate advanced cognitive skills. The World Economic Forum critically evaluates and challenges current norms. Their reports state that students should deconstruct complex problems, question assumptions, and understand how

different systems interact (World Economic Forum, 2026). Pope Francis highlights that this involves creating economic and political systems that prioritize human dignity and the well-being of the planet over profit and power (Congregation for Catholic Education, 2020).

Education 4.0's light emphasizes caring for the Earth, relating to everyone's involvement in the Global Connectivity and Citizenship in Education, which connect learners globally, breaking down classroom walls (UNESCO, 2018). This fosters Global Citizenship Education (GCED), a framework promoted by organizations like UNESCO, which aims to empower learners to assume active roles in addressing and resolving global challenges. The Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) leads diverse learners to collaborate in creating concrete solutions to fight climate change (O'Dowd, 2021). This model aligns with GCE's commitment to care for our common home, a principle which *Laudato Si'* calls "ecological conversion." In this sense, environmental education must broaden its focus to foster a sense of global solidarity and shared responsibility (Francis, 2015).

Listening: The "Shadows" of Education 4.0 through the Seven Commitments of GCE

Lurking in the shadows of Education 4.0's promise to make the human person the center is the risk, as Biesta argues, of the "learnification" (Biesta, 2015) of education, which reduces education to a process of acquiring measurable learning outcomes. Han explores how neoliberalism has evolved from disciplining the body to programming the psyche. Emphasizing the data-driven "achievement-subject" (Han, 2017) constantly self-optimizes based on external metrics, leading to psychic burnout and the erosion of a contemplative inner self, and losing interiority through datafication. In relation to this, Zuboff provides the foundational theory for understanding the large-scale "datafication" (Zuboff, 2019) of human experience, showing how technology companies perceive human life as behavioral data for prediction and control serves as the mechanism behind reducing students to mere metrics.

The shadows cast by Education 4.0's implementation reveal the difficulty in truly listening to the voices of children and young people, a problem echoed in Freire's perception of the "banking model of education" (Freire, 2018), which relates to the idea of students as passive consumers. As seen, the teacher "deposits" data and information to students who are regarded as empty vessels. Moreover, Kohn argues against an overreliance on standardized tests that forces teachers to "teach to the test" (Kohn, 2000). This mechanism results in a narrowed, top-down curriculum, highly discouraging the students from exploring the power of inquiry. This "programmed instruction" (Watters, 2019) model treats students as passive recipients whose learning paths are regulated by "algorithmic efficiency" and not by their personal curiosity or distinctive experiences.

The darker side of Education 4.0's technology can undermine the advancement of the role of women, as O'Neil explains how "algorithmic bias" (O'Neil, 2016) can reinforce discriminatory education. She details how models, trained on historically biased data, can lead to decisions that can disadvantage certain groups, which, in an educational context, can steer girls or women far from fields like STEM. This explanation is related to UNESCO's Report, which tackles how gender bias is embedded into technology products. It directly links "digital skills gender gap" (West et al., 2019) to cultural norms and the risk of online harassment, significantly hindering girls' and women's participation in digital spaces. Furthermore, a tendency in algorithmic bias is tangible in Educational Technology (EdTech) on how AI-driven

tools for personalized learning and proctoring perpetuate gender and racial biases (Vaidya, 2023), which impacts student opportunities and reinforces existing inequalities like the STEM gap.

Despite its promise, Education 4.0's shadows impact the effort to empower the family as the primary educator, as Hohlfeld et al. speaks of a “digital divide” in skills, preventing parents from effectively engaging with their children's digitally mediated schoolwork and alienating them from the process (Hohlfeld et al., 2010). Also, Selwyn avers that educational systems often promote technology in ways that assume a digitally competent household. This leads unintentionally to “sidelining parents” (Selwyn, 2011) who are not equipped to participate, thus outsourcing a part of the educational process to technology that weakens the communitarian and traditional role of family. In this regard, Turkle discusses the isolation of family members through the usage of digital devices, leading to a sense of being “alone together,” (Turkle, 2017), wherein family members are physically present but psychologically distant, engaged in their own digital worlds.

The unwelcome shadows of Education 4.0 also fall heavily on the most vulnerable and marginalized, recognized as Noble explains how digital platforms can amplify xenophobia and other forms of discrimination. She demonstrates how the “algorithms of oppression” (Noble, 2018) are brought about by subjective search algorithms and biased systems prioritizing racist and sexist content. The term “filter bubble” (Pariser, 2011), used as a primary mechanism that fosters digital tribalism and intolerance, fosters personalized algorithms on media platforms, leading to isolation and varying viewpoints. With this comes a seminal academic analysis of the “echo chamber” (Sustein, 2017) effect. Sustein argues that the internet allows people to filter out opinions they disagree with. This work directly supports the idea that digital environments foster intolerance.

The economic and political thinking of Education 4.0 carries shadows that prevent finding new, holistic ways of understanding these systems, with Brown analyzing how neoliberalism reshapes all aspects of life, including education, into an economic model, whereby citizens are seen as “human capital,” and education becomes a tool for edifying one's market value to benefit the national economic output. This directly supports the critique of education being reduced to a tool for the economy, fostering “hyper-individualism” (Brown, 2015) and competition. Likewise, Giroux argues that market-driven policies have transformed education from a public good into a private commodity, producing compliant workers for an unstable, market-driven society, including the “gig economy” (Giroux, 2014). Sunstein explains how political polarization feeds to create “echo chambers” and “information cocoons” (Sustein, 2017) that reinforce existing beliefs and shield users from opposing views, leading to increased division and a fragmented public sphere.

The growing shadows of the digital world challenge Education 4.0's commitment to caring for our common home. With the resulting piles of “e-waste” (Crawford, 2021), the author argues that the digital world has a massive, often hidden, physical footprint. Likewise, Louv speaks of a disconnect from the natural world due to contemporary lifestyles like excessive screen time. He coined the term “nature-deficit disorder” (Louv, 2008) to describe humans deviating from nature, diminishing usage of the senses, dwindling attention, and dealing with higher rates of physical and emotional illnesses. While focusing on data and privacy, Zuboff explains the economic engine driving unsustainable consumerism, which creates a “behavioral surplus” (Zuboff, 2019) to predict and modify user behavior for gaining profit, fundamentally being tied to consumerism.

Discernment: The Response of Education 5.0 and GCE in Addressing the “Shadows” of Education 4.0

The first commitment of GCE is to place the human person at the center. Education 5.0 embraces a holistic vision, where learning empowers individuals ‘to know, to do, to live together, and to be’ (Delors et al., 1996). In line with this vision, Education 5.0’s relational anthropology prompts a human-technology interaction in education (Rosa, 2019), while simultaneously highlighting how data-driven systems can undermine human dignity, reinforcing the need for human-centered digital education (Eubanks, 2018).

The second commitment of GCE is to listen to young people. Education 5.0 grounds participatory, experience-based learning that aligns with a dialogical orientation (Dewey, 1997). It emphasizes learners’ agency, voice, and co-agency in shaping their educational experiences, rather than passively following standardized instruction (OECD, 2019). Moreover, it frames youth participation as essential for fostering democratic values and ethical engagement in education (UNESCO & UNODC, 2019).

The third commitment of GCE is to advance women. In this light, Education 5.0 highlights gendered and racial biases in AI systems, advocating for human-centered design in education (Crawford, 2021). It further calls for educational policies and programs that increase female participation in STEM and digital learning (Vogt & Korte, 2020) and emphasizes initiatives that ensure women’s safe and meaningful engagement with technology (UNICEF, 2021).

The fourth commitment of GCE is to empower the family. Education 5.0 supports families in accessing digital resources and participating in digital learning (Warschauer, 2011). It presents research-based strategies for fostering meaningful parental involvement in students’ learning (Epstein, 2018) and provides empirical evidence on how family interactions are shaped by technology, reinforcing the need for mindful integration in educational practice (Radesky et al., 2014).

The fifth commitment of GCE is to welcome the most vulnerable and marginalized. Education 5.0 analyzes racial and social biases embedded in technology and algorithms, advocating for equity-focused interventions (Benjamin, 2019). It examines how social media reinforces ideological silos or ‘echo chambers’, highlighting the need for digital literacy education (Bakshy et al., 2015), and explores strategies for promoting digital inclusion across diverse and vulnerable populations (Eynon & Malmberg, 2021).

The sixth commitment of GCE is to find new ways of understanding our world. Education 5.0 critiques the social consequences of extreme individualism in neoliberal societies (Brown, 2015). It explores equitable and human-centered approaches to structuring work and professional life (Susskind & Susskind, 2015) and advocates for interdisciplinary, socially connected learning that fosters democratic participation (UNESCO, 2021).

The seventh commitment of GCE is to safeguard our common home. Education 5.0 focuses on digital literacy and the responsible use of technology to support sustainable practices (Bawden & Robinson, 2020). It calls for educational approaches that foster care for the planet and ethical stewardship of resources (UNESCO, 2021) and offers a holistic systems perspective that emphasizes the interconnection between humans and the environment (Capra & Luisi, 2014).

Participation: The Pedagogy of Encounter as *Via Pulchritudinis*

In “Education: The Global Compact,” Pope Francis reiterates three languages which focus on the mind (thinking), the heart (feeling), and the hands (doing). Pope

Francis calls for religious traditions, which have always played a leading role in schooling, from teaching literacy to higher education, to reaffirm their mission of integrally educating each individual: head, hands, heart and soul. “To think about what we are feeling and doing. To feel what we are thinking and doing. To do what we are feeling and thinking” (Francis, 2021). In essence, it points to the beauty and harmony of what it is to be fully human. He integrates these languages to fundamental human values, interweaving truth with mind, goodness with heart, and creativity with hands. Remarkably, he highlights the concept of beauty by stating that one cannot educate without leading a person to beauty or the heart to beauty (Francis, 2020). This person-centered approach implicitly contains the “path of beauty,” which is a move away from education as a mere instrument for the economy and toward education as the cultivation of the unique, unrepeatable dignity and creativity, pertaining to the “beauty” of every individual (Congregation for Catholic Education, 2017).

In this light, the study advances a Theology of Catholic Education titled, The Pedagogy of Encounter as *Via Pulchritudinis*. This framework centers on the seven commitments of the Global Compact on Education (GCE) and articulates a four-step process that integrates the cognitive, affective, and conative dimensions of Catholic education toward the *Via Pulchritudinis*, the Path of Beauty, as a transformative journey. The process begins with Mind (Thinking/Cognitive), which analyzes the “lights and shadows” of Education 4.0; proceeds to Heart (Feeling/Affective), which integrates values from the *Vademecum* of the GCE; moves to Hands (Doing/Conative), which expresses the response of Education 5.0 and the GCE; and culminates in the Path of Beauty, a theological and pedagogical proposal for humanizing 21st-century teaching and learning (see Figure 1).

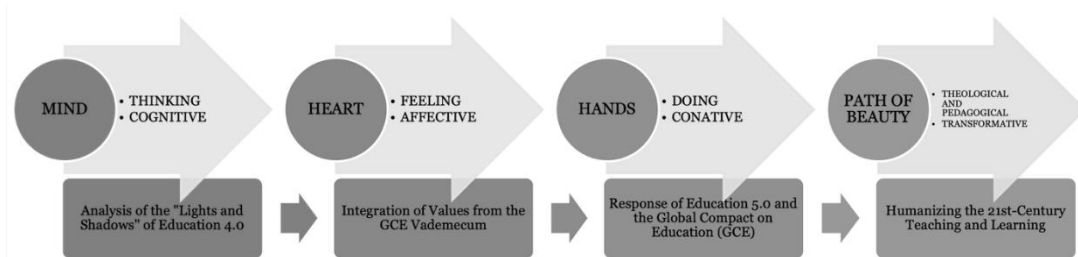


Figure 1. The Pedagogy of Encounter as *Via Pulchritudinis*

The first commitment of GCE is to place the human person at the center. Accordingly, Education 4.0 brings the opportunities of individualized learning paths (Hussin, 2018; Fisk, 2017) and integral human development (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1997), while also casting challenges like “learnification” (Biesta, 2015), the “achievement-subject” (Han, 2017), and “datafication” (Zuboff, 2019). Its core value is upholding the dignity and universal rights of every individual through an inclusive, holistic education that respects and develops all dimensions of their unique identity without discrimination (Global Compact on Education, 2020). Education 5.0 and GCE embrace a holistic vision (Delors et al., 1996), human-technology interaction (Rosa, 2019), and human-centered digital education (Eubanks, 2018). The “Path of Beauty” fortifies learners to put a human face on the global goals, moving beyond statistics to focus on the lived experiences of individuals in their community. This project shifts the focus from problems to people, teaching students that the first step to solving a global issue is to understand the human person at its heart.

The second commitment of GCE is to listen to young people. Consequently, Education 4.0 must highlight the strengths of student-driven learning (World Economic Forum, 2026; Bell, 2010) and positioning them as active protagonists (Francis, 2020; Congregation for Catholic Education, 2022), while avoiding the pitfalls of the “banking model” (Freire, 2018), a “top-down curriculum” (Kohn, 2000), or “programmed instruction” (Watters, 2019). We must advocate for a child-centered educational system where the community collaborates to provide a quality education that respects every child's right, adapting to individual needs and engaging their mind, hands, and heart (Global Compact on Education, 2020). Education 5.0 and GCE align with a dialogical orientation (Dewey, 1997), learners' agency, voice, and co-agency (OECD, 2019) and youth participation (UNESCO & UNODC, 2019). The “Path of Beauty” supports learners becoming community researchers, positioning young people as experts on their own lives to support responsive and inclusive decision-making. This project makes listening to children an active and impactful process, turning student opinions into data that can inform real-world decisions.

The third commitment of GCE is to advance women. Herein, Education 4.0 leverages the power of digital platforms that offer flexible learning opportunities (UNESCO, 2023; Malala Fund, 2020; Congregation for Catholic Education, 2022), but it must also confront the shadows of “algorithmic bias” (O'Neil, 2016), the “digital skills gender gap” (West et al., 2019), and “biased EdTech” (Vaidya, 2023). The fundamental goal is achieving gender equality by recognizing the equal rights and dignity of men and women, while actively ensuring girls' participation in education and women's inclusion in leadership roles (Global Compact on Education, 2020). Education 5.0 and GCE address gendered and racial biases in AI systems (Crawford, 2021) female participation in STEM and digital learning (Vogt & Korte, 2020) and women's safe and meaningful engagement with technology (UNICEF, 2021). The “Path of Beauty” empowers learners to become digital advocates who investigate the local digital divide affecting women and create a campaign to promote digital literacy and inclusion. This project transforms students from passive technology users into active digital citizens who use their skills to empower others.

The fourth commitment of GCE is to empower the family. For this reason, Education 4.0 requires building strong school-home partnerships (Hornby & Blackwell, 2018; Smith et al., 2020) and recognizing the family's primary role as educator (Francis, 2020; Congregation for Catholic Education, 2022), while mitigating challenges like the “digital divide” (Hohlfeld et al., 2010), the “sidelining of parents” (Selwyn, 2011), and the phenomenon of being “alone together” (Turkle, 2017). The guiding principle is to empower the family as the primary educator by ensuring parents participate in school decision-making and by implementing supportive, family-friendly policies, especially for the socio-economically disadvantaged (Global Compact on Education, 2020). Education 5.0 and GCE support families in accessing digital resources (Warschauer, 2011), meaningful parental involvement (Epstein, 2018) and family interactions integrated in educational practice (Radesky et al., 2014). The “Path of Beauty” lets learners become community organizers who host an Empowerment Fair for their own families and the wider community. This project moves beyond theory, allowing students to take on a meaningful role in strengthening their own families and community.

The fifth commitment of GCE is to welcome the most vulnerable and marginalized. Correspondingly, Education 4.0 utilizes tools like Assistive Tech and Open Educational Resources (UNESCO, 2021; International Federation of Catholic Universities, 2021) to care for the vulnerable (Congregation for Catholic Education, 2020), while actively fighting against the “algorithms of oppression” (Noble, 2018),

“filter bubbles” (Pariser, 2011), and “echo chambers” (Sunstein, 2017). This requires fostering a culture of encounter and openness, actively welcoming and integrating vulnerable and marginalized people through inclusive policies that directly counter a societal “throwaway culture” (Global Compact on Education, 2020). Education 5.0 and GCE analyze racial and social biases embedded in technology and algorithms (Benjamin, 2019), digital literacy education (Bakshy et al., 2015), and digital inclusion (Eynon & Malmberg, 2021). The “Path of Beauty” challenges learners to counter societal indifference by actively identifying and connecting with the stories of marginalized individuals in their community. This initiative transforms the abstract goal of inclusion into a tangible, face-to-face experience, fostering empathy and inspiring action.

The sixth commitment of GCE is to find new ways of understanding our world. In the context of Education 4.0, it means developing advanced cognitive skills (World Economic Forum, 2026) and envisioning systems centered on human dignity (Francis, 2020), while confronting the dangers of “hyper-individualism” (Brown, 2015), the “gig economy” (Giroux, 2014), and “political polarization” (Sunstein, 2017). The core of this effort is investing in community-focused education to foster a renewed vision of economy, politics, and progress that is inclusive, sustainable, and dedicated to the common good (Global Compact on Education, 2020). Education 5.0 and GCE critique extreme individualism in neoliberal societies (Brown, 2015), equitable approaches to structuring work and professional life (Susskind & Susskind, 2015) and democratic participation (UNESCO, 2021). The “Path of Beauty” strengthens learners to act as a Youth Policy Council, tasked with reimagining their city's economy and politics through alternative, sustainable models. This project empowers students not just to learn about these systems, but to actively redesign them for a more just and sustainable future.

The seventh commitment of GCE is to safeguard our common home. Hence, Education 4.0 is illuminated by collaborative online models (UNESCO, 2018; O'Dowd, 2021) and a shared responsibility for the planet (Francis, 2015), but it is shadowed by the realities of “e-waste” (Crawford, 2021), “nature-deficit disorder” (Louv, 2008), and unsustainable consumerism (Zuboff, 2019). The heart of this commitment is protecting our common home by educating for more sustainable and sober lifestyles, investing in renewable energy, and actively preserving and promoting local green spaces (Global Compact on Education, 2020). Education 5.0 and GCE focus on digital literacy and the responsible use of technology to support sustainable practices (Bawden & Robinson, 2020), ethical stewardship of resources (UNESCO, 2021) and the interconnection between humans and the environment (Capra & Luisi, 2014). The “Path of Beauty” reinforces learners to become environmental stewards of their university, their immediate “common home”. This project moves students from awareness to action, making them direct participants in creating a more sustainable community.

From the foregoing statements, the synodal processes of listening, discernment, and participation serve as a hermeneutical structure. It “listens” to the realities of Education 4.0, it “discerns” realities through ethical and theological lenses, and “participates” through transforming insights into a constructive pedagogical vision. *The Via Pulchritudinis*, or Path of Beauty, further deepens this synthesis by emphasizing that education leads learners toward meaning, transcendence, and authentic human flourishing.

Conclusion

This study finds that Education 4.0 is characterized by technological integration, personalization, and innovation-driven learning, while Education 5.0 reorients education toward holistic human formation, ethical responsibility, and relationality. Together, these paradigms mark a shift from technology-centered to human-centered education. Examining the “lights” and “shadows” of Education 4.0 through the lens of the Global Compact on Education, the study highlights opportunities for inclusion, participation, and global connectivity, but also identifies risks of dehumanization, datafication, algorithmic bias, and community fragmentation when applied uncritically. Synthesizing Education 5.0 with the GCE provides a coherent humanizing framework that addresses these limitations. This integration culminates in the proposed Pedagogy of Encounter as Via Pulchritudinis, which restores dialogue, dignity, and beauty to the center of learning. Guided by synodal processes of listening, discernment, and participation, this framework offers a theological-pedagogical vision capable of transforming digital education into a path toward authentic human flourishing. To deepen this vision, the study recommends applying the Pedagogy of Encounter across academic disciplines, enabling educators, policymakers, and institutions to critically evaluate strategies, identify gaps, and develop context-specific approaches that foster equity, inclusivity, and moral development. Through sustained reflection, research, and evaluation, the dual aims of promoting academic excellence and nurturing ethically responsible individuals are realized.

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Declaration on the Use of AI

The researchers utilized ChatGPT, CoPilot, and Grammarly for grammar check and refinement of sentences and paragraphs.

Data Availability Statement

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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About the Authors

Ms. Ericka Mae Bayani Cunanan is a Licensed Professional Teacher, faculty member of the University of Santo Tomas Institute of Religion, and a catechist. She completed her Bachelor of Secondary Education major in Religious Education and her Master of Arts in Theology at the Pontifical and Royal University of Santo Tomas, the Catholic University of the Philippines. She is currently pursuing doctoral studies at the same institution. Her academic interests focus on Catholic Education and Inculturation, particularly in relation to contemporary pedagogical contexts. She is actively engaged in the formation of pre-service teachers in Religious and Values Education, contributing to the preparation of future educators.

Prof. Allan A. Basas completed his academic formation in Philosophy and Theology at the Philippine Dominican Center for Institutional Studies and the University of Santo Tomas (UST). He earned his Licentiate, Master's, and Doctoral degrees in Sacred Theology from the Ecclesiastical Faculties of UST. Since 2003, he has been a faculty member of the UST Institute of Religion, where he teaches theology across various faculties and colleges of the University. He also teaches in the M.A. and Ph.D. Theology programs of the UST Graduate School, as well as in the Faculty of Sacred Theology and the Faculty of Philosophy. He has published scholarly works in academic journals and has presented papers at national and international conferences.

Joseph Renus F. Galang is an assistant professor of Theology at the Institute of Religion of the University of Santo Tomas. He holds a Bachelor of Arts in Philosophy, a Master of Arts in Education, majoring in English, and a Doctor of Philosophy in Applied Theology. He has taught philosophy, theology, sociology, literature, and creative writing classes. His interests include philosophy, theology, religion, mythology, and fantasy literature.

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