



## *AN INTERPRETIVE THEOLOGICAL AND PASTORAL APPROACH TO SACRAMENTAL TRADITION FOR FAITHFUL EARTHKEEPING*

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*This study presents an interpretive theological and pastoral exploration of the Catholic sacramental tradition as a vital resource for faithful stewardship of the earth in the face of the global ecological crisis. It contends that the deeply symbolic, embodied, spiritual, and communal dimensions of sacramental tradition can inspire a renewed ethical, spiritual, and pastoral commitment to the care of creation. Utilizing archival sources and interpretive methodology, the paper also draws on a wide range of voices from eco-theology, ecofeminism, and the environmental sciences to examine how the Church's sacramental imagination, rooted in the mystery of Christ's incarnation and presence in the material world, offers a counter-narrative to ecological degradation. While technological and policy-driven responses are essential, they remain insufficient without the moral, spiritual, and liturgical transformation that the sacramental worldview can animate. This approach affirms the vocation of the Church not only to preach ecological conversion but to embody it through rituals, relationships, and practices that reflect reverence for the Earth as God's sacred creation. It encourages creative pastoral ministry yet is grounded in the sacramental tradition. A pastoral work that becomes a way to shape ecological awareness and engagement, a faithful earthkeeping.*

Keywords: Faithful earthkeeping, Laudato Si, Pastoral Ministry, Sacramental imagination, Sacramental tradition

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## BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

The global ecological crisis is not just about science or politics. It is a deep moral and spiritual challenge. The damage we see happening to the Earth reflects a broken relationship between humanity and the rest of creation. Many faith communities, especially within the Catholic Church, are starting to wrestle with important questions: How are we meant to relate to the world around us? What responsibilities do our faith call us to in this time of environmental crisis?

In exploring these questions, the Christian sacramental tradition offers meaningful insight. This tradition teaches that God's grace is communicated through the material world, in things like water, oil, bread, and wine, which points to the sacredness and goodness of creation itself. Rooted in Scripture and lived out in the Church's worship, this tradition invites believers to see the natural world as a place where they can encounter the divine. Given today's ecological challenges, returning to this understanding feels urgent. It can help cultivate a spirituality that respects and cares for the Earth. Pope Francis, in *Laudato Si'*, affirms the theological importance of creation as a sacred trust, inviting ecological conversion rooted in the sacramental life.<sup>1</sup> Thomas Berry likewise argues that recovering a spiritual sense of the Earth is essential for addressing the ecological crisis.<sup>2</sup> Catherine Keller, drawing from process theology, highlights the dynamic relationship between God, creation, and human responsibility.<sup>3</sup>

Scholars like Elizabeth Johnson remind us how sacramentality highlights the deep connections

among all creatures, pushing back against views that isolate humans from nature.<sup>4</sup> Meanwhile, Denis Edwards talks about an "eco-somatic" theology that brings together body, earth, and spirit through sacramental imagination, helping communities reconnect with the whole of creation.<sup>5</sup> Pastoral theologian Celia Deane-Drummond also shows how sacramental practice can spark real transformation, encouraging both ecological awareness and ethical action.<sup>6</sup> Together, these ideas offer a powerful way for faith communities to respond to ecological harm by reclaiming a sacramental worldview, one that honors creation as a precious gift and a serious responsibility.

Building on this foundation, this paper seeks to enrich current theological conversations on ecological conversion by employing an interpretive methodology that weaves together deep theological insight and attentive pastoral care. Specifically, it investigates how sacramental tradition can serve as a theological, ethical, and pastoral resource for addressing the ecological crisis in the Philippines. The following objectives guide this study: (1) to understand the contextual ecological situation in the Philippines; (2) to examine the historical and theological factors, including religion itself, that have contributed to ecological degradation; and (3) to highlight the sacramental tradition as a distinctly Christian foundation for faithful earthkeeping through a reimagined pastoral approach.

<sup>1</sup> Pope Francis, *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2015), 70–75.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Berry, *The Great Work: Our Way into the Future* (New York: Bell Tower, 1999), 50–54.

<sup>3</sup> Catherine Keller, *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (London: Routledge, 2003), 112–15.

<sup>4</sup> Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014), 183–90.

<sup>5</sup> Denis Edwards, *The God of Evolution: A Trinitarian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 96–102.

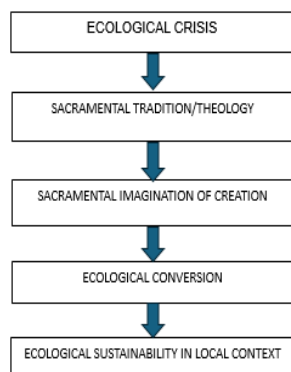
<sup>6</sup> Celia Deane-Drummond, *Ecotheology* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2011), 45–50.





## CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The researcher presents and briefly discusses the significant concepts and theories for this study (see also the diagrammatic form below).



### ECOLOGICAL CRISIS

Today's ecological crisis is not simply about vanishing forests, melting ice caps, or polluted rivers. It is also a crisis of the human spirit, an outward sign of a deeper rupture in how we relate to creation. For many people of faith, this crisis signals a moral and spiritual dislocation, a forgetfulness of our place within the larger web of life. Pope Francis speaks to this rupture in *Laudato Si'*, where he calls for a renewed sense of responsibility rooted in an "integral ecology" that sees the interconnectedness of all things, environmental, social, and spiritual.<sup>7</sup> Thomas Berry, a leading voice in ecological spirituality, wrote of the Earth as a "communion of subjects, not a collection of objects," emphasizing that the root of the crisis is not only technological but theological.<sup>8</sup> We cannot heal the planet unless we also heal our imagination and values. Addressing this crisis demands not just science

and policy but a deeper conversion of heart and worldview.

### SACRAMENTAL TRADITION/THEOLOGY

At the heart of Catholic thought is a beautiful conviction: that God meets us through the physical world. In sacramental theology, the elements of nature, water, bread, oil, and wine become the very channels through which divine grace flows. This is more than ritual; it is a worldview. The sacraments do not isolate the sacred from the ordinary. Rather, they affirm that God is already present in the ordinary.<sup>9</sup> In baptism, a handful of water becomes the sign of new life; in the Eucharist, bread and wine become the body and blood of Christ. As Alexander Schmemmann eloquently expressed, the world was created not merely to be used, but to become a way of communion with God.<sup>10</sup> When applied to ecological reflection, sacramental theology reminds us that the natural world is not disposable. It is deeply holy, a bearer of God's grace.

### SACRAMENTAL IMAGINATION

The sacramental imagination is a distinctively Catholic lens through which we see the world not just as created, but as charged with divine presence. This way of seeing is not limited to the sacraments themselves; it overflows into how we view all of creation. Every sunrise, every seed, every ocean wave becomes an invitation to encounter God. As David Tracy explains, this imagination perceives the infinite shimmering through the finite.<sup>11</sup> It is what allows St. Francis of Assisi to call the sun his brother and the moon his sister, and what allows us today to recognize

<sup>7</sup> Pope Francis, *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2015).

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1988).

<sup>9</sup> Catechism of the Catholic Church. 2nd ed. Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997.

<sup>10</sup> Schmemmann, Alexander. *For the Life of the World: Sacraments and Orthodoxy*. Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1973.

<sup>11</sup> Tracy, David. *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism*. New York: Crossroad, 1981.



the Earth not just as soil and stone, but as kin. In *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis revives this tradition, urging the faithful to rediscover nature as sacred and relational.<sup>12-13</sup> To live with a sacramental imagination is to live with reverence, to walk gently, and to see the world not as a commodity, but as a gift.

### ECOLOGICAL CONVERSION

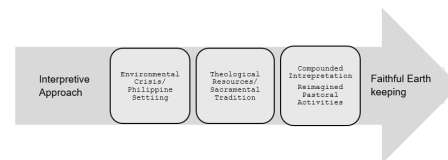
Ecological conversion is not a slogan or a trend. It is a deep, interior shift in how we understand our place in creation. It is about turning away from lifestyles of domination and turning toward patterns of humility, simplicity, and solidarity with all life. Pope Francis describes it as a change of heart where our encounter with Christ is mirrored in how we treat the world around us.<sup>14</sup> This is not only a personal journey; it is communal, even liturgical. It means reorienting parishes, schools, and institutions toward sustainable living. Theologian Sallie McFague offers a powerful image: if we once saw ourselves as rulers of creation, ecological conversion invites us to see ourselves as loving members of God's household.<sup>15</sup> This transformation is slow, but it is real and deeply needed in a time of climate anxiety and environmental collapse.

### CONTEXTUAL THEOLOGY

Contextual theology insists that real theology begins not in the abstract, but in the concrete struggles and hopes of actual communities. In the case of the Philippines, a country marked by staggering ecological beauty and ecological vulnerability. This means listening to the land and its people. Filipino theologians such as Dionito Cabillas and Agnes Brazal have shown

how theology must respond to local realities: communities displaced by mining, farmers suffering from typhoons, and Indigenous voices defending ancestral lands.<sup>16</sup> Such theology does not discard doctrine; it deepens it, making it more responsive and more just. It invites us to see how sacraments, Scripture, and tradition can speak meaningfully to communities facing ecological suffering. Rooted in experience and open to grace, contextual theology becomes a living witness to faith in action.

### OPERATIONAL FRAMEWORK



With the gathered data related to the ecological crisis, focusing on the realities in the Philippines, different theological resources on the so-called sacramental tradition of the Church were analyzed using an interpretive approach to arrive at a lens for addressing the present ecological crisis and proposed pastoral eco-activity.

### METHODOLOGY

This study uses an interpretive theological approach rooted in **contextual theology** and **eco-hermeneutics**. Contextual theology, as Stephen Bevans explains, emphasizes that theology must arise from specific cultural and social situations.<sup>17</sup> In this case, it is shaped by the Philippine experience of environmental degradation and Catholic spirituality. Eco-hermeneutics offers a way to reread scripture and tradition in light of

<sup>12</sup> Francis, *Laudato Si*, 233.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 217.

<sup>15</sup> McFague, Sallie. *A New Climate for Theology: God, the World, and Global Warming*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008.

<sup>16</sup> Brazal, Agnes M. "Eco-Theology and Filipino Cosmology: A Contextual Response to the Ecological Crisis." *Philippiniana Sacra* 41, no. 122 (2006): 397-415.

<sup>17</sup> Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 3-5.



today's ecological realities.<sup>18</sup> Key sources include **Church documents**, especially *Laudato Si' and Laudato Deum*, which provide the theological and ethical foundation for Catholic ecological reflection.<sup>19</sup> Other magisterial texts, such as Vatican II's *Gaudium et Spes*, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, and regional reflections like those from the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences, further ground the study.<sup>20</sup> This research is also informed by **eco-theological thinkers** like Sean McDonagh, Rosemary Radford Ruether, and Larry Rasmussen, whose work highlights the sacramental view of creation and the need for ecological conversion.<sup>21</sup> These theological insights are placed in dialogue with **Philippine ecological data** from national agencies and scientific studies. By weaving together a compounded interpretation, this study leads to a deeper understanding of how Catholics can respond faithfully to the ecological crisis in the Philippines. Thus, proposing a reimagined pastoral approach to sacramental tradition grounded in local context.

## RESULTS

Through an interpretive theological and pastoral lens, the researchers analyzed the data on ecological degradation in the Philippines and arrived at several significant insights.

<sup>18</sup> H. Paul Santmire, *The Travail of Nature: The Ambiguous Ecological Promise of Christian Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 123–135.

<sup>19</sup> Francis, *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2015), 1–246.

<sup>20</sup> Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et Spes*, in *The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Walter M. Abbott (New York: Herder and Herder, 1966); *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997); Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences, *FABC Papers No. 96: A Pastoral Statement on the Ecology* (Manila: FABC, 2000).

<sup>21</sup> Sean McDonagh, *To Care for the Earth: A Call to a New Theology* (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1990); Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Gaia and God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992); Larry Rasmussen, *Earth Community, Earth Ethics* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996).

## ECOLOGICAL SITUATION IN THE PHILIPPINES

Pope Francis's encyclical *Laudato Si'* offers a stark diagnosis: “The Earth, our home, is beginning to look more and more like an immense pile of filth.”<sup>22</sup> This prophetic statement captures the depth of the ecological crisis not only on a global scale but also in local contexts such as the Philippines. The Pope critiques the “throwaway culture” as a primary factor in this degradation, where creation is treated as a disposable commodity rather than as a sacred gift.<sup>23</sup> This is not merely a scientific or economic problem but a theological and moral one that demands a pastoral response. In this light, the current ecological conditions in the Philippines are a compelling site for theological reflection and sacramental imagination (see Table 1).

**Table 1. Summary of Key Ecological Issues in the Philippines.**

Ecological Issue	Key Causes	Impacts
Air Pollution	Vehicular emissions, coal plants, domestic activities	In 2023, 66, 230 deaths were attributed directly to air pollution
Water Pollution	Industrial waste, fishpond conversion, tourism	40 million with no access to potable water, Marine biodiversity loss, microplastic ingestion in seafood
Land Pollution	Poor waste management, unsustainable land use, soil degradation, mining, littering, industrial activities, soil erosion	60, 640 tons of waste generated daily in 2023, loss of land nutrients, acidification, decline in soil productivity, and 45% of arable land became moderately to severely eroded.
Deforestation	Logging, mining, agricultural expansion, urban sprawl	Total forest cover of 7.22 million hectares Habitat loss, Indigenous displacement
Climate Change	Global warming, deforestation, fossil fuel use	Severe typhoons, community destruction

<sup>22</sup> Francis, *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2015), para.21.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, para. 22–26.





Air pollution remains a deadly concern, aggravated by coal-powered energy and heavy vehicular emissions. According to the Center for Research on Energy and Clean Air, in 2023, an estimated 66,230 deaths were attributed to air pollution.<sup>24</sup> Urban areas such as Metro Manila and Baguio have reached critical pollution levels. In many parts of the capital, commercial expansion has outpaced environmental protection, resulting in tree loss, forest encroachment, and biodiversity decline.

Water pollution poses a particularly acute threat to the archipelago. Echoing Pope Benedict XVI's assertion that access to clean water is a basic human right,<sup>25</sup> many Filipinos across the country, at least 40 million, have no access to potable water. This is particularly true in underserved regions such as the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) and those in informal settlements.<sup>26</sup> Meanwhile, the country's marine ecosystems are increasingly imperiled by industrial and household waste, with microplastics entering the food chain through seafood.<sup>27</sup> Tourism development, as seen in the degradation of Boracay Island, often exacerbates this crisis.<sup>28</sup>

Land in the Philippines is overexploited basically because of land degradation and population growth. Land degradation was mainly due to numerous factors like poor waste management, littering, chemical use in farming, irresponsible

mining, and industrial activities. It resulted in poor land productivity and forced migration of the people from agricultural land to the cities, where they often ended up as squatters in informal settlements. In 2020, about 45% of arable land was moderately to severely eroded, which makes land less productive or results in total loss of productivity.<sup>29</sup>

The country's forests are rapidly disappearing. As of 2022 Philippine Forestry Statistics, it is estimated that the country has a total forest cover of 7.22 million hectares or 24.07% of the country's land mass.<sup>30</sup> Official data from the Forest Management Bureau of the Department of Environment and Natural Resources shows an annual loss of approximately 47,000 hectares.<sup>31</sup> From 2003 to 2010, the country lost 4.6% of its total forest cover, and according to some reports, only 2 million hectares of forest remain.<sup>32</sup> This deforestation contributes to flooding, displacement of Indigenous peoples, and erosion of local ecosystems. Theologian Sean McDonagh has emphasized how environmental destruction forces communities, especially those in rural and Indigenous areas, to abandon their ancestral lands.<sup>33</sup>

Climate change compounds all of these issues. Devastating typhoons such as Pepito, Ondoy, Pablo, Thelma, and Yolanda have intensified in recent years, driven by global warming and deforestation.<sup>34</sup> These natural disasters are not isolated events but symptoms of an ecological imbalance that also reflects deeper cultural and theological distortions, namely, a dominative attitude toward nature. Public awareness

<sup>24</sup> Center for Research on Energy and Clean Air, 2025, Estimating the Health & Economic Cost of Air Pollution in the Philippines, <https://energyandcleanair.org/publication/cost-of-air-pollution-in-the-philippines/#:~:text=Our%20research%20found%20that%20air%20pollution%20was,the%20impact%20with%20the%20most%20recent-%20literature.>

<sup>25</sup> Benedict XVI, *Message for the Celebration of the World Day of Peace: If You Want to Cultivate Peace, Protect Creation* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, January 1, 2010).

<sup>26</sup> Third Anne Peralta-Malonzo, "40M Filipinos No Access to Freshwater," *SunStar*, May 8, 2024, <https://www.sunstar.com.ph/manila/40m-filipinos-no-access-to-freshwater>.

<sup>27</sup> Heriot-Watt University, "Microplastics in Household Dust Pose Health Risks," *ScienceDaily*, March 2019, <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2019/03/190315104347.htm>.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Interactive Country Fiches, Country in a nutshell, <https://dicf.uneppgrid.ch/philippines/land>

<sup>30</sup> Climate Change Commission, *Keeping up with Deforestations*, March 21, 2024, <https://climate.gov.ph/news/851>.

<sup>31</sup> Heriot-Watt University.

<sup>32</sup> McDonagh, Sean, *The Greening of the Church* (New York: Orbis Books, 1990), 28–30.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 36.





campaigns such as Earth Hour and initiatives like Al Gore's Climate Reality Project (CRP) have increased understanding of these issues. One of the researchers attended a CRP seminar in the Philippines, where sustainability leaders emphasized renewable energy and climate education.<sup>35</sup> However, such initiatives must be complemented by theological and pastoral frameworks that speak to the spiritual roots of the crisis. A purely technological response cannot resolve a deeply spiritual disorder. A renewed theological consciousness, particularly one rooted in the sacramental imagination, offers a vital resource for rethinking humanity's relationship with creation.

#### UNDERLYING CAUSES OF ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

When looking closely at the environmental challenges humanity is facing, it becomes clear that they are not just about damaged ecosystems or disappearing species; they reflect something deeper about how human beings see themselves and the world around them. For generations, certain cultural and religious mindsets have shaped human attitudes toward nature, sometimes causing us to forget its sacredness. The table below (Table 2) points to some of these deeper roots and offers faith-filled responses that call us to see creation with fresh eyes through a lens of connection, care, and spiritual responsibility.

**Table 2. Causes of the Ecological Crisis and Call for Theological Contrast\**

Root Cause	Description	Theological Counterpoint
Anthropocentrism	Humans viewed as masters of nature	Theology of stewardship and interdependence
Capitalist Utilitarianism	Nature treated as a commodity	Sacramental view of creation as sacred

<sup>35</sup> The Climate Reality Project, "About Us," <https://www.climaterealityproject.org>.

Technocratic Paradigm	Over-reliance on technology without a moral compass	Ethical discernment in scientific advancement
Loss of Sacred Cosmology	Earth is no longer seen as sacred	Sacramental imagination, cosmic Christology

In recent decades, growing ecological crises have prompted scholars and theologians alike to revisit the roots of humanity's relationship with the natural world. One of the earliest and most provocative voices in this discourse was Lynn White Jr., who famously argued that the ecological crisis is, at its core, a religious issue.<sup>36</sup> He criticized Western Christianity for promoting a worldview that placed humanity above creation, leading to centuries of environmental exploitation. He thought that an overly anthropocentric theology had contributed to environmental exploitation. And yet, he also believed that the solution must be religious. For him, a renewed spiritual framework was essential for inspiring a more respectful and sustainable relationship with the Earth. Building on this line of thought, Gary Gardner has pointed out that the dominant model of progress in modern society often equates human well-being with material prosperity.<sup>37</sup> This mindset, which overlooks the spiritual and relational aspects of life, has encouraged patterns of consumption that degrade the environment. As a result, the Earth is increasingly treated as a storehouse of resources rather than as a sacred home.

This alienation between humanity and the Earth has become a central concern in eco-theological thought. Scholars have observed that many people no longer see themselves as part of the Earth community, nor do they regard nature as sacred.<sup>38</sup> A similar observation was mentioned

<sup>36</sup> Lynn White Jr., "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," *Science* 155, no. 3767 (1967): 1203–1207.

<sup>37</sup> Gary Gardner, *Invoking the Spirit: Religion and Spirituality in the Quest for a Sustainable World* (Washington, DC: Worldwatch Institute, 2006), 5.

<sup>38</sup> Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1988), 132.





in *Laudate Deum* by Pope Francis, he said, “The technocratic paradigm can isolate us from the world that surrounds us and deceive us by making us forget that the entire world is a ‘contact zone’.”<sup>39</sup> Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim have described how this disconnection runs deep, extending beyond individual attitudes to the cultural and spiritual frameworks that shape society.<sup>40</sup> When humans view themselves as separate from and superior to creation, the result is often a misuse of nature and a failure to recognize its intrinsic value.

The modern world’s reliance on technological and economic systems, particularly within a neoliberal capitalist framework, has intensified these trends. Rosemary Radford Ruether criticizes this worldview, noting how it promotes the belief that personal success and happiness are measured by wealth and accumulation.<sup>41</sup> Such a view tends to value efficiency and profit over care for the Earth, reinforcing harmful patterns of environmental neglect.

In light of these challenges, many environmental scholars are now turning to religious traditions as vital sources of wisdom and moral guidance. Thomas Sullivan emphasizes that religious worldviews fundamentally shape how communities perceive and interact with their environment.<sup>42</sup> He argues that these worldviews provide a foundational sense of purpose and responsibility that can motivate ecological stewardship. They are not peripheral to environmental ethics but central to any meaningful transformation in how we live with

the Earth.<sup>43</sup> Fr. Sean McDonagh, a prominent Catholic eco-theologian, draws attention to what he calls a “new universe story,” a narrative emerging from contemporary science that reveals the dynamic, interconnected, and creative nature of the cosmos. This scientific story, he suggests, is not at odds with religion but complements it. It helps deepen our appreciation of creation’s complexity and interdependence.<sup>44</sup> McDonagh insists that such insights should shape our theological and ethical commitments, reminding us that nothing in nature exists in isolation.<sup>45</sup>

Within the Christian tradition, and Catholicism in particular, the sacramental vision offers a rich theological resource for ecological consciousness. This worldview sees the material world not as a mere backdrop for human activity, but as a sacred medium through which God’s grace is revealed. A renewed pastoral engagement with this tradition can encourage the faithful to view Earth not only as a gift but as a sacrament to be cherished and safeguarded for future generations.

#### SACRAMENTAL TRADITION AS WELLSPRING FOR FAITHFUL EARTHKEEPING

The Catholic faith offers a powerful way to think about and care for the Earth. Through its teachings, sacraments, and traditions, the Church reminds us that creation is not just a backdrop to our lives. It is sacred, alive, and deeply connected to God. Aside from this, the Second Vatican Council teaches humans are called to “use the earth in such a way that it is not spoiled or destroyed, but preserved for future generations.”<sup>46</sup> The table below (Table 3) highlights key voices and ideas that show how

<sup>39</sup> Pope Francis, *Laudate Deum: Apostolic Exhortation to All People of Good Will on the Climate Crisis* (Vatican City: Vatican Press, 2023), para. 66, [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/20231004-laudate-deum.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/20231004-laudate-deum.html).

<sup>40</sup> Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim, *Ecology and Religion* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 2014), 16–17.

<sup>41</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Gaia and God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 14.

<sup>42</sup> Thomas Sullivan, “Religion and the Environment: A Framework for Understanding,” *Worldviews* 1, no. 1 (1997): 31–45.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>44</sup> Sean McDonagh, *To Care for the Earth: A Call to a New Theology* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986), 44–46.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>46</sup> Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et Spes* (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World), December 7, 1965, sec. 39, Vatican.va, [https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19651207\\_gaudium-et-spes\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html).





Catholic spirituality grounded on sacramental tradition can inspire us to live more gently, justly, and sustainably on this planet we all share.

**Table 3. Catholic Sacramental Tradition and Other Contributors to Ecological Engagement**

Contributors	Core Concepts	Ecological Implications
Gary Gardner St. John Paul II	Religions as sources of moral influence, social capital, and worldview shaping Ecological conversion	Religion can drive ecological action and justice through education, policy advocacy, and cultural transformation. Environmental crisis as a moral concern
Thomas Berry, Larry Rasmussen, Pope Francis	Creation as sacred; sacraments as signs of the divine presence; "sacramental imagination"	Invites a reverent, relational, and holistic view of nature; promotes spiritual motivation for environmental stewardship
Rosemary Radford Ruether, Sallie McFague	Emphasis on body, matter, and female experience; Incarnation as sanctification of creation	Counters dualism, fosters care for both human and non-human life and validates embodied Earth-centered ethics.
Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC)	Emphasizes sacramental theology as foundational for ecological response in Asia.	Sacramental worldview mobilizes Asian churches for ecological mission.
Colossians 1:15–20 Romans 8:19–23 Psalm 104	Creation is the beginning of salvation history; Christ is the "firstborn of all creation." All things came into being through him, Celebration of Creation.	Biblical cosmology reinforces respect for the natural world as part of God's redemptive plan.
Catholic Liturgy, Sacramental Tradition	Bread, wine, water, oil, fire as mediators of divine grace	Cultivates ecological awareness by linking everyday elements to sacred rituals; underscores Earth's sacredness
Pope Francis (Laudato Si') (Laudate Deum)	"Integral ecology," interconnectedness, environmental ethics rooted in faith	Elevates ecological care to a moral and spiritual imperative for Catholic life
José de Mesa, PAWS	"Sacramental attitude," reverence for animals and land; interconnectedness	Builds alliances with Indigenous cosmologies; links animal welfare to human ethics and spiritual integrity
Larry Rasmussen	Dualism, consumerism, and globalization as threats to creation	Calls for ecological conversion through sacramental consciousness and ethical economic practices

Matthew Fox, H. Paul Santmire	Creation speaks through symbols; nature is a messenger	Evokes emotional and spiritual commitment to conservation through narrative theology
St. John (John 1:1–3), Catholic Doctrine	Creation as the incarnation of divine Word; sacramental view of matter	Grounds ecological care in core Christian doctrines; calls for contemplative, reverent presence to creation

The growing convergence between religious traditions and ecological concerns, especially from the 1990s onward, has opened new pathways for faithful engagement with the Earth. In his message during World Day of Peace, St. John Paul II highlighted the environmental crisis as a moral concern, urging especially the youth to take up the role of caretakers rather than users of the Earth. He saw the ecological challenge as part of a deeper moral and spiritual crisis, calling for an "ecological conversion" rooted in faith, responsibility, and a deep respect for all forms of life.<sup>47</sup> For Gary Gardner, this implies that religious traditions are not merely belief systems but also powerful cultural forces that shape moral imagination, generate social capital, and mobilize collective energy for systemic change. These spiritual and communal assets, he notes, are indispensable in the effort to create a just and sustainable world.<sup>48</sup> In this context, major religious communities have begun to engage more visibly with environmental issues, crafting declarations, influencing policy, and integrating ecological themes into educational programs.<sup>49</sup> Gardner emphasizes that the moral teachings and practices of many religious traditions, particularly their warnings against material excess and concern for social equity, are deeply compatible with sustainability.<sup>50</sup> For both ecological advocates

<sup>47</sup> Pope John Paul II, *Message for the Celebration of the World Day of Peace: Peace with God the Creator, Peace with All of Creation*, January 1, 1990, Vatican Archive, [https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/peace/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_mes\\_19891208\\_xxiii-world-day-for-peace.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/peace/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_19891208_xxiii-world-day-for-peace.html).

<sup>48</sup> Gary Gardner, *Inspiring Progress: Religions' Contributions to Sustainable Development* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2006), 2.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 2–4.





and spiritual leaders, healing the Earth requires the “full engagement of the human spirit.”<sup>51</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether, a theologian known for her work in ecofeminism and liberation theology, brings this perspective to bear within the Catholic tradition. She argues that Catholicism possesses theological and spiritual resources that can animate ecological responsibility, particularly its sacramental vision of creation.<sup>52</sup> Ruether urges a response of hope, grounded in a renewed appreciation for creation as sacred. The Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences (FABC) echoes this emphasis, identifying sacramental theology as a vital theological wellspring in confronting ecological crises.<sup>53</sup> In Catholic understanding, creation is not inert matter but a living sign and instrument of God’s grace, and thus a locus for divine-human encounters.

This sacramental worldview has inspired figures like Thomas Berry, Sean McDonagh, and Larry Rasmussen to recover a cosmic spirituality within Christianity, one that draws on ancient insights while responding to contemporary ecological breakdown. Alongside Ruether and Sally McFague, they see sacramental tradition not only as symbolic but as spiritually generative calling believers to perceive the Earth as sacred and intrinsically connected to God’s salvific work.<sup>54</sup> Rasmussen argues for a shift from stewardship ethics to sacramental cosmology, in which material reality is viewed as a transparent medium of divine presence.<sup>55</sup> The sacraments

dramatize this conviction: ordinary elements such as bread, wine, water, oil, and even human touch become vessels of grace. José de Mesa articulates this approach as a “sacramental attitude,” a way of encountering the world that sees in it not only functionality but mystery and presence.<sup>56</sup> Such an attitude compels a moral and spiritual reawakening of the dignity of all creation. The mistreatment of animals, increasingly documented in public discourse and addressed by groups like the Philippine Animal Welfare Society (PAWS), is not a separate issue but part of the wider spiritual crisis in humanity’s fractured relationship with fellow creatures.<sup>57</sup> As Pope Francis reminds us in *Laudato Si’*, “everything is related,” bound together by God’s love for every creature.<sup>58</sup>

This theological perspective aligns closely with the doctrine of the Incarnation. Drawing from the writings of St. Irenaeus, Ruether highlights how creation itself participates in the incarnational mystery.<sup>59</sup> The material world is not simply a backdrop to salvation, but a participant in it. Irenaeus condemned Gnostic dualism for denying the holiness of the body and the Earth, affirming instead that all creation is redeemed through Christ’s embodiment.<sup>60</sup> In this cosmological vision, expressed in Colossians 1:15–20, Christ is the “firstborn of all creation,” uniting the beginning and end of creation’s story in his person. Ruether reads this passage as a testament to the continuity between creation, incarnation, and redemption.<sup>61</sup> The prologue of *John’s Gospel* similarly proclaims that “all things came into being through him,” and that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us,

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>52</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Gaia and God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 85.

<sup>53</sup> Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences (FABC), *Living the Eucharist in Asia: Theological and Pastoral Reflections on the Eucharist* (Manila: FABC Office of Theological Concerns, 2007), 26.

<sup>54</sup> Thomas Berry, *The Great Work: Our Way into the Future* (New York: Bell Tower, 1999); Sean McDonagh, *To Care for the Earth* (Manila: Claretian Publications, 1986); Larry L. Rasmussen, *Earth Community, Earth Ethics* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996); Rosemary Radford Ruether and Sally McFague, *Christianity and Ecology: Seeking the Well-being of Earth and Humans* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).

<sup>55</sup> Larry Rasmussen, *Earth Community, Earth Ethics* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996), 47.

<sup>56</sup> José de Mesa, *Why Theology is Never Far from Home* (Quezon City: Maryhill School of Theology, 2003), 103.

<sup>57</sup> Philippine Animal Welfare Society (PAWS), “Advocacy,” PAWS.org.ph, accessed April 2025.

<sup>58</sup> Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’: On Care for Our Common Home* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2015), no. 92.

<sup>59</sup> Ruether, *Gaia and God*, 104.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 105.

<sup>61</sup> Colossians 1:15–20 (NRSV).





revealing the divine presence within creation itself.<sup>62</sup> The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* affirms this sacramental theology, teaching that the world was created for God's glory and that salvation history begins with creation.<sup>63</sup> St. Bonaventure reinforces this understanding, portraying all of creation as a mirror of divine goodness.<sup>64</sup> Moreover, the poetic celebration of creation in Psalm 104 and the hopeful yearning of Romans 8:19–23 reveal that creation is not only sustained by God but longs for its ultimate redemption and transfiguration.<sup>65</sup>

Catholic liturgy enacts this theology. In the Eucharist, bread and wine, fruits of the Earth, are taken up into the mystery of Christ's Body and Blood.<sup>66</sup> Ruether sees this sacramental mingling of matter and spirit as a powerful affirmation of the Earth's holiness.<sup>67</sup> Pope Francis expands on this in *Laudato Si'*, writing that "the entire material universe speaks of God's love."<sup>68</sup> This echoes the spiritual vision of St. Francis of Assisi, who recognized each creature as a reflection of God and a companion on the journey to holiness.<sup>69</sup> McDonagh emphasizes that such a view fosters not only reverence but communion with creation.<sup>70</sup> Rasmussen similarly advocates for a "panentheistic" theology, one that holds the transcendent and immanent together, allowing the divine to be encountered in the ordinary.<sup>71</sup> The sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist provide tangible expressions of this ecological theology. Baptism, through water, evokes the sacredness of life itself, its cleansing, nourishing, and generative

power. McDonagh argues that water's theological symbolism is inseparable from its ecological significance.<sup>72</sup> Yet water, like many natural elements, has become endangered by human exploitation, reflecting a distorted relationship with creation. McDonagh, echoing Thomas Aquinas, asserts that each creature reflects God's goodness in its unique way, and that biodiversity is a necessary expression of divine abundance.<sup>73</sup>

Such insights are particularly relevant in the Philippine context, where ecosystems are threatened, and species like the Philippine eagle face extinction. McDonagh recounts how the eagle has become a prophetic symbol, reminding us of creation's plea for protection and reverence.<sup>74</sup> Both Ruether and Gardner call for a spiritual reorientation rooted in religious mandates that prioritize ecological regeneration and long-term sustainability.<sup>75</sup> Hessel and Ruether assert that the cosmos itself radiates God's presence, inviting humanity into a deeper reverence for the Earth.<sup>76</sup> As Matthew Fox puts it, all creation bears the "footprints" of the divine.<sup>77</sup> Rasmussen warns that the ecological crisis cannot be separated from the legacy of dualistic thinking that treats matter as disposable and spirit as eternal.<sup>78</sup> In particular, he critiques the ideology of globalization that places economic growth above ecological integrity.<sup>79</sup> This mindset, he argues, alienates us from the Earth and one another.

As Filipino Catholics, there is a need to reclaim our sacramental heritage as a lens through which

<sup>62</sup> John 1:1–5, 14 (NRSV).

<sup>63</sup> Ruether, *Gaia and God*, 106.

<sup>64</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1994), nos. 279–314.

<sup>65</sup> Psalm 104:1–30; Romans 8:19–23 (NRSV).

<sup>66</sup> St. Bonaventure, *The Soul's Journey into God*, trans. Ewert Cousins (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 54.

<sup>67</sup> Ruether, *Gaia and God*, 114.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>69</sup> Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, no. 84.

<sup>70</sup> Iliá Delio, Keith Douglass Warner, and Pamela Wood, *Care for Creation: A Franciscan Spirituality of the Earth* (Cincinnati: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2008), 59.

<sup>71</sup> McDonagh, *To Care for the Earth*, 77.

<sup>72</sup> Larry Rasmussen, *Earth-Honoring Faith: Religious Ethics in a New Key* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 39.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>74</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 47, a. 1.

<sup>75</sup> Sean McDonagh, *Greening the Christian Millennium* (Manila: Claretian Publications, 1999), 65.

<sup>76</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Integrating Ecofeminism, Globalization, and World Religions* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 91.

<sup>77</sup> Dieter T. Hessel and Rosemary Radford Ruether, eds., *Christianity, and Ecology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 44.

<sup>78</sup> Matthew Fox, *Original Blessing* (Santa Fe, NM: Bear & Company, 1983), 36.

<sup>79</sup> Rasmussen, *Earth-Honoring Faith*, 88.





we see and care for the Earth. Pope Francis' invitation to see Earth as our sister challenges us to move beyond technical solutions toward a renewed spiritual commitment. Rasmussen offers the concept of an "evolutionary sacramentalist cosmology," a vision that is grounded in relationship, presence, and reverence.<sup>80</sup> The liturgical calendar, shaped by natural rhythms, offers the Church a pattern for renewing ecological consciousness. McDonagh notes that liturgical celebrations rooted in water, fire, bread, oil, and light can become moments of ecological conversion.<sup>81</sup> At the heart of the Christian faith lies the Incarnation: God made flesh in Jesus Christ, who sanctifies creation by becoming part of it. This truth is not merely theological; it is ecological. The sacramental tradition of the Church reminds us to see Earth not only as a home but as a sacred mystery, a sacrament through which God continues to reveal and redeem.

#### REIMAGINED PASTORAL APPROACH TO SACRAMENTAL TRADITION FOR FAITHFUL EARTHKEEPING

In this time of deep ecological uncertainty, the Church is called to rediscover the sacramental tradition not only as rites and teachings within church walls but as ways of seeing and relating to the whole of creation. If we truly believe the Earth is "charged with the grandeur of God," as Gerard Manley Hopkins, a British poet and Jesuit priest, once wrote, then our pastoral practice must help the faithful see the world with sacramental eyes trained to notice grace in soil, rivers, seasons, and the lives of creatures. Here are some proposed creative yet grounded in the sacramental tradition pastoral activities:

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 122.

<sup>81</sup> Sean McDonagh, *The Greening of the Church* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1990), 33.

**Sacramental Pilgrimage in the Local Landscape.** Rather than limiting sacramental experience to church walls, pastoral leaders can organize ecological pilgrimages that connect spiritual reflection with local ecosystems. Participants walk through forests, coastlines, or urban gardens, praying the sacraments in symbolic ways, blessing rivers as baptismal waters, sharing Eucharistic bread from local grains, and anointing each other with native oils. This allows the sacramental tradition to breathe through place and presence, making Earth itself a sanctuary.

**The Parish Garden as a Liturgical Space.** Parishes can create "sacramental gardens," dedicated spaces where liturgies, blessings, and catechesis happen in tune with natural rhythms. These gardens become spaces for baptismal renewal, harvest feasts, ecological mourning, and Eucharistic thanksgiving. Children plant seeds as a symbol of hope; elders bless the soil as sacred ground. The garden becomes not just a backdrop but a living altar where Earth and Heaven meet.

**Earth-Keeping as Story-Keeping.** Sacramental tradition is not only theological. It is also a story. A unique pastoral approach includes developing "eco-sacramental storytelling circles" in communities. Here, people gather to share narratives of their encounters with creation, ecological losses, ancestral land wisdom, and moments of grace in nature. These are seen as contemporary expressions of sacramentality, real-life testimonies of God's presence. These stories are curated liturgically through art, song, and public prayer.

**Earth-Based Anointing and Blessings of Thresholds.** Reclaiming the ancient Christian practice of blessing thresholds (homes, harvests, births, and deaths), pastoral ministers can offer "rituals of Earth-anointing" at critical ecological





thresholds, such as at the start of planting seasons, after typhoons, during ecological restoration efforts, or in areas affected by extractive industries. These rituals offer prayer, oil, and symbols of healing, marking moments of grief and hope in communion with creation.

**Integrating Indigenous and Sacramental Cosmologies.** A unique pastoral approach engages intercultural dialogue between Catholic sacramental theology and Indigenous cosmologies. This does not dilute doctrine but expands its depth. For example, Indigenous rituals of honoring land, rivers, and ancestors can be dialogically linked with sacramental gestures of Eucharist and Anointing. This approach respects diverse cultural theologies while weaving a shared commitment to Earth as sacred.

**Sacramental Journaling and the “Ecological Examen.”** Pastoral programs can invite parishioners into spiritual journaling practices that explore their relationship with creation through a sacramental lens. Inspired by the Ignatian Examen, the “Ecological Examen” helps individuals prayerfully reflect on how they encounter God in creation, how their lifestyle choices honor or harm the Earth, and how they might grow in ecological virtue. This interior practice becomes an everyday sacrament of awareness and conversion.

**Sacramental Silence: The Liturgy of Listening to Creation.** A forgotten sacrament of our time may be **silence**, not as absence, but as reverent attention. Pastoral leaders can guide communities in practicing “**sacramental silence**,” especially in natural settings, as a way to honor the voice of creation. Listening to wind, birds, rustling trees, or flowing streams becomes a liturgy of presence, training hearts to perceive divine whispers in non-human voices. This fosters humility, attentiveness, and communion.

**Eco-Sabbath: A Family Day with Creation.** Once a month, families set aside a day to slow down, unplug, and reconnect with the members of the families and God through creation. They turn off gadgets, reduce electricity use, avoid shopping, and spend time together outdoors like gardening, composting, walking, or just enjoying the fresh air. Meals are simple and homemade, using local or leftover ingredients. The day begins and ends with a short prayer or reflection on nature. It is a small, peaceful way for families to rest, grow closer, and live more gently on the Earth.

## CONCLUSION

The ecological crisis in the Philippines demands more than technical fixes or legal reforms. It calls for a deeper change in how people perceive and relate to the Earth. In a culture where Catholicism permeates everyday life, the Church has a unique and urgent role to play. Its sacramental tradition holds a rich theological vision, one that sees the material world not as disposable but as sacred, an active participant in God’s saving work. This perspective invites the faithful to see creation not as a mere backdrop to spiritual life but as the very space in which God’s presence is encountered and revealed. This is most applicable in the Philippines, with its worsening environmental conditions.

An interpretive theological and pastoral approach to this tradition means re-reading the Church’s teachings and liturgical acts as lived invitations to conversion spiritually, socially, and ecologically. It involves reimagining pastoral ministry in ways that help communities connect sacramental meaning with the realities of the land, water, and climate around them. Through this lens, pastoral practice becomes a means of ecological formation: guiding people to pray





with creation, grieve the ecological loss, and live in ways that reflect the sacredness of the world. This approach affirms that faithful Earthkeeping is not peripheral to Christian life. It is central, an expression of what it means to walk in the mystery of Christ in today's wounded but grace-filled world.

In this light, the Church is called to animate new forms of community and catechesis that bring sacramental theology into dialogue with the Earth's cries. From parish gardens to riverside blessings, from ecological storytelling to liturgical silence in natural spaces, these practices express a faith that is attentive, rooted, and responsive. They nurture what Filipino theologian José de Mesa describes as a "sacramental attitude," a way of seeing the Earth as relative, not resource. This is where the Church's prophetic role lies today, not only in speaking against environmental harm but in helping people live out the sacramental principles as a way of caring for our common home. In doing so, the Church becomes a companion on the journey toward ecological conversion, offering hope, rooted in tradition, for a more faithful and sustainable future.

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