



The Church as An Ecological Community

¹Gregorius Loudowick Lengga Wangge

²Rafael Isharianto

¹ Program Magister Filsafat Sekolah Tinggi Filsafat Teologi Widya Sasana, Malang, Indonesia

² Sekolah Tinggi Filsafat Teologi Widya Sasana, Malang, Indonesia

¹ gregoriuswangge17@gmail.com, ² rafaalescat@yahoo.fr

Article History:

Received: 5 July 2024

Revised: 27 July 2024

Accepted: 7 August 2024

Published: 7 August 2024

Keywords: ecological

repentance; synthesis model;

ecclesial based community

Abstract: This paper addresses the global ecological crisis, highlighting a significant decline in human stewardship of the natural world. The focus is on the Church's role as a communion of God's people within the Mystical Body of Christ, emphasizing the need for the Church to act as a sacrament of salvation for both nature and humanity. The study aims to explore the Church's identity as an ecological communion that views nature as a subject, not an object. It utilizes a contextual theological approach, specifically the synthesis model advocated by Stephen B. Bevans, as exemplified in Pope Francis's Encyclical *Laudato Si'*. This encyclical proposes "ecological conversion" as a response to the crisis, fostering a harmonious relationship among God's creatures. A practical example is the Soverdia Association of St. Pius X Tenggarong Parish's initiative to collect used oil, demonstrating the Church's commitment to ecological salvation.

INTRODUCTION

The Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) introduced reforms to the paradigm and understanding of the Church. Primarily, the Church is understood as a communion of all believers with God through Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit. This communion forms the basis of the visible Church (the Pilgrim Church), which includes local congregations and those with specific ministries. Together, the Church is called to manifest God's work of salvation in the world. The Church's mission includes five essential tasks: communion (*koinonia*), proclamation (*kerygma*), sanctification/liturgy (*leiturgia*), service (*diakonia*), and witness (*martyria*). One of these tasks is to build a life of communion, emphasizing that the Church is not just an organization but a fellowship of God's people united in Christ, reflecting the Trinitarian nature of God. This communion is rooted in mutual love, mirroring the relationship within the Trinity. This divine love is shared with the Church through the Word, ministry, and sacraments, calling believers to live in mutual sharing and unity.

In recent decades, the intersection of theology and ecology has garnered increasing attention, driven by a growing recognition of the environmental crises facing our planet (Haryono, 2021). This confluence is not merely a matter of academic interest but a profound theological urgency that challenges the very foundations of Christian thought and practice. The concept of the Church as an ecological community emerges as a pivotal response to this crisis, rooted in the belief that creation care is integral to Christian faith. This introduction explores the background and theological urgency of viewing the Church as an ecological community, highlighting its biblical foundations, historical development, and contemporary relevance.

The biblical narrative begins with the account of creation in Genesis, where God creates the world and declares it "very good" (Genesis 1:31). Humanity is placed in the Garden of Eden with the responsibility to "till it and keep it" (Genesis 2:15), signifying a stewardship role over creation. This foundational text establishes a relational framework between humans and the rest of creation, one of care, responsibility, and harmony. Throughout the OT Scriptures, there are numerous references to the interdependence of humanity and the natural world. The Psalms often celebrate the beauty and majesty of creation (Psalm 19; 104), while the prophetic literature warns against the consequences of exploiting and neglecting the land (Isaiah 24:4-6; Hosea 4:1-3). These texts underscore a theological vision where creation is not merely a backdrop for human activity but a dynamic participant in God's redemptive plan.

The New Testament continues this theme, with Jesus frequently using nature in his parables and teachings (Matthew 6:26-30; Mark 4:1-9). The Apostle Paul, in his epistle to the Romans, speaks of the whole creation "groaning" in anticipation of redemption (Romans 8:22-23). This imagery reinforces the notion that the salvation brought by Christ is cosmic in scope, encompassing all of creation.

Historically, the Christian tradition has sometimes struggled to maintain this ecological vision. The rise of industrialization and the accompanying exploitation of natural resources have often been justified by a misinterpretation of the biblical mandate to "subdue" the earth (Genesis 1:28). This has led to a dualistic view where the spiritual is valued over the material, and human dominion is exercised at the expense of ecological well-being (Troster, 2013). However, there have always been voices within the tradition advocating for a more integrated understanding of humanity's relationship with the natural world. Saint Francis of Assisi, with his deep love for all creatures, is a notable example. In more recent times, theologians and church leaders have begun to reclaim this ecological vision, emphasizing the need for a theology that recognizes the interconnectedness of all life.

The urgency of this theological task is underscored by the contemporary environmental crisis. Climate change, deforestation, loss of biodiversity, and pollution are just some of the issues that threaten the integrity of creation. These problems are not merely scientific or economic but deeply moral and spiritual. They call for a response that is rooted in a profound reverence for life and a commitment to justice. The theological urgency of viewing the Church as an ecological community is also reflected in the growing body of eco-theology. This field of study explores the relationship between God, humanity, and the natural world, offering a framework for understanding creation as a sacrament of God's presence. Eco-theologians argue that a proper understanding of the doctrine of creation leads to a commitment to environmental justice and sustainability.

The ecological community concept emphasizes the Church's role as a witness to God's care for all creation. It calls for a reimagining of Christian practices, from liturgy and sacraments to community life and mission, in ways that reflect an ethic of care for the earth. This includes practices such as sustainable living, advocacy for environmental policies, and the promotion of ecological education within church communities. Furthermore, the Church as an

ecological community seeks to embody a vision of shalom, the biblical concept of peace that encompasses wholeness, harmony, and justice. This vision challenges the Church to address the environmental crisis not only through practical actions but also by fostering a spiritual transformation that aligns human desires and behaviors with God's purposes for creation.

The current ecological crisis, resulting from humanity's poor treatment of nature, reflects a fundamental misperception of humans' relationship with nature. This perspective reduces nature to a mere resource for human needs and profit, leading to various ecological harms such as pollution, climate change, water scarcity, waste, and loss of biodiversity. The Church, as a communion of believers united by the love of the Trinity, is called to respond to this crisis by engaging in contextual faith teachings relevant to today's world.

Three Popes have emphasized the importance of caring for creation. Pope John Paul II, in his 1990 World Day of Peace message titled "Peace with God the Creator, Peace with All of Creation," highlighted the loss of respect for nature and the irresponsible treatment of natural resources. He advocated for ecological education, emphasizing respect and responsibility towards oneself, others, and creation, recognizing nature as a gift from God to humanity and all creatures.

Second, Pope Benedict XVI, in various occasions and in his encyclical "Caritas in Veritate" (CV, 48-52), emphasized that Christian faith always maintains that the universe is a creation and a gift from God to humanity. This fundamental belief carries moral consequences, namely that we must collectively preserve, care for, and responsibly use natural resources, preparing them for future generations (Prasasti & Go, 2014).

Third, Pope Francis issued the encyclical *Laudato Si'* on May 24, 2015. In this encyclical, Pope Francis acknowledged the increasingly concerning state of the world, human relationships, and the environment (Hadut et al., 2023). It calls for a "ecological conversion" that recognizes the intrinsic value of all creation and the need for a holistic approach to environmental stewardship. The encyclical emphasizes that care for creation is an essential part of the Christian vocation, not an optional add-on. It challenges the Church to rethink its mission in light of the ecological crisis, advocating for an integral ecology that links environmental, economic, social, and cultural dimensions.

Pope Francis reminded us of this situation: "This sister now cries out to us because of the harm we have inflicted on her by our irresponsible use and abuse of the goods with which God has endowed her. We have come to see ourselves as her lords and masters, entitled to plunder her at will" (Francis & Harun, 2015). The violence present in our hearts, wounded by sin, is reflected in the symptoms of sickness evident in the soil, water, air, and all forms of life. Therefore, the earth is burdened and laid waste, including the poor who are most abandoned and mistreated by us. The earth "groans in travail" (Rom 8:22). We forget that we ourselves are made from the dust of the earth (Gen 2:7); our bodies are composed of its elements, we breathe its air, and we are nourished by its waters.

In *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis speaks to the world about the dignity of nature and its place in human life. The concept of *communio* is expressed in the term "universal communion"

(LS, article 89) Ginting, 2022). Pope Francis uses this expression to remind us that creation is the work of God's greatness and a testament to God's love and care for humanity. Moreover, nature contains spiritual values that connect nature, humans, and God. Nature is not merely an object to be dominated and exploited; it is also a subject. Pope Francis also reminds us of the close dialogical relationship between nature and humanity, akin to that of siblings. This relationship is so intimate that harm to one result in harm to the other.

One of the key points emphasized by Pope Francis in *Laudato Si'* in response to the ecological crisis is ecological conversion (Meko et al., 2022). First, it involves recognizing the presence or existence of all things around human life. Second, following this recognition, the faithful are invited to respect their existence (land, air, water, trees, and other creatures). Third, they are called to care for and protect them as creatures of the Almighty God. Ecological conversion invites the faithful to be proactive in caring for the universe. In relation to the Church as a communion of believers united with the Triune God, ecological conversion is based on faith in the One God in Trinitarian communion, acknowledging that all reality bears the traces of the Triune God (Francis & Harun, 2015).

Quoting Patriarch Bartholomew, Pope Francis also calls for each of us to repent from how we have treated this planet. "No matter how small the ecological damage we have caused," we are called to acknowledge "our contributions, whether small or large, to the wounds and damage to creation. We are challenged to recognize our sins against the created world: for humans who destroy biodiversity; for those who diminish the earth's integrity by causing climate change, deforesting, or destroying wetlands; for those who pollute the earth's waters, soil, air, and life—these are all sins." Because "evil against nature is a sin against ourselves and a sin against God."

From the statements of these three Popes, it is clear that the ecological crisis is one of the serious problems of today's world. All three Popes advocate for ecological education or conversion. Pope Francis, in particular, calls humanity to undergo "ecological conversion," as outlined in *Laudato Si'*, articles 216-221.

In article 216, Pope Francis suggests the need for an ecological spirituality based on our faith belief that the Gospel fosters care and zeal to protect the world (art. 216). He highlights that not only is the "external desert" (the natural crisis situation in the world) expanding, but also the "internal desert" (the crisis of human inner life). Thus, the ecological crisis is a call for profound inner repentance. The form of repentance he teaches involves letting the fruits of one's encounter with Jesus Christ develop in relation to the world around them. For him, living out the call to protect God's creation is an integral part of a pious life, not optional or secondary in Christian experience (LS, 217). Remembering Saint Francis of Assisi, Pope Francis reminds us that a healthy relationship with creation is a dimension of complete human repentance (art. 218), a repentance that implies gratitude and generosity, a loving awareness that we are all part of a beautiful universal communion (LS, 220), and that every creature reflects something of God and carries a message for us to reflect upon (LS, 221). However, the Pope emphasizes that

individual initiatives are not enough to address our complex world situation; we need effective community networks (*LS*, 219).

Pope Francis invites all the faithful to change their perspective on nature: "This sister now cries out to us because of the harm we have inflicted on her by our irresponsible use and abuse of the goods with which God has endowed her. We have come to see ourselves as her lords and masters, entitled to plunder her. The violence present in our hearts, wounded by sin, is reflected in the symptoms of disease we see in the soil, water, air, and all forms of life. Therefore, the earth is burdened and laid waste, including the poor who are most neglected and mistreated by us" (Francis & Harun, 2015).

Belief in God provides strong motivation for each individual to dedicate everything they have for the common good. Humans are social beings who constantly need others to live. With this motivation, the drive to act grows stronger. Humans must realize that faith and ecology are an integral unity that exists because of God. Pope Francis reaffirms that humanity must always be aware of itself as believers, where the commitment to protect and preserve nature comes from faith (Francis & Harun, 2015). Without faith, how can there be a commitment to protect and preserve nature? Caring for and preserving nature must not be done half-heartedly. The commitment to preserve nature must be total. Half-hearted efforts will only create new disasters.

The Church has provided a clear perspective on how faith and ecology can coexist. Faith requires awareness from each individual. This awareness, formed within each person, will move them to act. The Church views the integration of faith and ecology not merely as a theory to be memorized but as a dynamic life that evolves with the changes in the world. Faith and ecology are dynamic and adapt to the changing times. The concept of salvation, traditionally focused on individual souls and human communities, is increasingly recognized as encompassing the entire cosmos. Climate change, with its far-reaching impacts, serves as a stark reminder that human actions affect not only other people but also the whole universe. This reality is echoed in the Apostle Paul's words in Romans 8:19-22, where he speaks of creation groaning in anticipation of redemption. Such insights urge a transformative view of creation, recognizing nature as God's work, valuable in its own right. This shift in perspective requires a fundamental change in mindset, or metanoia, with Christians leading the way.

Modernity has often reduced nature to mere material, valued only for its utility, as noted by Immanuel Kant, who posited that nature has a price but not dignity. In contrast, a Christian worldview inherently includes all creation, acknowledging its worth without falling into pantheism. This view recognizes that while dignity, linked to freedom and responsibility, is uniquely human, other creatures are not to be exploited at will. Saint Augustine captures this balance by asserting that creatures glorify their Creator not for our convenience, but by their very nature. This perspective calls for a profound reorientation in how we understand and interact with the natural world, placing Christians at the forefront of advocating for and embodying a holistic vision of salvation that honors all of creation.

The Church's response to human and ecological issues is one of disaster. The Church regards it as a disaster because the earth is increasingly damaged year after year. The depletion of the ozone layer is concrete evidence of the planet's deterioration. The ozone layer functions as a filter for ultraviolet rays before they reach the earth. Damage to the ozone layer causes skin cancer, crop failures due to incomplete photosynthesis, and threats to marine life due to contaminated food (Keraf, 2014). Many other damages also result from irresponsible actions. To change this perspective, Pope Francis calls for what he terms "ecological conversion." The ecological conversion envisioned by Pope Francis involves reconsidering oneself as a creation of God and embracing the Earth to repair the damage done (Marbun, 2019). In other words, ecological conversion allows every creation to meet and care for each other. Embracing God's call and work is a crucial part of living a pious life and not a secondary option in Christian experience (Francis & Harun, 2015).

The Church's involvement in addressing human and environmental issues has opened a new perspective for humanity. As stated above, faith and ecology are dynamic unities that adapt to changing times. Every believer is endowed with the ability to think clearly. The intellect given by God enables humans to develop new capacities and move beyond themselves towards others. If humans can adapt to this new perspective, it is likely that the previously hidden awareness will emerge and have a significant impact on life. Humans must encourage each other to create harmony within the created world (Marbun, 2019).

This enables a synergy that can address longstanding ecological issues (McDaniel, 2007). Peaceful and prosperous situations will arise from humanity itself. The Church helps believers cultivate a peaceful and prosperous situation. However, the Church does not work alone to achieve this situation. Cooperation with humanity is necessary. In this regard, humans play a crucial role. Harmony with the universe allows humans to deepen their understanding of themselves in a holistic way. Pope Francis invites all of humanity to actively participate in preserving the integrity of creation. The Church's involvement in human and environmental issues results in tangible actions. The call for ecological conversion has awakened humanity. Ecological conversion should not stop at mere exhortation. Action from all of humanity is required, leading to positive changes in how we view and treat the universe. The damage occurring on Earth has reached a dangerously critical stage. Human greed, as the pinnacle of creation, sometimes places humans as the most powerful beings on Earth. With the status of the pinnacle of creation, humans often assume that nature has provided everything. This shallow perspective has driven excessive exploitation (Purnomo, 2020; Indonesian Bishops' Conference, 2013).

METHOD

The method used in this study is the library research method. The researcher presents this paper by referring to various literatures on Catholic teachings that discuss the ecclesiology of *communio-koinonia* of the Catholic Church as an ecological communion. This research examines how these teachings are lived out by the *Soverdia* community in St. Pius X Parish in Tenggara, Archdiocese of Samarinda, utilizing sources such as books, journals, and relevant

articles. Through this literature review, the researcher aims to uncover the ecological dimension within the Catholic faith community in that parish.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The Soverdia community is a group of SVD (Society of the Divine Word) colleagues selected from among the faithful. The origins of the Soverdia community come from a group of lay people who willingly and consciously support the SVD missionaries in communicating the Word of God through works of charity and embodying the love of God the Father in today's world.

The Soverdia community is both a listener and a doer of the Word of God. This community is deeply involved in every church activity, particularly at St. Pius X Parish in Tenggarong. Their contributions are significant to the church life in the parish, especially during the early stages of navigating the new normal post-pandemic. Their presence also highlights a spirit of brotherhood and family that inspires the entire parish community. Despite having diverse backgrounds, the members of this community demonstrate unity, harmony, and a strong sense of fellowship. The Soverdia community acts as a partner in developing Christ's mission, serving as extensions of Christ's work. With a noble awareness and intention, they become responsible and dedicated individuals fulfilling their tasks through their unique talents and abilities.

The context of Soverdia in East Kalimantan is influenced by the region's situation. During the 2021 Idul Fitri holiday, two districts in East Kalimantan, Berau and Kutai Timur (Kutim), were hit by severe flooding affecting over 2,500 households. The focus is on the environmental damage caused by land conversion to coal mining concessions in upstream areas and along river basins.

Additionally, Samarinda, a city not far from Tenggarong (30 minutes travel time), is also affected by coal mining concessions in East Kalimantan. Samarinda is a frequent flood zone due to the presence of numerous coal mining and forestry industries. There are 349 former coal mining pits in Samarinda, which are blamed for environmental damage and increased flood intensity. This situation causes rapid flooding in Samarinda after just 30 minutes of rain, with the flood area expanding each year. In 2014, the water coverage was 1,300 hectares, which doubled to 2,100 hectares by 2018.

According to Pradharna Rupang from JATAM (Mining Advocacy Network) Kaltim, the industrial concession areas for mining, plantations, and forestry in Kaltim cover 70 to 80 percent of the total land area. Specifically, the areas are 5 million hectares for mining, 4 million hectares for plantations, and 5.5 million hectares for forestry, while the total land area of Kaltim is 12.7 million hectares. This irony reflects a land area deficit compared to industrial concessions in Kaltim. The decreasing forest cover and environmental pollution contribute to declining water quality.

In response, the Soverdia community of St. Pius X Parish in Tenggarong, East Kalimantan, serves as an ecological communion of the faithful. This year, the Soverdia community began its term for 2022-2025, officially renewing its commitment on January 20,

2022. The leadership includes Mr. John Jemawu as Chair, Mr. Yuven Enos as Vice-Chair, Mrs. Lucia Madonna as Secretary, and Mrs. Sri Utami as Treasurer. Alongside these core members, there are about 76 members (40 active), residing both in the parish center and its stations.

They demonstrate their commitment by gathering laypeople for apostolic work, aiming to be useful missionaries drawing from their experiences with God, both individually and in groups. Members of Soverdia learn to complement and enrich their callings through work and prayer. Some activities include monthly Eucharistic celebrations, group Rosary prayers at the Grotto of Mary, social work, JPIC (Justice, Peace, and Integrity of Creation) projects, and participating in parish event committees.

How does the salvation of God manifest in today's world through the Soverdia community? It is crucial to understand the context of today's world, including the ecological crisis. In the context of this ecological crisis, the Church, as a communion of the faithful that listens to and acts on the Word of God, has a moral responsibility to practice ecological conversion by following God's command to love and care for creation (Arianto et al., 2021). Loving and caring for the environment in the spirit of ecological conversion is a key aspect of the Church being truly the Mystical Body of Christ, bringing salvation. Therefore, the Church is expected to delve deeper into the mystery of Christ, becoming increasingly renewed in Him.

The Soverdia community of St. Pius X Parish in Tenggara is a categorical group of the faithful that has embraced and practiced ecological conversion as a form of their concern for the ecological crisis affecting the world today. The Soverdia community has presented itself as a representation of the Church as an ecological fellowship, a community that loves nature. One of their initiatives is a regular program for collecting used cooking oil. This effort is a form of ecological conversion and a way to heal the environment from ongoing damage.

One form of ecological conversion practiced by the Soverdia community is their regular program for collecting used cooking oil. This used oil is collected and sold as a biofuel, specifically biodiesel. The proceeds from these sales are used to fund financial support for the parish's pastoral work. Besides providing financial assistance to the parish, this program has a noble ecological goal of reducing water pollution, especially in East Kalimantan. This means that the benefits extend beyond the Church to the environment and people, also strengthening social bonds within their community. They aim to build networks with neighbors and local groups to support each other in environmental conservation efforts.

Used cooking oil is obtained from frying or cooking leftovers and is often referred to as waste oil. This type of oil contains carcinogenic compounds that are toxic and harmful to human health, potentially triggering diseases such as cancer. Moreover, if disposed of improperly, used oil can become hazardous waste (B3), potentially poisoning ecosystems and disrupting the Biological Oxygen Demand (BOD) and Chemical Oxygen Demand (COD) balances essential for supporting life (Kosasih, 2016).

The Soverdia community at St. Pius X Parish in Tenggara shows dedication to their mission and calling in proclaiming God's love. They not only collaborate and support all members within their group but also act as salt and light for the world and those outside their

community. One distinctive ecological activity of Soverdia is their routine program of collecting used cooking oil (Khunaivi, 2023; Damayanti, 2021). This oil is collected and sold as a plant-based fuel, namely biodiesel. The proceeds from the sales are allocated to financial support for parish pastoral activities. Besides financially assisting the parish, the program's primary aim is its noble ecological goal. In the spirit of ecological conversion, this program also helps reduce water pollution and conserve the environment. Thus, the Soverdia community of St. Pius X Parish in Tenggara—East Kalimantan District—truly embodies its calling to love and care for nature as an ecological community of the faithful.

In many ways, ecological communities serve as models for broader society, demonstrating how a more sustainable way of life can be achieved (Arianto, et al., 2021). They show that with commitment, collaboration, and concrete actions, it is possible to create a greener and healthier future. By inspiring and empowering individuals to act, these communities contribute to the global movement to protect our planet and ensure that future generations can enjoy a clean and healthy environment (Denar et al., 2022). Overall, ecological communities are a tangible proof that collective efforts can lead to significant changes in protecting and restoring the environment. They demonstrate that small actions at the local level can have a large impact on a global scale. By continuing to work together and inspiring more people to join this movement, they hope to create a more sustainable and harmonious world for all living beings.

CONCLUSION

The Church is the Mystical Body of Christ, which, through its members, carries out the mission of God's salvation in Jesus Christ and under the guidance of the Holy Spirit for the world. The issue of the ecological crisis also falls under the Church's responsibility in manifesting God's work of salvation. Nature is our sibling, to be cared for and loved as a subject equal to humans as fellow creations of God. Nature was created through the greatness of God's hand, designed beautifully with His love. This means that nature also contains the richness of God. God can also be present in nature. Thus, faith and ecology are inherently inseparable.

Faith and ecology are dynamic aspects that continually adapt to the changing times. Humans will always live alongside nature. Nature provides everything needed for human life. Humans help nature by protecting and preserving it. However, humans are sometimes tempted to exert absolute power over nature. This temptation leads to attitudes of greed and avarice. Such attitudes render the harmony created by God futile. To address this issue, all parties must exercise restraint and reflect on their actions. The Church pays significant attention to this problem. Every person is called to protect and preserve God's creation (Juhani & Firmanto 2021). What God has given to humanity is an invaluable gift. The world situation will continually change. Faith and ecology will also experience changes. Therefore, every individual must start cultivating the spirit of ecological conversion from now on. With a harmonious and aligned life of faith and ecology, a more sustainable and harmonious world will be created on this Earth (Surip, 2020).

Acknowledgement: The authors acknowledge parishioners of the Diocese of Samarinda who helped the authors collect data, analyze, and write this research article.

Conflict of Interest: The authors declared that the research results that have been carried out are free from conflicts of interest from certain parties who may claim the results of their research.

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