
CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITIES: THEIR ROLE IN COMBATTING ECOLOGICAL DISASTER, THE GROWTH OF POVERTY AND THE CRISIS IN HEALTH CARE

基督教大学在抗击生态灾难、贫困增长和医疗保健危机中的作用

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ABSTRACT

Silliman University, Dumaguete, Philippines, is widely recognized as a pioneer in developing programs designed to promote environmental responsibility, not only among its students, faculty and staff, but also in and for the local communities that it serves on the island of Negros in the Visayas in the Philippines. With the visit to the Philippines of Pope Francis in January 2015, the University welcomed his message challenging all the Filipino people to do their part in mitigating catastrophic climate change. His vision of hope, as promoted worldwide in the encyclical letter, *Laudato si'* (2015), suggested how doing many small things to care for our common home might actually help all of us to become more effective stewards in preserving and enhancing the natural environment, while seeking justice and peace. The Macau Ricci Institute's second issue (June 2018) featured three interrelated essays presenting *Laudato si'*, analysing its practical significance for waste management policies and practices, and the responses specifically emerging from communities impacted by Typhoon

Haiyan in the Philippines¹. What follows is presented as further testimony to what must be done to respond to the interrelated crises of environmental degradation, increasing poverty, and deteriorating health care. Here the focus is on institutional change in a significant NGO, what can happen when a mid-sized private university, Christian in its inspiration, foundation, and ongoing commitment, collectively reexamines its mission, policies and practices to respond affirmatively to our common desire to create a sustainable future².



SILLIMAN UNIVERSITY AND THE ECOLOGICAL CRISES

Asia is no stranger to ecological disasters, extreme poverty conditions, and health outbreaks. Just last month several countries in Asia were swept by typhoons, earthquakes, and tsunami. Typhoon Mangkhut, in mid-September 2018, is the strongest typhoon to make landfall in the Philippines since Typhoon Haiyan in November 2013, and the same typhoon is Hong Kong's most intense storm ever recorded. In both places the disaster caused significant damage. The initiatives taken by the survivors, their concerted responses, highlighted the value of community spirit in tackling natural disasters. In Palu, in the Indonesian island of Sulawesi, five days in late September brought five earthquakes and a resultant tsunami. At least 2000 people were killed and thousands more were buried beneath the soil along with their homes and belongings. In

1 See the essays published in the *Macau Ricci Institute Journal*, second issue (June 2018): D. P. McCann, "Laudato si': Mobilizing Christian Faith and Practice for Environmental Responsibility" (pp. 13-22); F. Gassner, "Science and *Laudato si'* on the Paradigm Shift toward Sustainable Development" (pp. 24-35); M. Pufpaff, "Karaniwang Tao: Filipino Response to Pope Francis' Challenge on Climate Change" (pp. 36-46).

2 This paper was originally presented as "The Role of Christian Universities in the Context of Ecological Disaster, Growth of Poverty, and Health Crisis: How to redefine socially responsible education praxis" at the consultation workshop on the "Role and Relevance of Christian Education in a Multi-Religious, Secular Asia" hosted by Chang Jung Christian University, Tainan, Taiwan, on 16-17 October 2018. The original text can be found online at Silliman University's website, under the heading of "About: President's Corner," accessed online at <https://su.edu.ph/role-of-christian-universities-in-the-context-of-ecological-disaster-growth-of-poverty-and-health-crisis-how-to-redefine-socially-responsible-education-praxis/>

response to Typhoon Mangkhut, a group of faculty and students from Silliman University under our Calamity Response Program traveled to Naga, Cebu where several houses and about 100 people were buried in a landslide due to heavy rainfall. The team of volunteers carried out various tasks—physical health assessment, psychological first aid and psychosocial intervention activities, and assistance to rescue and relief operations. Why should university people be there? Why transport staff, faculty, and students to a place that is in itself a health and security risk? News and media reports, scientific journals, conferences, and summits around the globe have escalated their focus on catastrophic climate change and related crises as major plagues attacking the world today. Evidence and scientific data about these crises abound. But targeted and collective responses to these issues are wanting. How can Christian universities address these issues and chart ways to act on these urgent concerns?

Higher-education institutions that profess a Christian mission need to demonstrate and set good practices in battling against ecological destruction, rising poverty, and the health crisis. Each college or university rooted in the tenets of Christian faith must be steadfast in its vision and mission in these changing times. But, certainly the teaching-learning contexts have changed. The ways of thinking about and carrying out the mission of Christian higher education must adapt strategies consistent with the needs of the current conditions. Now more than ever the threats of ecological disaster and related crises not only have escalated, but also have revealed themselves to be interrelated. In facing these challenges, Christian colleges and universities must re-examine their understanding of the faith and mission in the ministry of teaching. What are the moral imperatives? What is the nature and scope of our sociocultural and moral response? How can we best respond to these identified challenges?

MORAL IMPERATIVES

Can Christian institutions turn a blind eye to these issues, as if our traditional ways of doing

business were a sufficient response? Obviously, not. Christian commitment is inspired by a vision of the earth as our common home. This is the telling phrase used by Pope Francis, for example, in his recent encyclical letter, *Laudato si'* which, while meditating on the witness of St. Francis of Assisi, spells out the meaning of the Bible's claim, not only that we are made to the image and likeness of God, but also that we have been given "dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth" (Genesis 1:26, KJV). Biblical scholars insist that the "dominion" entrusted to us—otherwise known as "stewardship"—does not mean that we are free to do anything we want with the earth and our fellow creatures. We are not free to exploit resources—human, animal, or mineral—exclusively for our own comfort and security. Caring for our common home means cultivating the earth so that all creatures can fulfill their role in pursuing our common destiny. "Dominion" must not be confused with domination, at least not if we are to be faithful in our stewardship.

Because we are gifted to bear in ourselves the image and likeness of God, our stewardship means first of all the cultivation of intelligence. Education consistent with a Christian commitment means pursuing the learning that will enable us to understand our common home, its capacities and its constraints, so that we can respond more effectively, not only to our own needs, but also to the needs of all our fellow creatures. In light of what we now know about the impact of human activity in exacerbating the interrelated threats of ecological disaster, rising poverty, and the health crisis, we must re-examine our values and institutional practices, our teaching methods and curricula, to determine whether in fact we are effective in responding to the vision our institutions profess as Christian.

The image and likeness of God animating each of us, first of all, demands that education be not about indoctrination—or other strategies designed to enforce compliance with previously

established traditions. Education, responsive to the image and likeness of God in us, is about pursuing the truth wherever it may lead, and cultivating the courage to act upon the truth, however much it may run contrary to received wisdom. For over a generation now, scientists have been documenting the growing effects of climate change and its role in increasing both the frequency and the depth of ecological disasters. With so many horrible examples to learn from, now we find ourselves confronted with another inconvenient truth, namely, that climate change is but the initial stage of an ecological crisis of global dimensions.

A Christian commitment to education for stewardship demands no less of us. But as Pope Francis—whose message is not just for Catholics, but for all of us—has pointed out, embracing an ecological awareness requires more than accumulating information, and advancing sound policies, however important these may be. A change of heart is what is required for this awareness to become as natural as breathing.

What we ought to be learning from this new intelligence is that we can no longer address our stewardship obligations in piecemeal fashion. As Pope Francis pointed out in *Laudato si'*, we cannot accept a "trade-off" in which we address the looming global temperature rise, while either ignoring the cries of the poor and the sick or addressing them on a business-as-usual basis. If, as appears to be the case, the problems are interrelated, then we cannot solve any one of them while ignoring the others. Awareness of

the ecological crisis must not be used as a pretext for constructing safe havens for the rich, while excluding the poor and the sick. While this is clearly a global problem—easily lending itself to perpetuating the blame games of North vs. South, First World vs. Third World, and the like—we must also recognize that in each of our countries we see elites acting to save themselves at the expense of everyone else. As Pope Francis pointed out in *Laudato si'*, such stratagems for saving “the best and the brightest” while consigning their neighbors to perdition simply will not work. What we are learning confirms the wisdom of Jesus’ warning against indifference to the needs of the poor and the vulnerable: “Whatever you

of plastic pollution that begins with straws and single-use plastic bags—as well as the birds of the air, and the animals who, like us, roam the earth. We would know that stewardship includes all of these, and we would make a priority of focusing our educational effort on how to cultivate a world in which they, too, can flourish.

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do to the least of my brothers and sisters, that you do unto Me” (Matthew 25:31-46).

Developing the intelligence required of us to carry out our stewardship responsibilities means embracing an ecological awareness as a habit of mind and heart, in light of which we come “to live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28). Were such an awareness to become as natural as breathing, we would have no difficulty in identifying the least of our brothers and sisters commended to us by Jesus. We would know that the least not only include our poor neighbors, starting with the street urchins in my country desperately trying to shake us down for a few pesos by helping us park our cars, but also the living creatures of the sea—starting with the coral reefs and all the fish who live among them, as well as the sea turtles, and all our watery “brothers and sisters” now put at risk because of the pandemic

be. A change of heart is what is required for this awareness to become as natural as breathing. But one would hope, this is an insight that has always inspired new learning in Christian colleges and universities. What, then, can we do to make it come alive in response to the interrelated threats of ecological destruction, rising poverty, and the health crisis?

SOCIOCULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

I come from a country with profound experiences of the horrible consequences of environmental irresponsibility. Each disaster that comes our way— natural ones, to be sure, such as typhoons, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, but especially those caused by human activities such as the wanton destruction of forests, or destructive mining activity—breeds more poverty and spawns more health risks among the people.

The physical evidence of such consequences in our country is staggering.

Filipinos as a people are known to be generally happy, *matiisin* (long suffering), resilient, adaptable, hardworking and flexible. Above all, Filipinos have a strong faith in God—the One who is *Ilaw, Kasama, at Tagapagligtas* (Light, Companion, and Protector) in our life journey. These strengths of the Filipino character are good elements to build on as we face challenges at work (especially when facing difficult working conditions far from home), school, or play. In relating with others, Filipinos exude *pakikipagkapwa-tao* (literally, being one with others), a trait that is a natural spark for collaboration and cooperation in group efforts toward alleviating the sufferings of poor communities. How can colleges and universities harness these strengths in times of trouble and difficulties?

SOME STRATEGIES AND PRACTICAL APPROACHES

Silliman University is 118 years old. Our Presbyterian founders introduced a program of education that responds to a three-fold sense of Christian service: teaching, healing, and spreading the gospel. The University's vision statement responds to all three of these: "A quality Christian education committed to total human development for the well-being of the society and environment." The university has a number of curricular programs, research agenda, and community extension projects that already respond to the issues of ecological disaster, rising poverty, and related health crises. Our present and future track, therefore, should not be simply to add more programs, but more importantly, to do each of them better, reflecting more effectively how each of these crises compounds the difficulties of addressing the others.

Silliman University already supports environmental programs that also respond to poverty issues. We have the Marina Clinic, for example, that addresses the health needs of subsistence fisherfolk and farmers in nearby

communities. There is the Center for Tropical Studies that engages in reforestation projects utilizing tree species indigenous to the place and a program for captive breeding of animals native to our island such as the spotted deer and warty pigs, aimed at maintaining the diversity and sustainability of forest ecosystems. Our focus on these activities ensures that the remaining forests can continue to generate resources for the benefit of forest dwellers and those who depend on forest products.

In order to integrate theory and practice more effectively, universities need to break down the silos of teaching, research, and community service. We need to adopt learning models that respond to our trifocal vision of Christian higher education. Let me share the lesson learned from the Apo Island marine conservation program which is facilitated by the university's marine biology department. Research outputs of an interdisciplinary group composed of faculty in the social and natural sciences, law, engineering and the humanities guided decisions toward marine protection and poverty alleviation in this island community. This initiative relied heavily on community participation. Fishing households were organized to serve as their own *Bantay Dagat* (seawatch) to protect marine biodiversity, enforce off-fishing grounds during closed season, build artificial reefs, regulate diving and tourism activities that harm the marine environment, promote direct selling of fish harvest to cut down price gouging by middle buyers, and enforce several other measures that redound to the residents' better control over the local economy.

Here's another example of an integrated approach. At the start of my term of office as President, in July 2018, Silliman University started a vigorous campaign for zero waste management on campus. Our goal as an institution is to become a model of a sustainable campus by demonstrating the principles of Zero Waste, the waste management hierarchy, energy conservation and renewable energy utilization, biodiversity conservation, and a reduced carbon

footprint³. Silliman University's commitment is reflected in our internal management processes (administration, operations, planning, and infrastructure development). We strive to meet and where practicable, exceed, our environmental obligations under the law. We believe that everyone is a stakeholder and has a role to play in sustainability, thus our environmental commitment engages the whole Silliman community, the city we live in, and beyond.

Silliman University's commitment to the environment encompasses nine component activities:

1. Teaching: Environmental sustainability and stewardship integrated into the curriculum and the educational experience of all students, and in knowledge sharing among staff and faculty
2. Research: Research on environmental issues and solutions within and among multiple disciplines, and knowledge transfer
3. Service: Environmental restoration and preservation incorporated in service learning, volunteerism, and other efforts in the service of the community
4. Worship and Fellowship: Reflection, discernment, and recommitment to the Christian vocation of responsible stewardship of God's creation
5. Culture and Sports: Changes in lifestyle towards a small ecological footprint promoted through sports, arts and the humanities, and forms of cultural expression
6. Outreach: Information sharing, collaboration, and partnerships in environmental protection with other educational institutions, civil society organizations, government, businesses, international organizations, and the community as a whole
7. Planning and Development: Waste minimization, green building design and construction, renewable energy use and low utility consumption, material resource efficiency, water conservation, reduced

3 Our policies, we believe, are consistent with the waste management agenda outlined by Franz Gassner, in his MRIJ essay, "Science and *Laudato si'* on the Paradigm Shift toward Sustainable Development" (*Macau Ricci Institute Journal*, Vol. 2, June 2018, pp. 24-35).

environmental impact, eco-friendly mobility and transportation options, enhanced biodiversity, and preservation of green spaces all considered in planning and budgeting

8. Administration: Monitoring and periodic evaluation of performance indicators, and continuous improvement of the university's environmental performance
9. Operations: Internal practices aligned with the principles of environmental sustainability.

Based on these general principles, policies have been formulated specific to five areas: waste prevention and waste management, green procurement, food and food waste, events and festivals, and greening of the campus. From policies, implementation guidelines and best practices were drafted for use in ten University operations: buildings and grounds, academic departments, administrative and support service units, student affairs, student government, student and faculty housing and residences, food services, college of agriculture, elementary and high school departments, and information and dissemination⁴.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

What we do, we need to do better and in a more purposive, consistent and integrated way. The "One-and-done" model of higher education should give way to an integrative approach that is

4 The details of these policies, and the steps taken to measure our progress toward implementing them are available in the statement, "Silliman University Environmental Principles, Policies and Guidelines 2018," formally adopted by the Board of Trustees, accessed online at <https://su.edu.ph/silliman-university-environmental-principles-policy-and-guidelines-2018/>. My own presentation of these policies, "President's Message during the All-University Convocation" (19 November 2018), can be found online at <https://su.edu.ph/presidents-message-during-the-all-university-convocation/>. What should be clear from these documents, as well as the follow-up reports published at the Silliman University website, "My Environment," is that our goals are not simply aspirational, but have been thought through systematically, with the designation of specific responsibilities for various units within the University. The nine component activities outlined above, correspond to the detailed expectations and requirements assigned in the Board of Trustees statement, that I am pledged to implement in the months and years ahead.

responsive to the needs of the times⁵. Christian universities have a special charge: as St. Teresa of Ávila so eloquently reminds us, we can become the eyes, hands and feet that constitute, as it were, the body of Christ, for “Christ has no body on earth now but yours.” Faithful to Christ, we will train the next generation of leaders who must care for the earth and the creatures with whom we share it, as our common home.



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5 Overcoming the “One and Done” model starts with the realization that with each incoming class of students, we must begin again the work of orienting the entire community to the University’s sense of mission, and the role of caring for our common home, our commitment to environmental stewardship in fulfilling that mission. In July of 2018, at the beginning of my term of office, we held a student convocation on the environmental crisis, focusing specifically on the problem created by single-use plastics, such as straws and sachets. This was the kick-off for our campaign to eliminate such items from all campus operations. But doing such a convocation once, clearly is not enough. A second student forum was organized a year later, in June 2019, to renew student awareness, and commitment to do their part in the more comprehensive Zero Waste program, now mandated by the Board of Trustees. The results of that 2019 student forum were reported in the story, M. J. Partlow: “Students dared to take active stand on environmental issues,” published by the *Philippine News Agency* (June 24, 2019), accessed online at <https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1073195>. The report suggests the progress made in one year, in terms not only of the higher levels of student participation in the event, but also of the University’s outreach to other local universities as well as partnership with the Energy Development Corporation (EDC), a pioneer in developing our island’s resources for geothermal energy.