

Article

The Environmental Activism of a Filipino Catholic Faith Community: Re-Imagining Ecological Care for the Flourishing of All

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Abstract: Extensive open-pit mining activities in the Philippines since the 1970s up to the present confront the meaning of the “Church of the Poor”, a description that the Catholic Church in the Philippines uses to visualize its prophetic mission. Alongside mining, many more environmentally destructive industries are present in the poorest areas in the country, even though the Philippines is disaster-prone and one of the world’s most vulnerable countries to the devastating effects of the climate crisis. The environmental degradation has prompted many Filipino Catholic organizations and communities to act together through various campaigns to address the problem. The article examines a case of a faith-based community that rose to the challenge to address various environmental issues their community has encountered and continues to experience. The community’s environmental activism presents a viable model for a re-imagined ecological care towards the “flourishing of all” as a response to Pamela McCarroll’s call to action to continue conversations on the many ways practical theology can move beyond anthropocentrism while focusing on social justice.

Keywords: ecological activism; practical theology and environmental crisis; ecological care; action research



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1. Introduction

Lynn White’s article, which came out in 1967, made a controversial claim. According to White, the root cause of the environmental crisis is religion, specifically Christianity, which privileged the human person over animals and other nonhuman beings in the world (White 1967). Towards the end of the article, however, White discloses that the remedy for the crisis is also religious. After that, he cites Buddhism and St. Francis of Assisi as exemplars of a deep understanding of our connection with nature. The Filipino Catholic bishops in 1988 declare that a particular task, the stewardship of creation, was given to humans by God based on their reading of Gen. 1: 27–28. Stewardship points to an ethic of responsible management or stewardship of these natural resources so that the next generations of humans can have continued access to these resources. The stewardship ethic is a response to White’s claim that religion could offer remedies against the environmental crisis. It uses the language of conserving resources for future generations—an implicit acknowledgment of its usefulness to human beings. The 1988 pastoral letter refers to this notion of stewardship as an act of Christian duty.

For the Filipino Catholic bishops, stewardship is the approach for viable resource management that aims to restore the beauty of the Philippine natural environment and serve the needs of the future generations of Filipinos. The environmental actions that the Catholic bishops have inspired manifested an anthropocentric dimension of stewardship, even though the environmental issues and concerns were massive, like mining and deforestation. In 1998, they called for the repeal of the Mining Act of 1995.

William Holden (2012) documents the Catholic response to large-scale mining in the Philippines. The global mining industry has taken note of the Church's opposition to mining. According to Holden (2012, p. 852), for the Catholic Church in the Philippines, environmental issues such as mining must not be seen as purely environmental issues, but also as human rights issues because mining not only disrupts the biophysical environment, but degrades natural resources upon which many poor people rely; it further impoverishes them.

In 1991, the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines (henceforth CBCP) convened the 2nd Plenary Council (PCP II). The "Church of the Poor" became the blueprint for the Catholic Church's renewal in the country. The Basic Ecclesial Communities (BECs) or Catholic faith communities in the rural areas of the country were instrumental in translating the ideas of being the "Church of the Poor" into concrete actions (Dagmang 2015). Some BECs widely interpreted one of the visions of the 2nd Plenary Council of the Philippines, "a Church is a community of disciples", as about a spirituality of stewardship (Picardal 2013). This interpretation enabled some BECs to incorporate environmental campaigns into their action platforms. However, it is worth noting that there is no provision in the Acts and Decrees of the PCP II, published in 1992, that specifically mentioned the environmental crisis (Peracullo 2020). The localization of efforts towards addressing environmental issues and concerns is sustainable because local Catholic communities and progressive groups are invested in these issues, specifically mining, deforestation, and increasingly by 2015, climate change. After all, these issues impact their vulnerable communities significantly.

The study participates in the conversation by reflecting on two questions: (1) Can care be re-imagined as a non-anthropocentric response to the environmental crisis? (2) What model for ecological care beyond anthropocentrism arises from the environmental activism of a faith-based community in the Philippines? The study examines Marinduque Council for Environmental Concerns (MaCEC)'s notion of ecological care. Moreover, the study investigates how the organization's concepts or ideas of care go beyond anthropocentrism. Finally, the study proposes a model of ecological care that promotes the flourishing of all in ecological communities. Cultural values such as *pagtutulungan* (service), *pakikiisa* (solidarity), and *pananampalataya* (faith) are features of the model of ecological care beyond anthropocentrism.

1.1. From Stewardship to Ecological Care

Since its publication in 2015, *Laudato Si* (Francis 2015) became a model of doing theology that engages with the scientific community, the faithful, and the nonhuman members of the biotic community. Rolando Tuazon (2018, p. 198) claims that Pope Francis rejects the dominant view about environmental stewardship as dominion. *Laudato Si* provides a new way of regarding nature largely absent in many encyclicals in the past, even though those advocated for sustained economic and political justice towards the poor in society (Eballo 2018). For Wolfgang Sachs (2017, p. 2583), *Laudato Si* pillories excessive anthropocentrism and emphasizes relationships with nature, others, oneself, and God (Sachs 2017, p. 2580). This intertwining relationship calls for an integral ecology (Francis 2015). Integral ecology corrects that binarism or dualism (Canceran 2018, p. 9).

For the CBCP (2019, par. 23), echoing Pope Francis, there is a need for a paradigm shift to reestablish our sacred relationship with nature and not just for a token of environmental protection and stewardship. The Catholic bishops seemed to underscore the language of care from the language of stewardship. Nonetheless, the language of care still evokes anthropocentrism because, as Wickman and Sherman (2020) emphasize, the scope of the Anthropocene is essentially planetary. Whatever it means, it refers to the enormous influence of human beings upon the entire terrestrial system and thus the historical emergence of the *Anthropos* as a geological agent. Anthropocentrism refers to the idea that only human beings possess inherent worth and moral standing. Anthropocentrism's literal or etymological meaning is "human-centered". This concept asserts that the human being—as

an individual or species—stands at the center of existence in descriptive and normative modes (Beever 2018, p. 39).

The influence extends to the kinds of response to the environmental degradation that is largely human inflicted. Sally McFague points out: “It is hard to care for the Earth when one has never cared for a piece of it” (McFague 1997, p. 155). In using the analogy of a gardener, McFague points to the gardener who cares as pragmatic, practical, immersed in trying to look for local solutions to make the garden flourish, and in so doing, able to distinguish suitable interventions from bad ones in gardening.

Caring for a garden is a case of making the personal political (McFague 1997). McFague argues that this particular activity of caring can motivate groups of gardeners to lobby for inner-city parks where poor people in urban areas can commune, appreciate, learn to care for the environment; to work for a community where people and nature can co-inhabit; and lastly to advocate for a simpler, limited lifestyle, in which a sense of community, a high literacy rate, the emancipation of women, preventive medicine, and ample green space are considered the good life. She cites examples of such communities, both rich and poor.

The ecological ethic of care suggests relating to nature-appreciation and not domination. For McFague (1997), the former is the crucial point we have missed from Genesis. God appreciates what God created, and as beings made in God’s image, our attitude toward nature should also be valued. She also points out that this attitude toward nature is in keeping with the commandment to love God and neighbor. McFague (1997, p. 166) puts it this way:

“God is the ultimate Subject: we love God (or should love) because God is God and deserves our adoration. We love our neighbor (or should) because we see human beings as ends in themselves, as valuable. After all, they are. A human being is good, period. Gen. 1 says that we should extend the way we relate to God and neighbor to nature: nature is good, period.”

For Pamela McCarroll, though, McFague’s recommendation belongs to the efforts in religious ethics and systematic theology “to replace the image of the human as “master”, and maker of history with the image of the human as caretaker, steward, custodian, and fellow creature upon the Earth, created to love, reverence and care for the planet, its animals and processes” (McCarroll 2020, p. 35), and this can be problematic. McCarroll continues that “until the living web of humanity can be conceptualized within the more extensive live web of creation, our research and practice cannot help but serve human-centric ways of being in the world. Ultimately, it re-inscribes and normalizes human-centricity, the fundamental cause of the environmental crisis (McCarroll 2020, p. 36).

1.2. Small Island Communities in the Philippines

The Philippines’ archipelagic nature and its location in the most disaster-prone region in the world and the Pacific ‘Ring of Fire’ make it even more critical for this calamity-prone country, particularly for small island communities. The Philippine Department of the Interior and Local Government (DILG) enumerates the following factors to describe small islands: (1) Physical dimension, e.g., the land area of less than 10,000 sq km; (2) distance from the mainland; (3) geo-physical profile; (4) substrate or origin; (5) population density; (6) resource limitations, usually resulting in food insecurity and chronic poverty; (7) dependence on the mainland; (8) lack of access and links to market institutions and technology; (9) political/social marginalization due to the existing governance structure; (10) lack of alternative sustainable livelihoods to complement farming and fishing; (11) direct exposure to climate-related hazards, especially typhoons and storm surges; (12) lack of risk assessment, early warning, and search and rescue capacity; and (13) isolation, especially when disasters hit (CCS et al. 2011, p. 3).

Thousands of small islands with fragile ecosystems and populated by communities heavily dependent on natural resources are highly exposed to natural and human-induced hazards. As such, these small islands become the most vulnerable to risks because they face multiple threats and the possibility of isolation from the mainland (CCS et al. 2011, pp. 125,

130). Nevertheless, these communities most susceptible to environmental challenges and climate risks also have the most potential to advocate a response concretely and appropriately, and act on these risks and challenges.

1.3. Profile of the Island Province of Marinduque

Marinduque is situated about 170 km south of Metro Manila at the eastern portion of Luzon, Philippines. Tayabas Bay on the north, Mongpong Pass on the northeast, Tayabas Strait on the southeast, and the Sibuyan Sea on the southbound Marinduque bound the province. It comprises the main island and 17 islets and spans 959,000 sq. km. Approximately 83% are hills and mountains, while 17% are coastal, swamps, and marshy areas (UP PLANADES 1999; Province of Marinduque 2011, p. 2).

It has pristine biodiversity and ecosystems of natural forests, agricultural fields, seas, coastlines, thirty-two (32) river basins, and copper, copper concentrate, copper metal, iron, manganese, limestone, gold, and silver. The region is primarily agricultural. The sector provides 48% of employment, while approximately 53% of the total land area is devoted to crop production, mainly coconut and copra (Province of Marinduque 2011, p. 5). Figure 1 presents the location map of the island-province map of Marinduque.

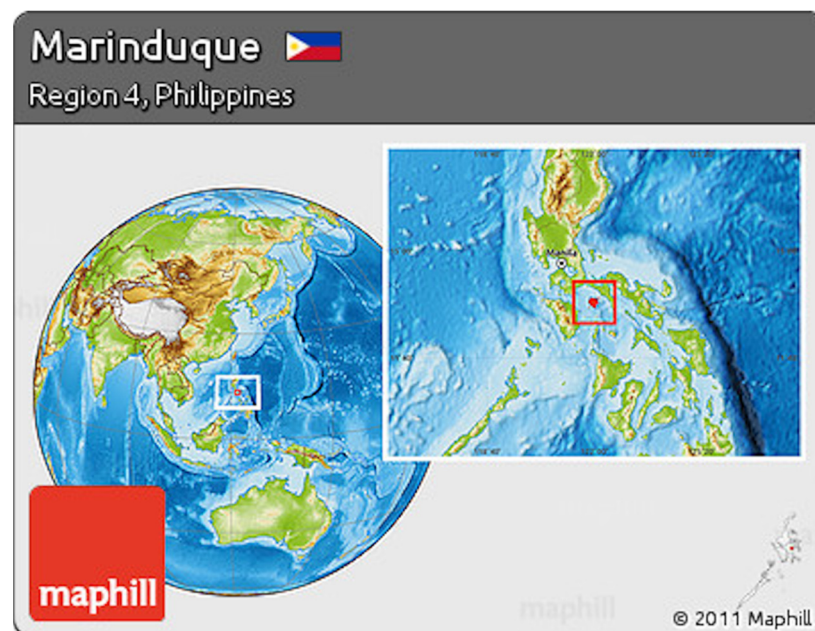


Figure 1. Location map of Marinduque Philippines. Original image from ©Maphill (2011) distributed under license CC BY-ND.

Historical studies on disaster pointed to several environmental, tragic, and climate risks faced by the island province (Magalang 2010; Formilleza 2010). Marinduque's geographical feature makes it an earthquake-prone area. It is home to a dormant volcano, Mt. Malindig, located in the municipality of Buenavista, and is situated along the Boac River Fault line. The island province is considered the 7th landslide-prone province in the country, with the heavy disturbance of its mountains' physical base caused by large-scale mining operations. According to the Department of Environment and Natural Resources Mine and Geosciences Bureau (DENR-MGB), the province has a high risk for landslides during earthquakes and large-scale flooding. Marinduque's location in the country's typhoon belt means that it is either directly hit or affected by an average of twelve typhoons each year which caused devastating damage to properties, infrastructure, agriculture, livelihoods, and living conditions (Province of Marinduque 2011, p. 7; Magalang 2010).

For over 30 years until 1996, the Marinduque Copper Mining (Marcopper) operations served as a source of livelihood for some residents. However, the mine operations have

caused innumerable threats, particularly health, environmental problems, and risks. Mining has polluted waterways, killed fish, and flooded agricultural fields. With poverty incidence moved from 12.5% in 2015 to 10% in 2018, almost 24% of its population is still under poverty, even after hosting mining operations for three decades (PSA 2020, p. 45; Salvacion and Magcale-Macandog 2015, p. 28).

A cumulative effect of the mine tailings dumping occurred when the Mogpog and Boac Rivers overflowed the banks during a typhoon in 1993. On 24 March 1996, the pit, which used to hold the wastes of the Marcopper, failed and caused a massive spill of mine tailings into the Boac River and other bodies of waters traversing three towns. The mining spill destroyed a significant water artery in the capital town of Boac that brought about further environmental, health, social, and economic problems. In addition, flooding in the island-province's coastal and flood plain areas aggravates the increasing effects of sea-level rise due to climate change and climate variability.

The flow of mine tailing deposits from impounding pits that collapsed in 1993 and 1996 placed many communities along the riverbanks and low-lying areas vulnerable to flood-related risks. The possible collapse of at least six abandoned and unmaintained mine tailing dams located up in the mountains and above the primary fault line and still contain contaminated liquid and solid materials pose a severe disaster threat even after the close of mining operations in the province (Magalang 2010; Province of Marinduque 2011, p. 10).

Moreover, water quality and hydrology analysis in Boac River indicates that "water conductivity is higher than the acceptable values for a freshwater body and that concentrations of arsenic, lead, mercury, manganese, and copper with the first three as highly toxic are 'above their threshold limits'" (Cruz et al. 2020, p. 152).

One of the many Basic Ecclesial Communities that mainly attend to environmental issues is the Marinduque Council for Environmental Concerns (MaCEC) that Rev. Rafael M. Lim, the first bishop of the Diocese of Boac, established in 1978. The initial advocacies of MaCEC focused on the struggle of the fisherfolks against the surface dumping of mine tailings at Calancan Bay and Boac River by the Marcopper Mining Corporation (Magalang 2010). With support from national organizations such as CBCP's National Secretariat for Social Action (NASSA), Luzon Secretariat for Social Action (LUSSA), and *Lingkod Tao Kalikasan* (Service, People, Nature), the struggle took the form of pressing legal and administrative charges against the mining firm. However, the environmental disaster due to the mine tailings spill in 1996 brought together residents of the province, non-governmental organizations, local Church organizers, and local public officials in a collective and integrated advocacy and action (Quindoza 2015).

2. Methods

The study is essentially participatory action research that uses a qualitative approach and documents review, interviews, and observation as data collection methods. It is limited to the case of the Marinduque Council for Environmental Concerns (MaCEC) involving several faith communities, community chapters, or members. The participants in the interviews were purposively selected using the following criteria: (1) living in the community/province for ten years or more; (2) a member/leader of MaCEC community/chapter; (3) resident of capital town villages with high 'risks' based on Provincial Disaster Risk Reduction and Management (PDRRM) Plan; (4) willingness to participate in the interview; and (5) access to digital/online platform for data gathering activities. While MaCEC has village and town chapters in all six towns of the province, the interviewees selected were limited to village-level formations in the capital town of Boac, as this was the most accessible to the researcher at the time. Documents reviewed included MaCEC plans and reports, press statements, online information, and documentation of events from its official social media, training modules, and relevant local policies and programs.

The study observes ethical considerations of ensuring voluntary participation and withdrawal, informed consent, and the health and safety of the research community. With the observance of government quarantine and mobility restrictions during the field research

schedule, the researchers modified the interviews into paper/online interviews with follow-up phone calls arranged based on the availability of the interviewees and contingent on the health situation and connectivity access households/villages. The discussions proceeded with an interview guide that grouped questions into the participants' understanding of how cultural and religious aspects figure into their work as environmental stewards, the cultural and religious elements in the risk and resilience messages, results, and recommendations. In coordination with MaCEC staff, the researchers identified a total of nine (9) informants: four (4) of which are community/chapter leaders, four (4) are community/chapter members, and one (1) is the head of the MaCEC. The researchers then contacted them and sent printed copies of the interview guide. After two weeks, the researchers retrieved the filled-out interview guides. The researchers did some follow-up phone calls during data processing to validate or probe the recorded responses.

The organization permitted the researchers to conduct an online observation of a MaCEC Leaders' Discussion scheduled during their meeting on 7 October 2021. It informed the researchers of the process and content of organizational ecological discussions, planning, and evaluation. The validation session proceeded with emails and scheduled phone calls with MaCEC leaders and staff.

3. Results

The Significance of Cultural and Religious Aspects of Resilience

Resilience, in the context of risk, refers to the "ability of a system, community or society exposed to hazards to resist, absorb, accommodate, adapt to, transform and recover" from the effects of a hazard (UNGA 2017, p. 22). A community's resilience depends on the degree of availability of resources and capacity to organize itself before and during times of need (UNISDR 2009, p. 24; 2017). Participants regarded resilience as *paghaw* or *pagbangon* (the ability to rise beyond adversity). The participants compared themselves to the "bamboo which bends with the wind but never breaks". The description is apt because the participants believed that they could rise above the adversities they regularly experience and could even face the danger of a looming environmental disaster if the abandoned dams that hold toxic mine tailings would give way.

The participants, living in Marinduque, understood that the precarity of their existence could lead to negative consequences such as "something bad happening", "*panganib* (danger)", which affect people, property, communities, environment, livelihood, and even cause "fear" or "phobia" related to disaster, calamity, and climate emergency. In these instances, most participants turned to family and community support and prayer and devotion, especially among the Roman Catholics, to the *Ina ng Biglang-Awa* (Our Lady of the Prompt Succor), the Patroness of the Diocese of Boac. The prayer and devotion are part of the coping process of some of the participants as they navigate their lives around the risks posed by natural and human-made challenges.

MaCEC members and leaders underscored that the concepts of *pagtutulungan* (service to one another), *pakikiisa* (solidarity), and *pananampalataya* (faith) are significant manifestations of resilience. Participants stated that close family ties, formations, and support in the neighborhood (*kapitbahayan*) and community (*pamayanan*) and faith are vital in addressing, responding to, and coping with risk, disaster, or disaster adversity.

Moreover, the community expanded its Basic Ecclesial Community (BEC) program to address environmental issues and concerns. It conducted the activity, *Bahaginan ng Pamayanang Kristiyano sa Salita ng Diyos* (Sharing of the Word of God among Christian Communities) in villages for their members to become what they call the "basic faith communities of environmental stewards" (BFC-ES). The spiritual-ecological course, *Batayang Pag-aaral Pangspiritwal at Pangekolohiya* (Learning Modules on Spirituality and Ecology), youth environmental camps, youth and adult leaders ecological learning exchange, among others, are some environmental education formats implemented to enhance and sustain ecological awareness and action.

4. Discussion

Vera Files, an independent news organization in the Philippines, featured a story on the continuing ill-effects that the people of Marinduque suffer from as a result of the disastrous spilling of the mine tailings into the Boac River in 1996. Twenty-three years later, the people are still trying to rebuild their lives (Dizon 2019), while the Boac River remains biologically unable to sustain life (DENR 2020). Without adequate support from the local and national governments to rehabilitate the poisoned land and waters, it would be up to the people in Marinduque to find ways to help one another. Against this backdrop, MaCEC drafted its members' mandate to be environmental stewards.

In its 25th year of existence, MaCEC demonstrates how a local, faith-based organization can effectively respond to the risks and challenges of living in a place where natural and human-induced disasters occur. While it started as a social action environmental arm of the local Church, which supported fisherfolks who suffered from surface dumping of mine tailings into their traditional fishing areas, it expanded into a significant partner of local and national organizations that oppose large-scale mining operations in the country. At present, MaCEC provides the bulk of environmental advocacy in the province of Marinduque by its work on climate emergency mitigation and response, disaster management, environmental justice, and care. In the various campaigns, advocacy work, and mobilizations, MaCEC's core environmental advocacy framework flows from three program components: ecological literacy, ecological actions, and ecological ethics. Literacy and steps lead to public awareness and knowledge; literacy and ethics produce socio-environmental values and ethics and actions that result in desired environmental behavior changes in its members. It hopes to do the same in the greater public.

MaCEC operations envisioned a clean, bountiful, and life-giving environment in the Island Province of Marinduque, which will benefit the present and future generations. In fulfilling this vision, it adheres to democratic processes, collective actions, the inspiration of Gospel values, and the Social Doctrine of the Church (MaCEC 2021). The Social Doctrine of the Church includes the CBCP pastoral letters that are typically read on Sunday services for the Catholic community.

MaCEC's initial understanding of environmental stewardship is a blend of the Catholic bishops' view of stewardship as resource management for the future generations of *Marinduquenos* and the members' awareness of the responsibility of rehabilitating the poisoned waters and land of the province and restoring the livelihood of those who were greatly affected by environmental disasters. The first logo of MaCEC in Figure 2 reflects this view of stewardship.



Figure 2. The original logo of MaCEC.

The older logo features an oversized pair of hands that holds the entire province, particularly rivers, trees, mountains, and cows. The natural world is now under the care of humans, the *Marinduquenos*. The disembodied hands accentuate the outsize responsibility of MaCEC to aid, support, and care.

Over time, the notion of stewardship expanded to include environmental justice. According to the 2021 Press Release of the organization, in 2003, Bishop Jose Oliveros of the Diocese of Boac headed the first Diocesan Synod that led to the ratification of decrees that became the pillars for the local Church in Marinduque. Part of the document included *Katarungan* or Justice. MaCEC expanded its mission to have “a firm stance on the explicit objection over any forms of large-scale mining and other similar industries and activities that can cause serious effects on the environment and ecology of the province” (MaCEC 2021).

MaCEC has since launched massive campaigns and advocacies on the environment, climate justice, and disaster risks following the spirit of social justice and guided by the local Catholic Church, specifically, its mission of being the “Church of the Poor”. It successfully lobbied at the *Sangguniang Panlalawigan* or the Provincial Assembly to declare a 50-year large-scale mining moratorium in the entire island through legislative enactments by the *Sangguniang Panlalawigan*. It also successfully lobbied to remove the San Antonio Copper Project from the national government’s list of priority mining areas (Magalang 2010, p. 73).

MaCEC began as a Basic Ecclesial Community that grew stronger over time. The BEC members had reached a more sophisticated level of conscientization and organizing. They wanted to address more fundamental issues confronting their precarious life like the security of land/housing tenure and disaster risk engaging the community (Holden et al. 2017, p. 41). Over the years, long-time members have begun to deepen their ecological consciousness, as evident in expanding their environmental education courses to include the rights of nature, *Kalayaan ng Kalikasan* (freedom of nature), and, following Pope Francis, care for our common home, Earth.

In the Philippines, Christianity came through colonization. This sobering truth has led to more disquieting reflections in recent years on the many ways religion sustains epistemic violence by those in power. The presence of Christianity in the Philippines is always problematic from a postcolonial perspective. The Philippine Catholic Church has tried to address this problem. Karl Gaspar cited the 2010 Episcopal Commission on Indigenous Peoples’ statement that essentially asks for forgiveness from indigenous peoples for the “historical wounds” that were inflicted for the time when “[the Church] entered indigenous communities from a position of power, indifferent to their struggles and pains. We ask forgiveness for moments when we taught Christianity as a religion robed with colonial cultural superiority, instead of sharing it as a religion that calls for a relationship with God and a way of life” (Gaspar 2010). Like the other pastoral letters or messages, the concrete calls to action are localized through the endeavors that directly impact vulnerable communities, such as MaCEC.

4.1. The Three Dimensions of Ecological Care

In 2017, MaCEC updated its logo that captured the essence of the organization. MaCEC patterns the evaluation of the stages of village chapters, from formation to maturity, after the four stages of development of a butterfly, namely: egg, larva, pupa, and adult. The butterfly hovering above the heart-shaped Marinduque is a symbol in the official logo of MaCEC. Figure 3 presents the ecological ethic of care and its three features.



Figure 3. The conceptual framework of ecological care.

The new organization logo adopted in 2017 has some elements: The green heart in the blue circle symbolizes the island province, the home of all those living in its ecological communities. The six rays of the sun represent the six towns where local chapters are located and reflect light and hope to the members and all Marinduque, especially the poor, living in the present and the future. Circling white and blue colors refer to the cleanliness and clarity of its ecological vision and mission for caring and protecting God's creation, based on the principles of social justice. The butterfly resting on a green stem is likened to the clean, healthy, and bountiful ecosystem and life support that reminds the organization of its mandate to care for God's creations and of the challenge to protect, cultivate, and restore the damaged ecosystem to health.

The parallelism between the butterfly and MaCEC cannot be more evident. As the pupa emerges from the cocoon, it faces several challenges that it must overcome to progress into an adult butterfly. The butterfly lives precariously and, like the pupa, must learn to navigate the world it inhabits to be healthy enough to lay eggs. Additionally, the cycle continues.

The use of nature imagery to describe the journey of the village chapters manifests the full ecological consciousness of the members that displaces human superiority and affirms the value of the natural process. Like fireflies, they are reflections of a healthy ecosystem for the members. Robyn Eckersley (1992) puts the basic tenets of ecocentrism based on an ecologically informed philosophy of internal relatedness. All organisms are not simply interrelated with their environment but are also constituted by those environmental interrelationships. Like the butterfly, the life cycle of village chapters undergoes the organic process towards maturity.

While most of the work that MaCEC is doing is gardening, tree-planting, and cultivating land to be a viable source of food for its members and the people of Marinduque in general, MaCEC did not use the image of a gardener or a resource management officer to describe what it does. From an ecocentric perspective, singling out only our unique attributes as a basis of our exclusive moral considerability is simply human chauvinism that conveniently fails to recognize the unique characteristics of other life forms. The use of nature imagery to capture what the organization, at its core, does, is ecocentric.

4.2. To Care Is to Be Human in the Complex Web of Creation

For MaCEC members, the cultural values are *pagtutulungan* (service to one another), *pakikiisa* (solidarity), and *pananampalataya* (faith). Humans undoubtedly do activities above, but they do not necessarily point to human exceptionalism or superiority. The lived experiences of the MaCEC members gave rise to the cultural values that guide their work and reflect their mission.

Pagtutulungan or service to others. Several Filipino scholars point to *pagtutulungan* or service to others as a Filipino value akin to a similar value, *Bayanihan*. For Eade and Su (2018, p. 334), *Bayanihan* is the Filipino principle of mutual effort. *Bayanihan* was a term that originated in farming communities. It worked within the rhythm of harvests and the weather and was based upon common expectations, benefits, and trust (Eade and Su 2018, p. 342). *Bayanihan* is translated to helping each other in a time of crisis (Soriano et al. 2021, p. 91). In the studies cited above, *Bayanihan* reveals uneven power dynamics. The more desperate for help and assistance become dependent on the dole-outs of those who control the goods and services, often local and national leaders, aid and grant agencies, and wealthy individuals in the wake of the devastating damage due to typhoon Haiyan in 2013 (Eade and Su 2018, p. 334). *Bayanihan* is especially important amongst poor communities lacking other forms of capital (Jocson and Ceballo 2020). In the context of digital labor in the platform economy, those who dispense advice become social media influencers who attract desperate subscribers eager to participate in a largely unregulated industry (Soriano et al. 2021).

Pagtutulungan, literally translated to “helping one another”, points to a more egalitarian relationship among participants, who are either the donor or recipient and vice versa. *Pagtutulungan* underscores the members’ affinity to each other as all of them experienced the ill effects of various environmental disasters in one form or the other. Each of them faces the dangers and risks together. Based on the interviews and documents review, abandoned and unmaintained mine structures, including the open pit and dams of the closed mining site, are a source of disaster risks in the entire province. MaCEC leaders pointed to interconnected environmental and climate change risks for the island province, mainly coastal and riverside communities. While MaCEC members believe that people and communities in the island province can recover, the process takes time. *Pagtutulungan* highlights the eco-anxieties (McCarroll 2020) that environmental activists feel due to the seemingly slow-moving pace of ecological rehabilitation while living under the constant threat of *panganib* or danger. However, helping one another overcome despair is one of the ways that help sustain their energy and commitment.

Pagtutulungan parallels the dynamics in the ecosystems of the planet. Ecologists point to the mutual interdependence at play because the environment is both dynamic and diverse, ecologists recognize that there is no single set of ecological attributes or strategies that make an organism “the best”. All living populations and species continuously change in response to pressures from other organisms and variability in Earth’s geology and climate. Over time, this dance of evolving interactions has produced a fantastic array of organisms that depend upon and compete across the surface of the planet (Malmstrom 2010, p. 88).

Pakikiisa or solidarity. *Pakikiisa* or solidarity is a common feature in Philippine social movements that address social and political inequalities in society. At the community level, women workers in the informal economy, when organized and galvanized through collective forms of action in peri-urban areas stricken by disasters related to climate change, produce and sustainable ways of surviving and adapting (Ofreneo and Hega 2016, p. 180). There is a strong link between poverty and environmental degradation in the climate crisis, making poor people more vulnerable to climate-change-related disasters (Holden et al. 2017, p. 8). *Pakikiisa* or solidarity occurs when there are shared experiences among the actors, such as the case of women workers above and the members of MaCEC.

Pakikiisa or solidarity highlights relational ethics more than the individualistic ethics that have long governed how we relate to other people. In the ecological sense, solidarity “means a relationship of care and concern for the Other. The Other can be fellow human beings and the natural environment. We should correct the tendency to see humans as ontologically separate and above nature” (Jennings 2015, p. 6). Thompson et. al echo the same sentiment:

“When we come together to study environmental issues and concerns and work together to find viable and sustainable solutions to the problem, we can support one another. What will emerge from the connection and support is an ecological ethic of solidarity, which mirrors the interconnectivity and reciprocal interdependence of beings in the world” (Thompson et al. 2011, p. 144).

The coming together to support each other is evident in MaCEC’s core values of environmental advocacy, environmental literacy, and environmental education towards what they termed “ecological care”.

Households, particularly in riverside barangays, use bamboo materials for disaster preparedness as a native life raft (*timbulan ng buhay*) like the image above in Figure 4. *Timbulan* or a bamboo raft is a lifesaving device that you hold onto when you are in the middle of the sea, ocean, lake, or river.

Pakikiisa resonates with what Jennings and Gwiazdon call “The Principle of Solidarity Respect and Equity” that should be pursued with a recognition of the limits of everyone’s ability to determine the conditions of their own lives and our mutual interdependency and reliance on outside support, care, and assistance. The notion of solidarity and interdependence applies in a social context among individuals and groups. Still, it applies with equal importance and resonance in an ecological context, between human and biotic communities (Jennings and Gwiazdon 2021, p. 32).

Pananampalataya or faith. The spiritual aspect of the work of MaCEC is a crucial part of the organization’s identity. *Pananampalataya*, or faith for MaCEC members, informs and motivates them to engage in their work as environmental stewards actively and sustains them in the protracted struggle to obtain justice from the Marcopper Mining Corporation. Rooted in their beginnings as a small Basic Ecclesial Community, MaCEC developed a more comprehensive program to share the Word of God to village chapters. The program, *Hangkaan at Bahaginan ng Pamayanang Kristiyano sa Salita ng Diyos* (Sharing of the Word of God among Christian Communities) helps spread the Word of God.

In the development of course modules, the knowledge of priests and pastoral workers, and seminarians of the diocese were pooled together, according to the members. The organization tapped local facilitators and resource persons to implement the integrated formation and skills development, including relevant modules in environmental justice and stewardship. Until recently, this combined formation is being applied and updated by the MaCEC to cover timely issues. The ecological dimension of the program aims to develop environmental consciousness and values by eliciting actions from the members themselves that will encourage sustained commitment. Activities were about community organizing and holding a series and continuing education using modules such as understanding spiritual ecology and links to climate change, mining, health (as a response to the pandemic), and digital security related to the proliferation of misinformation and “fake news” in social media.



Figure 4. A sample of the bamboo raft used by families. Photo by the author.

Hand and Crowe (2012, p. 11) observe that in the US, greater exposure to church culture (through attendance), greater commitment to personal piety (through prayer), and a greater commitment to one's denominational identity does not generally increase pro-environmental beliefs and behavior. For Ramon Echica (2010, pp. 44–45), the devotional practices heavily promoted by the Catholic Church in the Philippines tend to focus on the "other-worldly" concerns and are apolitical. Both studies suggest that without widespread support from the public, including local government, non-government organizations, and other citizen-driven ecological movements, religiosity alone is not enough to elicit behavioral changes towards environmental action. MACEC has proved that faith and religiosity must intertwine with culture and environmentalism to effect meaningful and sustainable social transformation.

4.3. Greening the Moriones Festival

Marinduque is known for its Holy Week event, the *Moriones* festival. The original ritual would have male volunteers from the poorest *barrios* in Marinduque wear the costume of Roman soldiers and put on elaborate masks for one week to depict the *morions* who chased the Roman soldier, Longinus. In the Lenten rituals, Longinus was the first Roman soldier who converted to Christianity when he witnessed the death of Jesus on the cross

(Peterson 2007). According to Peterson, the men chose to enact *morions* as a response to a *panata* (vow) to purge their sins. The *morion* mask, a symbol of repentance during the Holy Week, becomes a symbol for the MaCEC and its members. It reminds them of the challenges of being faithful to God (Peterson 2007, p. 311).

The Boac river, a victim of the mine tailings disaster, silently witnesses the Holy Week events as they unfold beside it. The presence, and the symbolic participation of the river, added to the lamentation of the members of MaCEC. Nonetheless, they managed to make the river into an active participant. According to the members, the *Moriones* Festival becomes a venue for commemorating the mine tailings spills on 24 March 1996 through Earth Day celebration, tree planting, Lenten recollection, and other environmental advocacy activities. Reflections of the members focus on the responsibility, rooted in faith, to be stewards of the environment, nature, and creation.

5. Conclusions: Ecological Care beyond Anthropocentrism

The heart-shaped island province of Marinduque is home to the members of MaCEC. In Filipino, the word *tahanan* refers to home. Its root word is *tahan* (hush). It evokes a mother rocking her fussy, crying baby to calm down and sleep. It pulls forth the original meaning of ecology, *Oikos*, a Greek word for home. Many Filipinos regard the home as the safest place as it evokes the warm embrace of a mother. Filipino psychologists have attempted to seek what they call cognitive and affective dimensions of biodiversity, which, according to them, have been lacking in many social and scientific studies on biodiversity conservation (Tan Siy 2008). In a study involving Filipino farmers and fisherfolks living on the banks of ecologically vulnerable Taal Lake in the southern part of Manila, Tan Siy claims that those who lived by the banks of the lake were more open and receptive to its rehabilitation and care. The results of this study highlighted the significant role people's affective bonds placed on the conservation and the protection of the lake. Moreover, the quality of respondents' answers was a function of their proximity to and dependence on the lake (Tan Siy 2008, p. 98).

Similarly, the members of MaCEC are deeply committed to their environmentalism, living as they do in a disaster-prone area and having experienced environmental disasters brought about by natural hazards and extractive industries. Their environmentalism developed into a community consciousness that regards members as thoroughly embedded in their ecological communities. Such is akin to Eckersley's (1992) ecocentric approach to environmentalism that views creations as formed by ecological interrelatedness.

Ecological care's dimensions of *pagtutulungan* (service to one another), *pakikiisa* (solidarity), and *pananampalataya* (faith) demonstrate its breadth and depth that includes "a recognition of systemic interdependence that means recognizing that self is deeply related to other, not just other human selves, but the natural world (water, air, other species) that impact our lives and whose lives and actions profoundly impact processes" (Bradbury 2003, p. 211).

Reflecting on the notion of ecological care of the members of MaCEC, we can appreciate this view of care as Christian praxis. Praxis refers to reflecting and acting upon and within the world to transform it. McFague (1997) challenges Christians to extend the Christian praxis to nature. Christian praxis is grounded in what Leonardo Boff calls "social ecology, the ways that human social and economic systems interact with the natural ecosystems" (Boff 1995, p. 88). This ecology underscores that whatever onslaught to the poor affects the natural world and vice versa.

Through the various stages of development, faith-based communities of environmental stewards actively participate in determining their role in ecological care and stewardship and transforming structures that cause inequalities. As MaCEC members subscribe to service to *Simbahan ng mga dukha* (Church of the Poor) and *likas-kayang pag-unlad* (sustainable development), the organization exemplifies a practical application of the ecological liberation theology, as advanced in Holden et al. (2017).

While the praxis of MaCEC members echoes that of liberation theology, it arises from their self-understanding of faith intertwining with service. According to the MaCEC members, the extended hands of Jesus on the cross signify service and solidarity; the hands of Jesus are reaching out to help. According to the organization and its members, the cross symbolizes the Christian faith in which all actions on ecological care are rooted. The organization's vision aptly reflects the values of service, solidarity, and faith ingrained in the local culture. In turn, these values contribute to the discourse [McCarroll \(2020\)](#) raises towards a re-imagining of ecological care that extends beyond anthropocentrism without losing the focus on social and environmental justice. Ecological care beyond anthropocentrism encompasses human activities that attend to the needs of the ecological community, promote its wellbeing and health, and work for the flourishing of all members of the ecological community. Those who extend ecological care beyond anthropocentrism recognize that ecosystems thrive and flourish when suitable conditions are present for everyone, including humans to be healthy. The research supports the continuing discussions on the many ways religion's commitment to ecological care reveals its promising potential, primarily the pro-environmental actions of faith-based communities.

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