Teaching participatory action research as engaged pedagogy in the time of pandemic

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Abstract

This article reflects on the process, challenges, and opportunities of conducting a graduate-level class in environmental philosophy for Catholic priests who were seminary formators in the time of pandemic in the Philippines. The final output of the course is a participatory action research project. I developed an engaged pedagogical framework, which draws from the works of Jennifer Ayres that incorporated theological, philosophical, and ecological principles in teaching and facilitating students’ research. The development of the tenets, the flourishing of all, right relations, and praxis began from a deep engagement with my students whose influence in the religious and cultural lives of the Filipinos could add to the flourishing of ecological consciousness of the Catholic community in the Philippines.

KEYWORDS
Covid-19 pandemic, ecological consciousness, ecotheology, engaged pedagogy, environmental education, environmental philosophy, participatory action research

1 | INTRODUCTION

What is it like to teach a course with participatory action research as the final output during a pandemic? In the first part of 2021, at the cusp of the second wave of the Covid-19 pandemic in the Philippines, I handled a graduate course in environmental philosophy for a class of Ph.D. students composed of Catholic priests. The GRASEF (Graduate Program for Seminary Formators) is a platform designed for Catholic priests to obtain a Ph.D. in Philosophy to be a president of a seminary that can offer an undergraduate program in philosophy. The Ph.D. degree is a requirement of the Philippine Commission on Higher Education (CHED). A top Catholic university and the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) collaborate for the GRASEF program. For the final output of the course, I decided that students adopt participatory action research instead of the standard philosophical research in
other graduate courses. My main motivations were the following: The course in environmental philosophy aimed to familiarize the students with Philippine environmental movements, which can help them formulate contextual reflections informed by the Philippine situation; many environmental philosophers are activists whose ideas were profoundly influenced by their involvement in environmental issues and concerns; for students who are Catholic priests to rise to the challenge of Lynn White Jr’s article, “The Historical Roots of the Ecologic Crisis,” (1967) where he claims that Christianity, as a religion, could be blamed for the environmental crisis; and for them to concretize the Catholic bishops’ call to action concerning the environmental problems that beset the country. My students and I are formally trained in theological studies at the graduate level. In this connection, the opportunity to interweave philosophy and theology in the subject, environmental philosophy presented itself. The final research output’s theme was “Participatory Action Research on the Catholic Engagement with the Environmental Crisis in the Philippines.”

Jennifer Ayres’ reflections on our vulnerability during these precarious times of the pandemic and ecological crisis (2021) inform the paper’s view of engaged pedagogy. She draws from Judith Butler’s notion of vulnerability as a kind of bodily and emotional fragility that binds us together as human beings (Butler, 2014). Ayres extends the connection to include the more-than-human world (2021, p. 328). Education, then, for Ayres, “should nurture in our resilience and open-heartedness, capacities necessary to live honestly, compassionately, and courageously in a precarious and transient world” (2021, p. 330). Ayres’ newer work extends and particularizes the work she has been doing recently on environmental theology, significantly changing focus from being primarily anthropocentric to being more deeply ecocentric. Her article “Learning on the ground” (2014) shows how seminary education can be enriched by the bodily engagement that ranges from a “walk and talk” class activities to actualized commitment to “live life accordingly.” Such life is now awakened, engaged, and summoned (2014, p. 213) by the embodied encounters with the other members of the planetary community. In this study, engaged pedagogy is an education that highlights the possibility of expanded ecological consciousness and nurtures the stakeholders’ commitment to environmental justice and care.

The paper is divided into the following sections: the first part presents the framework of participatory action research or PAR. The second part discusses the process adopted in this project. The third part presents the challenges and opportunities that COVID-19 brought to the participants, including the researchers and communities. The fourth part offers recommendations for doing PAR for theology and religion that draws from a multidisciplinary approach to address local and global environmental problems even in the time of a pandemic.

2 | THE ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVISM OF THE PHILIPPINE CATHOLIC CHURCH

The Catholic Church in the Philippines regards itself as a “Church of the Poor.” The mandate flows into the theological reflections of the faith community that had incorporated ecological concerns since the 80s. According to Paul-Francoise Tremlett (2013), the decades-long ecclesiastical resistance to mining activities in the Philippines has made the local Catholic Church be the only institution Filipinos can trust to speak out against environmental and other abuses (p. 122). Large-scale mining in the Philippines has devastated entire forests, leveled off mountains, polluted rivers and lakes with their mine tailings and chemical wastes. Moreover, these activities were taking place in communities where indigenous peoples live. In 1988, twenty-seven years before Laudato Si, the Filipino Catholic bishops released a pastoral letter on the environment. They narrated the environmental disasters happening in the country due to mining that destroyed the “beautiful land” and devastated the land-centric culture of the Philippine indigenous peoples. Since 1988, the Catholic bishops have released ten more pastoral letters on the environment. The publication of Laudato Si in 2015 influenced the Filipino bishops to be more vocal about the destructive effects of climate change. In January 2022, the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) announced that the Catholic Church will divest from local banks that continue to support fossil fuels in 2025 and will actively promote the use of renewable energy in its parishes and schools (CBCP, 2022).
The Philippine Catholic Church has leveraged its massive influence on the cultural lives of the people to be able to conduct an effective ecclesiastical praxis on environmental issues and concerns, especially mining. Some of my students who had their formation studies in seminaries where extensive mining occurred shared that several academic modules would allude to the interlocking issues of mining, loss of biodiversity, and destruction of the indigenous peoples’ homes and cultures. Nonetheless, the colonial past of Christianity in the Philippines is a contentious point. Gaston Kibiten interrogates the Catholic Church's complicity in undermining the cultures of indigenous peoples in the Philippines (2018). He claims that this examination is necessary despite the history of the Catholic bishops' public statements on respecting and protecting ancestral or indigenous lands, and even after Pope Francis' call for a dialogue with the indigenous peoples in *Laudato Si*. The Philippine Catholic Church has tried to address this problem. Karl Gaspar cites the 2010 Episcopal Commission on Indigenous Peoples' statement that essentially asks for forgiveness from indigenous peoples for the “historical wounds” which 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).

The above discussion points to the reality that there is still more work to be done by the Catholic clergy to deepen its ecological commitment through sustained actions. In his study on the impact of the 2nd Plenary Council of the Philippines (PCP II) on the Basic Ecclesiastical Communities (BECs), Ferdinand Dagmang (2015) notes that the successful implementation of the program could be attributed to the laity's committed participation and did not just depend on the initiatives of ecclesiastical leaders. A student shared the same conclusion, observing that “the goal of leading people to the mission of ecological ethics is enormous for a single individual, but with the contributive effort from the community, the goal becomes reachable.”

### 3 | THE PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH

What is participatory action research (PAR)? For Chevalier and Buckles (2013), it entails participation by stakeholders in a systematic research process aimed at advancing knowledge that results in action for social change on the part of the stakeholders. In the academic-community collaboration, the stakeholders include the faculty, staff, and students of a learning institution and the members or organizations outside the academe. As a general philosophy or framework for research, PAR emphasizes the connection of research with action in a real-world setting that advances knowledge beneficial to the researchers and participants (Fletcher et al., 2015, p. 1).

A PAR framework typically has four components: participatory, action, research, and social transformation. Participatory refers to the scope of the collaboration between individuals and communities or organizations. The extent of the partnership must begin with the community's involvement in the research design of the proposed project, from conceptualization to the final output, which is often in the form of advocacy or capacity-building. There is a mutual understanding between the community and the academic institution from the onset. Each understands that everyone is a stakeholder for social change. The participation component includes ethical considerations of ensuring voluntary participation and withdrawal, informed consent, and the health and safety of the stakeholders.

The action component refers to the researchers' task to build the community partners' capacity to analyze issues and concerns in their community, reflect on their possible causes and effects, and act towards change. Reflecting on their long-term project using PAR, Constantinou and Ainscow (2020) posit that the active component of the research has led to “the development of a form of collaborative inquiry in which participants were enabled to move from being data-respondents to becoming co-researchers and data-inquirers, to become aware of and, if possible, improve their situations” (p. 9). The key is the meaningful engagement of stakeholders, especially young people whose unique needs, experiences, and insights can provide policymakers with tools to respond to their concerns (Liebenberg et al., 2017).

The research component of PAR indicates that the research's goal is social transformation. The researchers ensure that the stakeholders are informed and consulted at every step of the research design, from conceptualization
of the project, appropriate methodologies for data collection, and the final output or result. Sharing the research in a way that is useful for the community is part of the research component of PAR. Liebenberg et al. note that the platform to initiate change would not be established without sharing the findings in meaningful and impactful ways (2017, p. 7). The researchers may need to revisit the research design and ensure that the research problems are well-laid out, objectives are clearly articulated, and the research output is doable and realistic.

The social transformation component may be built from theoretical frameworks to achieve social change. Paulo Freire’s critical pedagogy to raise consciousness is one such framework (Freire, 1970). It can be inspired by a feminist perspective where women are not regarded as subordinates but active participants of their own lives and self-determination (Adriany et al., 2021). It can be from a liberative theological paradigm wherein the see-judge-act mode of analysis enables us to adapt newer theological insights and pastoral actions towards social change (Gutiérrez, 1973). Sallie McFague claims that Christianity has preached the Good News for so long that it has forgotten that the Redeemer of human beings is also the Redeemer of everything that is (McFague, 1997). It is an “oversight” on the part of Christianity when it fails to include nature as one of the recipients of the “Christian praxis” that opts for the poor, oppressed, and the needy, or when it fails to develop a subject-subjects model for nature as part of its expression of faith. The natural world is vulnerable, sick, disadvantaged, and deteriorating; thus, Christian nature spirituality means caring for nature as Christian practice concerning the natural world. This “praxis” is an affirmation that the Redeemer God is also the Creator God, that God loves all creation, especially those who are vulnerable, sick, and needy. God’s love is inclusive, and therefore, it does not stop with the human species. The word “oppressed” changes over time; nature should be included inside the circle of divine concern, not outside it.

It might be inspired by a deep, ecological paradigm that rejects anthropocentrism, adopts biocentrism, upholds environmental kinship, and fosters respect and care for nature (Naess, 2005). According to Thomas Berry (1988), anthropocentrism has blinded humanity to the position that the human species is a product of the natural evolutionary processes of the universe. It has wound its way in human affairs, especially in Western civilization that emphasizes dualities of mind and body, spirit, and matter, as well as the eternal and the temporal. In the phenomenal order, Berry argues that the universe is the only being in “self-referent” mode, and all beings within it are “universe-referent.” All beings constitute a unity of existence coherently and intelligibly, as demonstrated by scientists studying the universe over a long time. The universe is a communion of subjects rather than a collection of objects. Berry (1988) argues that the traditional biblical creation story has become outmoded. He seeks to replace it with a new story that traces the evolutionary development of life from the first formation of particles in space to the creation of conscious human beings. The task for people is not to choose a better story but to find avenues for the creation stories to enrich one another.

4 | TEACHING PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH

This section presents students’ steps to create a good research design following the PAR framework. The preparation for the research started at the beginning of the course. A course typically runs for 14 weeks or 1 Term. To make the workload manageable, a compassionate teacher must distribute the tasks evenly throughout the term.

4.1 | The focus of the research

What is the most pressing environmental issue that your parish or community faces? What is the history of the problem? Is the situation better or worse than before? I framed these questions to elicit from students an awareness of environmental issues in the community that they might not have recognized as an issue, a problem, or a concern. Although they were Catholic priests, they were also doing administrative tasks for the diocese or parish and might not be too aware of environmental issues in their communities.
4.2 Stakeholders and actors

In the second week of the term, the students would identify the stakeholders and actors. The guide questions for this part are as follows: Who is working on the ground to address the issue? Who is the most affected by the problem or crisis? Additionally, the students need to identify a community partner, local government unit, non-governmental organization, a private organization in their parish/community to assist the research. They must find out those who are severely affected by the environmental crisis. Those affected might include nonhuman beings, bodies of water, ecosystems, biodiversity, and others.

I scheduled an individual Zoom meeting for one hour to address my students’ concerns regarding this part of the research design. During the personal consultation, we defined the concept of community in the light of restricted mobility due to lockdowns and travel restrictions. All students, except one, opted to work and partner with their seminaries and parishes to minimize the need to travel to a remote community.

4.3 Research objectives

In the third week, the students were ready to write their research objectives. The guide question for this part was simple: What does the research aim to achieve?

4.4 Research methods

In the fourth week, the students identified the research method that would work best for them. Before the pandemic, research methods were classified as qualitative, an analysis of literature that includes personal narratives of stakeholders and actors. They can be quantitative, an analysis using objective measurements and the statistical, mathematical, or numerical analysis of data collected through polls, questionnaires, and surveys. The pandemic upended traditional face-to-face research methods. Traditional methodologies that rely on fieldwork, face-to-face interviews, surveys, and data-gathering posed significant risks to researchers and participants. On the second individual consultation with my students, we talked about some creative methods that they could use for data collection that would not put them and their community partners at risk. Some students used photo-elicitation, online surveys, interviews, and focus group discussions to ensure safe social distancing with a limited number of participants.

4.5 The participatory action research proposal

In the fifth week, the students were ready to submit their research proposals. The proposal is an abstract or overview of the entire action research. It should contain the research question, theoretical framework, method, tentative conclusion, and research outcome. The research outcome was a project that is actionable, realistic, and adaptable by the community, either as a community project or towards a grant proposal to fund a project.

4.6 Progress report

In the eighth week, the students presented their progress reports. This part of the process or steps allowed the students to describe in class some challenges they encountered, if any, and whether they made some changes to their original research proposal. To facilitate the discussions, I prepared guide questions such as:
1. Were there changes you made to your research after collecting data?
2. Did you make some changes to your research objectives or goals?
3. What problems have you encountered so far at this point of your research?
4. What research method do you think is applicable right now?

The progress reports were significant because the students could express the difficulties in carrying out participatory action research in the pandemic. At the same time, though, they could draw strength from one another and offer support.

4.7 | The final paper

In the fourteenth week, the students submit their final paper. The titles of the projects in Table 1 manifest the place-based dimension of the research. The students identified the community by name and included their seminary or diocese in the title. Similarly, a student identified Taal Lake as the locale of the research. According to Estey (2014), place-based educational methods decenter the traditional classroom as the sole locus of learning, thus focusing on the non-traditional environment, including the natural environment that might have been overlooked as a possible locale for education (p. 125).

5 | CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

The Covid-19 pandemic presented several challenges and opportunities for conducting participatory action research. According to my students, mobility restrictions hampered their visit to more ecologically distressed communities, often in rural areas. In the Philippines, seminaries are found in highly urbanized city centers. As a response to this difficulty, most of the students identified their seminary or diocese, where they were residing, as the community partner. However, one student opted for a more remote community, away from the seminary and the diocese grounds.

| Participatory Action Research Project |
|--------------------------------------|
| Taal Lake Cycling Community: A Response to Heidegger’s Anthropocentric Perspective of the Environment |
| Provincial–Wide “Bishop Jose Manguiran Day” in Honor of His Radical Environmentalism |
| The Impact of a Manmade Forest of Mahogany (Swietenia macrophylla) and Mangium (Acacia mangium Willd.) Trees to the Adjacent Natural Mangrove Forest’s Flora and Fauna in the Seminario de San Jose, Vicariate of Puerto Princesa |
| Aquaponics Project for the San Carlos Seminary College in Cebu City |
| The Integration of Ecological Paradigm into the Seminary Formation of Our Lady of Penafancia Catholic Seminary |
| Food From Garden to Table, through the Greening Program in the Home: A Project for the Diocesan Family Life and Apostolate |
| Groundwater Contamination Prevention in Saint Francis Xavier Regional Major Seminary of Mindanao: an Economic vs. Environmental Inquiry |
| Integration of the Ecological Dimension in the Pastoral Formation Program of the Regional Major Seminary of Mindanao |
| Organic Waste Management through Vermiculture Technology in the Neighborhood of Saint Joseph Seminary |
| Waste Disposal Management as practiced by the Parishioners of the newly established Parish of San Pedro Calungsod in Cordova, Tigbauan Iloilo |
| Exploratory Research on the Ecological Engagements of the Diocesan Social Action Center (DSAC) of the Diocese of Dipolog |
| The “Iko bag” Project: a Single-use Plastic Alternative Initiative for the St. Francis Xavier College Seminary |
Localizing the meaning of community within the confines of their seminaries and dioceses enabled the students to be aware of overlooked environmental issues occurring within their jurisdiction. A student decided to work on water pollution to address a baffling problem that had hounded the seminary for years. A decade ago, the seminary cultivated a lush, vibrant orchid flower farm that was economically viable. Over the years, the orchid plants started dying in droves until the farm became unsuitable for orchid cultivation. The student, through the research, suspected that prolonged and sustained use of chemical fertilizers poisoned the farm, and worse, the toxins might have contaminated the seminary’s potable water supply. Some students identified the lack of a waste management system in their seminaries. A couple of students noted the lack of environmental studies in the seminary formation despite Laudato Si and the local Catholic Church’s efforts to address environmental issues in the country. The lack of group recreational activities due to the pandemic provided an opportunity for the student who decided to engage a local community. It was during this time that the student took to cycling. Together with his group of recreational cyclists, they usually took the route going to the towns around Taal lake in the southern part of Manila. Immersing into the communities and observing the lake’s condition, the student, with the help of the cycling community, decided to raise awareness for the preservation of the lake.

In the individual consultations, the students initially struggled with identifying the stakeholders and actors in their communities. The intervention I used for this problem was to forward a tree model to identify stakeholders. The tree model captured our discussions on identifying those greatly affected by the issue and benefit significantly from the solution.

The tree’s roots refer to the stakeholders and actors affected severely but will benefit significantly from solutions offered and adopted. As we move higher to other parts of the tree, the “trunk” refers to those who are less severely affected; the “leaves” pertain to those who are “moderately affected; and the “leaves” refer to the stakeholders who are less affected. For the seminary communities, the students identified the seminarians as the “roots,” the staff and non-clergy faculty as the “trunk,” the formators and clergy faculty as the “branches,” and the diocese that runs the seminary as “leaves.” The visual representation was helpful because the students could identify the affected actors who could become active participants in addressing the environmental issues that affect the community. Some students extended the Tree Model by adding more roots and leaves to refer to the broader community outside the seminary or diocese.

The choice of appropriate research methods and data collection proved to be some of the biggest challenges that the students faced. The pandemic hastened the Filipinos’ adoption of online platforms for classes, work, and even worship services. The Filipinos are one of the world’s most engaged people on social media; however, the Internet also highlights the digital divide in the country (Juya, 2020). Many Filipinos cannot access the Internet fully because of poverty and poor infrastructure, especially in rural areas. The students in environmental philosophy would have to use creative research methods to obtain data.

For research involving interviews of key informants, the students used Facebook, Messenger, Zoom, and Google Meet. The social media platforms are accessible, and telecommunication companies bundle the apps freely into the subscription. In research involving many participants like the Ministry of Family Life Apostolate members, the student conducted virtual focus group discussions where he presented his research proposal, gathered the members’ feedback and questions, and offered the research results were integrated into the existing programs of the ministry. In the pre-Cana seminar, “Economic Aspect of Family Life,” the idea of ecological stewardship would be introduced to couples before they start their families.

Another creative method that a student used is photo-elicitation through the participants’ photographs. Participant-generated photo-elicitation usually involves inviting participants to take pictures, then discuss them during a subsequent interview or in a focus group. This approach can provide participants with the opportunity to bring their content and interests into research (Dunlop & Ward, 2012; Gou & Shibata, 2017). The student requested the members of his parish in a rural community to gather evidence that the community practiced a sound waste management system. Figure 1 is a participant-generated photograph of a clean road and neatly organized plastic bags containing waste. The method allowed the student-researcher to follow the recommended health protocols while remaining engaged with his parishioners.
The unique position that my students occupy in the Roman Catholic Church as clergy provided them with the opportunity to implement their projects. As seminary formators, the students whose research projects involved the seminary community found little resistance against their projects, from conceptualization to implementation. Their judgment as priests, educators, and scholars carried weight and gravitas. In two of the research projects, one helped design a sound water management system to address water pollution, and the other created a viable vegetable garden design for every parishioner to adopt and use. Likewise, in research involving members of a Diocesan ministry and parishioners, the faithful would seem to consent to the priests’ requests to participate in the study and to agree with their recommendations. However, in research involving a remote community, the student-researcher found it challenging to engage the people in the community and to find like-minded cycling enthusiasts who would support his research. Even pre-pandemic, the opportunity and challenges described above are present.

Nevertheless, in narrating the research process in their final paper, the student-researchers ensured that participants of their study volunteered willingly, and they took note of the participants’ inputs and insights. To do the research ethically, the students gathered the participants’ consent through a series of preliminary online meetings where they presented their project proposals. The participants’ willingness to join the research projects of their pastors manifested their trust in the latter. Building trust is an essential part of doing participatory action research. Trust does not happen in an instant. Both researchers and participants cultivate it over time. In the Philippines, with a large Catholic population, priests are among the most trusted by Filipinos.

6 | ENGAGED PEDAGOGY IN THE TIME OF PANDEMIC

The PAR Framework is a tool in engaged pedagogy. Engaged pedagogy involving environmental philosophy and ecological theology requires that learning institutions undertake collaborative partnerships with communities outside academia. In the pre-pandemic period, partnerships with marginalized communities could be made. However, the pandemic posed challenges to the conduct of collaborative partnerships. One of my students initially thought of working with the badjao, an impoverished indigenous linguistic group living in Mindanao. Due to the health risks posed by the Covid-19 virus, he decided to choose a community within the diocese where he lived and worked. Selecting a community where one lives is inspired by an ecological principle, “niche.” “Niche” pertains to the species’
ability, determined by the traits, to gather resources, evade enemies, and any other factor that influences its relative birth and death rates (Chase & Myers, 2011; Polechová & Storch, 2019).

While teaching environmental philosophy to graduate students who were Catholic seminary formators, I developed an engaged pedagogy framework that considered theological, philosophical, and ecological principles.

The first principle, the flourishing of all, refers to the end or purpose of why we use engaged pedagogy in teaching and research. The notion of flourishing is based on Jesus’ words in John 10:10: “I came that they may have life and may [a]have it abundantly.” The superabundance of life does not have to be confined to human life. Following McFague (1997), Jesus is the redeemer of all. The “all” refers to humans and nonhumans alike. To work for human flourishing is not enough; we must contribute to addressing environmental destruction that results in unimaginable loss of life and biodiversity. Leopold (1949) underscores the importance of knowing and understanding flourishing as members of the biotic community that live and thrive within it. In the context of learning, the ecosystem includes the members of the academic community.

The Covid-19 pandemic, on the one hand, manifests the interconnectedness of lives worldwide by connecting us through collective suffering and despair. The pandemic highlights that in moments of “illness,” shock waves of pain reverberate worldwide. It reveals the extent of the effects of systemic social inequalities that result in acts of injustice towards groups we render as “Others.” The pandemic brings to our attention the imbalance such as lack of access to quality healthcare and discrimination of racial/ethnic minorities for generations (Ahlers et al., 2020, p. 25; Ayres, 2021).

On the other hand, reflecting on the pandemic offers opportunities to attend to the illness collectively. It reminds us that there are connections between human activities, environmental destruction, and the ill effects of the pandemic. In the context of religious and theological studies, teaching and research can address questions such as: How did spiritual and religious narratives help or assist believers/devotees/adherents in coping with traumas associated with COVID-19? What lessons can be learned from their experiences that will enrich the use of spirituality and religion in healing therapies in the post-pandemic future?

Earlier, I mentioned the community’s enthusiastic response towards some of my students’ project proposals. In projects that required the participation of communities outside the seminary, the students acknowledged the inputs of the laity by listening to their stories during focus group discussions either online or in-person. A student who was recently appointed chaplain of a new parish in the city’s outskirts was pleasantly surprised to learn that the community had high regard and concern for the environment, especially when it came to proper waste segregation and management even before the parish was established. Another student reflected that the vulnerable Taal Lake and its human communities changed his perspective from a distant and disconnected relationship to one that is close and intimate. At the same time, the Catholic priests enjoy power and influence as ministers when it comes to much more to the community through their actions. This observation regarding environmental care is consistent with Dagmang’s assessment of the impact of the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines in the life of the Catholic Church. The Basic Ecclesial Communities (BECs) in the rural areas of the country have been instrumental in translating the ideas of being the “Church of the Poor” into concrete actions (Dagmang, 2015).

The second principle, right relations, refers to the values that will result in the flourishing of all. In determining the level of institutional engagement with communities or organizations, researchers must constantly observe ethical conduct. This means respecting the existing cultures and traditions of partner communities or organizations. We must also demonstrate empathy and compassion towards our partners, students, and fellow researchers. In the greater community, right relations in the pandemic necessitates that we observe health protocols such as wearing masks, maintaining appropriate social distancing, minimizing social gatherings, and ensuring data privacy at every stage of the research process.

The third principle, praxis, refers to the actions that manifest both tenets of the flourishing of all and right relations by demonstrating our skills and competence as teachers and researchers. Freire (1970) uses praxis to offer a pedagogy based on reflection and action about the world to transform it for the better. To be skillful, we must be able to communicate the vision of engaged pedagogy to our students so that they, in turn, would manifest the skills to engage the community.
for the better. Cipollone and Zygmunt (2018) describe a culturally sensitive teacher whose praxis includes careful pre-preparation of materials during pre-teaching, a respectful attitude towards the members of the community whose insights into the community are valuable, a competent mentoring of students’ research from beginning to end, and the capacity to empower students to communicate the research results to the community for feedback, validation, and adoption.

The pandemic still rages worldwide, making lives difficult for the millions severely affected by the economic and social loss. It also opens chances to work together to address social and environmental problems by working with and through communities. In the feedback session, after the student-researcher has presented his plan to integrate environmental studies into the seminary formation, he shared that the seminarians appreciated the project for “intellectual formation develops ecological awareness by integrating ecology as part of theology. Biblical studies, particularly in the Pentateuch, develops ecological awareness. Christian anthropology elaborates the role and place of human beings in the complex web of creation. Pastoral formation cultivates ecological awareness through the preferential option for the poor. Our apostolate to the poor is not limited only to the poor but to the Earth. For the Earth is poor. We take so much from the Earth, but we have not given her enough compensation.”

A student who worked on the legacy of Bishop Jose Manguiran, a passionate environmentalist who has campaigned hard against mining in his diocese and has supported the indigenous peoples’ right to their ancestral domain, reflected that it would not be difficult for Filipino Catholics to reject anthropocentrism and embrace ecocentrism. He then cited the following passage in Job 12: 7: “Ask the beasts, and they will teach you; the birds of the heavens, and they will teach you."

7 | CONCLUSION

What is it like to teach a course in environmental philosophy for Catholic priests and seminary formators? The whole experience was rewarding. I realized early on that there could be a promise and a potential in the opportunity to craft participatory action research for this group of students. As priests, educators, and scholars, they can harness their influence in the religious and cultural lives of the Filipino people towards community-building, including restoring the biotic communities in their seminary, or diocese, or beyond it. The act of restoring must arise first from the recognition of our shared “woundedness” and “fragility” (Ayres, 2021, p. 335), living as we do in a world equally wounded by the ecological crisis.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST
The author declares no conflict of interest.

ETHICS STATEMENT
Written informed consent has been obtained from all subjects involved in this study.

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