

Article

The Christian Ideal of Sustainable Development and Its Perception among Young Adults: A Case Study from Slovakia

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Abstract: In this article, we present the concept of the participation and responsibility of individuals in the sustainable development (SD) of the world from a Christian ethics point of view. The Christian ethics perspective is based on the biblical command to care for and protect creation. Nevertheless, errors have been repeated throughout history because of a misunderstanding of human responsibility for what has been entrusted to man from the beginning. The article explores not only these mistakes, but also the concept of a properly understood individual responsibility from the point of view of Christian ethics. The ideal from the perspective of Christian ethics is followed by our own qualitative research. The research sample consists of 120 young adults. During the research, the perception of a person's individual responsibility tasks for SD is explored from the perspective of university students. The research findings answer the question of in which of the four areas of SD do respondents see the needs of their participation the most. The findings of the research also indicate the importance that the young respondents allocated to all four areas of SD, which were clearly defined by The National Strategic Document on Sustainable Development in Slovakia. Furthermore, we recorded a total of 12 main areas that the respondents considered to be important tasks of man for the world and its SD. We also evaluated the qualitative findings in the group of young adults that confirm the perception of each student's individual participation and responsibility for the SD of society and the physical world.

Keywords: sustainable development of society; Christian ethics; liability; participation; social media; adolescents; research



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1. Introduction

Achieving human well-being, addressing the problems of the Earth's ecosystem, and eradicating poverty, in a population that will reach nine billion people by the year 2030, is still possible, according to the 'Global Sustainable Development Report 2019', a new United Nations report by an independent group of scientists. However, it is only possible if there is a fundamental and serious change in the relationship between people and the world in which we live. The report advocates for efforts to implement the 2030 Agenda which is a developmental plan for the international community until 2030 in the field of sustainable development (SD). The report argues "that understanding the interconnections between the individual SD goals and the concrete systems that define society today will be essential to invent policies that manage exacting trade-offs" ([Global Sustainable Development Report 2019](#)).

Some experts, therefore, point to the use of technological innovation that can increase total green factor productivity ([Zhou et al. 2019](#)), which considers the impacts of energy saving on achieving sustainability ([Vymetalova-Hrabakova et al. 2020](#)), and about the needs in new global SD policy agendas ([Nhamo et al. 2018](#)). Other experts provide findings that point out the necessity of governing, interpreting, and striving to

implement policy coherence for SD (Tosun and Leininger 2017; Koohi-Fayegh and Rosen 2020), the use of media as a support of sustainable behavior (Ohuneni and Popoola 2019; Saner et al. 2019; Shahzalal and Hassan 2019), the importance of promoting SD through civil society (Pierobon 2018), and the necessity of valuation of environmental damages (Usmani 2020; Bherwani et al. 2020).

Many authorities define SD as a popular catchphrase in contemporary development discourse (Šmajs 2006; Klarin 2018; Nhamo et al. 2018; Ukaga et al. 2019). In this case, they referred to “sustainable development” as a responsible and interesting strategy that satisfies the biological, material, social, psychological, spiritual, and emotional needs, standards, and interests of people, with an accent on promoting efficient and sustainable use of natural resources and limiting (or at a minimum regulating) interventions, damaging, or even destroying current and future living conditions and existing life forms on Earth. It is a concept that stresses that people should not burden the Earth beyond tolerable levels but consider the prudent use of all resources in order to protect cultural heritage (such as landscapes, buildings, art, books, etc.) as well as natural heritage (such as biodiversity, culturally significant environment and places, etc.). The concept emphasizes the needs of balance and the subsequent stability between human needs and the carrying capacity of the current and future environment. It can be stated that in a broader sense, we can speak not only of endurance, but without doubt also of the necessity of participation of the whole community of human beings (Martin et al. 2020; Vymetalova-Hrabakova et al. 2020; Žalec and Pavlíková 2019; Matúšová 2007). One of the main goals of the concept of SD is therefore to protect and preserve the current environment for future generations as much as possible.

We must ask, along with Pope Francis, how it is possible that our society does not take into account the “environmental crisis” (p. 13), denies this crisis or lives in “comfortable resignation”, or in “the speed of all activities” which has been developed by humans (p. 15), or “in blind confidence in technical solutions” (p. 14), which are linked to business interests (p. 16) and always re-emphasizing efficiency and momentary benefit (p. 182). However, since we agree with Pope Francis that “change is something desirable” (p. 17), we have to be careful on the other hand, when change is becoming “a source of anxiety when it causes harm to the world and to the quality of life of much of humanity” (p. 17). As Pope Francis, we also believe, that each of us “can cooperate as instruments of God for the care of creation, each according to his or her own culture, experience, involvements and talents” (p. 13) (Pope Francis 2015)..

There are several possibilities that we can consider to be suitable for the dissemination of daily messages in the context of SD and sustainability. There is personal experience, experiential learning, learning by examples (parents/children, teachers/students) or, for example, personal contact with nature where humans may see the beauty of God’s creation. These possibilities, said through Plato’s parables, emerge (go away) from the “cave” and direct human activity towards proper human action. Human action is supposed to be “over-human” and thus we do not have to look at the shadows as Plato expresses. Similarly, one of the most effective ways to attractively present “God’s mandate to man” in the secular world is through the media. We consider social media as the current creator of public opinion as one of the most suitable tools for emerging from “the cave parables” to “open minds”. Social media can be an effective tool for the dissemination of SD, i.e., it moves people to not look at the shadows but through cheap and rapid technology, look at challenges.

A number of studies have focused on the relationship between the adoption of social media and SD. These empirical studies and related literature mostly introduced social media as a very effective way of spreading awareness of the problem of SD to society. Based on results, we can see that social media exists on the basis of technology that is practically without limitations, and therefore social media is a tool for regular classification of SD results or criteria (Evans 2013; Leonardi 2014; Mujahid and Mubarik 2021; Aspasia and Ourania 2014; AlSharji et al. 2018; Trawnih et al. 2021).

However, research into the use of social media in promoting SD has taken place for less than ten years. This kind of research proves that social media creates a link between stakeholder involvement, is a place for communication with different communities, is a suitable and proven helper in sustainable marketing or advertising, and is an effective tool for the promotion of SD and the promotion of sustainable development goals (Sarkar and George 2018; Krätzig and Warren-Kretzschmar 2014; Gonzalez-Lafaysse and Lapassouse-Madrid 2016; Finney 2014; Fraoua et al. 2014; Sujata et al. 2019).

Promoting SD through media and especially through social media (for example, microblogging, social networking, social bookmarking, forums, social curation, and so on) is a way of life for most of society. Many studies have proven that many individuals use social media to interact with friends and family, while others use it to communicate with different communities or share their messages, inspirational stories, and/or to motivate others with calls to action (Lottridge and Bentley 2018; Lee et al. 2011; Lenhart 2015; Kumpel et al. 2015; Oeldorf-Hirsch and Sundar 2015; Wong and Burkell 2017; Pew Research Center 2018a, 2018b). Moreover, social media: (1) can create a periodical classification of results, or criteria of SD goals; (2) may help in sustainable marketing, advertising, or promotion; (3) can appeal for the usage of technology instead of the paper form among communities, customers, or organizations; (4) can create a platform where consumers act more and more as engaged citizens; and (5) can address ordinary people, who share messages and via social media, co-create other content for and about SD. Thus, social media seems to be a very effective way to spread knowledge of the SD issue throughout society.

In addition, promoting SD through social media allows advocates: (1) to create narratives comprehensible to all, thus raising public interest and support; (2) to promote open initiatives and SD innovation in the public sector; (3) to communicate social norms and rules, that reflect sustainability principles and sustainable development goals, and thus make them more understandable to the wider public; (4) to appeal to sustainability indicators; (5) to be a voice in providing clear facts for steering policies, including information about daily decisions of regional policies; and (6) to point out the need for human participation and responsibility for SD now and in the future. In short, social media has great power in which to promote the concept of SD as a new developmental paradigm.

From this theoretical introduction arises the concept of human participation and responsibility for the world and its SD from the point of view of Christian ethics. The basis of this ideal is the biblical command to care for and protect creation, which the Creator assigned to man (Genesis 1:28, 2:15), after which we will introduce errors that have arisen due to a misunderstanding of human responsibility, and, finally, properly understood individual responsibility of man from the perspective of Christian ethics. This ideal is followed by our own research, in which findings indicate the importance of 12 main areas that respondents considered regarding the individual tasks needed for the world and its SD.

This research follows a research analysis of individual tasks of sustainable human behavior from the perspective of 48 university students, which was carried out two years ago and was published in the journal *Sustainability* in April 2021 (compare Tkáčová et al. 2021). The research presented in this text does not focus on “the use of media in the field of individual responsibility for SD in schools” (Tkáčová et al. 2021), but brings a new perspective, enriched by the Christian ideal of SD. The research presented in this article, in addition to almost tripling the research sample from the earlier study (Tkáčová et al. 2021) (to 120 young adults in the age range of 18–25), addresses students of all years of study (as opposed to students in the last year of second-level university studies from the previous research), addresses students from several universities from different areas throughout Slovakia, and thus brings broader research findings with regard to the Christian ideal of SD.

2. Theological-Ethical Ideal of Individual Participation—An Outline of the Issue

The commission to administer and care for the world, as voiced in the biblical message, is a commitment to man—the world and all areas of human activity, such as ecology, social affairs, human rights, and politics, should be the subject of intense human interest. Koltermann considers this an order as well as a mandate, i.e., as about God's specific regulation for man—he “is to act responsibly and care for his living space, including the living creatures that are in it.” The author recalls that in the theological perspective of humanity's concern for the world and its development, not only the perspective “from man to God” is essential, but so is the view directed “from man to his surroundings” (Koltermann 2000, p. 188). The first view is maximally subjective, but the second can be assessed and evaluated; that is why it can be stated that the view directed “from man to his surroundings” has brought about many misunderstandings in history and at present.

2.1. Misunderstood Individual Participation and Responsibility of Man

Speaking of man's responsibility for the world and its development in the context of a theological-ethical perspective, the first inadequate attitude can be described as “Ethical Docetism”. Humanity's involvement in the world is foreign to this principle. One should isolate oneself from the world, as it represents a corrupt place for him without the possibility of remedy. The term “cosmos” is understood in a negative sense, which we also find in the thoughts of the heretic Markion and in the Gnostics. The attitude of Ethical Docetism has also been fully demonstrated in the recent past. We could see Ethical Docetism in the withdrawal of Christians during World War II; in not taking responsibility for society, when the German Free Churches expressed no serious disagreements with Hitler. Today, this view is held, for example, by hermits and some groups of pietists. The consequence of Ethical Docetism is often a separation from the world and a lack of interest in its course.

Another example of non-participation and an irresponsible attitude of the individual towards the world is sometimes called “Ethical Nestorianism”. It expresses an indifferent attitude of man towards the world. Although the world is perceived positively (i.e., as God's creation), one is indifferent to its social and political problems. The root of such an attitude is the separation of faith and politics; the church does not have political responsibility for society and should maintain neutrality in political matters. This attitude forgets that the church can be a “loud trumpet”, which in society emphasizes the duty of politics to maintain “democratic legitimacy and social justice” with the policy that man “should especially care for the virtue of public reason in political life, and for the virtue of civility in civil society” (Zákon o Životnom Prostředí 1992).

Another problem is that religion itself, in the understanding of Ethical Nestorism is limited to the area of private, that is, internal beliefs; concerning mostly or only the individual. All this leads to the attitude of the so-called “privatization of faith”, and thus the separation of Christian and secular existence, private and public, sacred, and profane (Kišš 2006, p. 131).

“Ethical Monophysitism” is another example of the misunderstood role of mankind's participation and responsibility for the world and its further development. The principle represents a clericalist attitude of man towards the world, which can be described as the intention to govern the world from a “pulpit”; i.e., it is the clergy's efforts after secular rule. Kišš (2006, p. 131) states that clericalism is inherently a misunderstanding of the Gospel and represents a kind of Ethical Monophysitism—the mixing of power between church and state into one power.

“Ethical Arianism”, on the other hand, proclaims the reduction of Christianity to socio-political actions. It takes away the importance of spirituality and the spiritual tasks of the church. Man has a responsibility to change the Earthly world and society, and to ignore the spiritual plane (e.g., the question of eternal life, salvation, etc.). In the words of Kišš, Jesus is also understood as a kind of pioneer of humane, social, and political ideas, a social revolutionary who was concerned with the Earthly world (not the world of eternity). Arianism preaches an exclusively secular understanding (for example, there

is no transcendent reality, there is only an immanent one), it focuses only on the human and ethical side of Christianity, and its interest is to create an Earthly “kingdom of God” in this world. According to Kišš, it is a “one-sided principle that transforms Christianity into secular philanthropy” (Kišš 2006, p. 140).

In the context of human participation on the suitable development and responsibility for the world, the last-mentioned inadequate attitude of the individual within the theological-ethical perspective is certainly the “subjectivization” of faith or the subsequent postmodern and contemporary hyper-consumption understanding of the world and man’s tasks. Kasper points out that these changes came about gradually, because of two opposing entities—a firm Christian belief and a desire for man. According to the author, the division between these entities can be seen in the loss of participation and responsibility among Christians for the world and its further development (Kasper 1994). Armstrong takes a similar view, observing that Europe has gradually ceased to express its faith, emphasizing, rather, the desire to create a society based on rational, autonomous reason, in which the principle of “as if God did not exist” (*etsi Deus non daretur*) (Armstrong 1996, p. 325) has taken over. Similarly, Máhrík et al. sees it comparably, as he points out that the age of great and good actions is past (Máhrík et al. 2018). Grenz sees the beginning of this process against the backdrop of the enlightenment, which emphasized “the God of nature” at the expense of “the God of the Bible” and led to “the supernatural merging with the natural.” The author states that at the end of modern times, this process paved the way for the “complete abolition of God” (Grenz 1997, pp. 66–67).

In the context of Christian ethics, although man’s participation and responsibility for the world has not changed (i.e., the mandate continued to apply), the secular world has rejected the participation and responsibility thus understood. These days, media, as the powerful representatives of these principles, unfortunately have their own interests. Before appeal to participation and responsibility, they were mostly not continually active in enlightening people, government, and the society to work collectively for sustainability. According to a few recent studies that studied the role of media in sustainability communication, most either analyzed the content about selected themes (for example, climate change) (Schmidt et al. 2013; Barkemeyer et al. 2017) or explored some of the characteristics of media’s communication theory (for example, “the news attention cycle”) (Holt and Barkemeyer 2012). Therefore, the question is not “if we can use”, but there is a question “how we can use” media and social media as effective tools which, aside from a person’s experience, experiential learning, learning by examples, or for example personal contact with nature, could be one of the most effective ways to attractively present “God’s mandate to man” in the secular world.

Phenomena such as media’s own interests, secularization, postmodernism, and hyper consumption can, paradoxically, also present positive connotations. The positive understanding of secularization was brought for example by professor emeritus Charles Taylor, the winner of the prestigious Templeton Prize and author of an interesting view about what it means to say we live in “a secular age”. In his book “Secular Age”, Taylor introduced, inter alia, a point about the heritage of Reformation. Periods of the late Middle Age and especially Reformation brought to the society its development as well as its risk because of moving away and consciously forgetting about “Imago Dei”; i.e., separation from God. On the other hand, people discovered what professor Taylor calls peoples’ “interiority”. According to Taylor, a positive connotation of the current secular plurality can be considered the possibility of cooperation of peoples’ “interiority”, together with the sense of proper discipline, which both and together could reform not only humans but also society as a whole (Taylor 2018).

Furthermore, in our opinion, phenomena such as media’s interests, hyper consumption, secularization, and postmodernism have their positive connotations. The diversity of opinions and orientations, typical of today’s society, ultimately speaks against any one-sided thinking. The current secular plurality can be seen positively for example when we do not understand secularization as an absolutization of the “non-religious” view of reality

(i.e., secularism), but as the intention to be and remain authentic, yet understandable to the secular world. In its positive sense, secularization is, after all, the opposite of clericalism, with which Slovaks have had a sad experience from the Second World War.

Christianity itself can also see the current secular setting positively, as it certainly brings new opportunities (not only challenges, notably). For various Christian churches and communities, it provides a platform for the existence of initiatives that can be enriching for society. In the context of the topic, we mean humanitarian activities and projects of a charitable nature; steps leading to the solution of acute social problems (care for the suffering, refugees, etc.); interfaith scientific and publishing activities and dialogue (which would help to cultivate human reciprocity); and other procedural possibilities and sources of social cohesion.

2.2. Properly Understood Individual Participation and Responsibility of Man

The Christian's correct attitude to the world is very specifically regulated by the Ecumenical Council of 451, which took place in Chalcedon. The Chalcedonic application of the two natures of Christ to the Christian's relationship to the world is an interpretation of the Christian's participation in sustainable development, and image of his responsible approach to the world. The General Ecclesiastical Council in Chalcedon formulated the relationship of the two natures of Christ based on which the Christian's relationship to the world is to be formulated. The two natures of Christ, divine and human, are:

- (a) Immiscible (asynchytós)—it is the responsibility of man not to mix the Divine and the human, but to perceive their differences, that is, the difference of God's empire from the secular empire as a warning against clericalism. In this context, Bonhoeffer's words are memorable, declaring that the dominion of Christ above the lordship does not mean the dominion of the church above the lordship (Bonhoeffer 1956, pp. 269–70).
- (b) Immutable (atreptós)—the responsibility of man is not to confuse the Divine and the human, i.e., man's love for the utopian world must not be more than the real world, although there is a lot of suffering and evil in it.
- (c) Indivisible (adiaretós)—the responsibility of man is not to divide the Divine and the human, because the whole world belongs to God. God does not want to rule only in the church and leave the world to evil. Man is responsible for God's principles to enter the world, for example, through good and humane laws.
- (d) Inseparable (achóristós)—the responsibility of man is not to isolate and not to separate from the world. The fourth point speaks of the need to maintain a positive relationship with the world. For, in the words of Kišš, "love for the world cannot be replaced by any other love, nor by increased love of God" (Kišš 2006, p. 146).

In the context of Christian ethics and the ideal of participation and a responsible approach of man to the world, it can be seen that the four Christological concepts can be realistically applied (Hennelová 2011). The ethical application of Chalcedony Christology represents the individual's serving attitude to the world, which is to perceive the world positively because it is God's creation; a space where God's will and laws are to be realized. Kišš reminds us that this goal is to be achieved not by "empowering the church to rule over the world" (Kišš 2006, p. 10), but by responsible people understanding their role correctly and helping to lead the world on the path to humanity (Kondrla 2016; Kondrla and Durková 2018).

Beem (2007, p. 72) also encourages such an understanding of our participation and responsibility for the world and its SD, saying that God has made us capable and therefore we are committed to participating in all world events. Focusing attention on the meaning of the participation and responsibility of the individual also, Kierkegaard adds the necessity of the individual's relationship with God; that is, the Christian God and, consequently, a refined and complex anthropology that challenges man (Martin et al. 2020). Armstrong follows Kierkegaard, adding that God has given man not only abilities but also freedom to make decisions "which He does not threaten in any way." God never says with complete concreteness what He asks of us, but He gives us, in the words of the author, "freedom in

creativity" (Armstrong 1996, p. 452). Moreover, for a Christian, he can see in the context of this "confidential freedom" an example of absolute participation and responsibility for others that Jesus Christ gives; one who has mercy on the humble and quiet; distracts proud hearts; elevates the humiliated; satisfies the hungry; bows to those who ask him; and so on. We suggest that in the context of Christian ethics, the guiding idea of the "ethics of responsibility" is the social ethics represented by Christ. Christ's example is a suitable model from which the (existentially internalized) continuation of "ethics of responsibility" can be derived. An internal change in the attitudes and lifestyles of a growing number of individuals could subsequently put gradual "healthy pressure on those who have it in the hands of political, economic and social power" (Pope Francis 2015, p. 206).

Moreover, as Vymetalova-Hrabakova et al. point out, man's commitment to the world and its SD (i.e., continuing the mandate to care for and protect creation) is part of a natural law that, unlike the law revealed to believers (e.g., Jews, Christians, or Muslims), is obvious to all people (Vymetalova-Hrabakova et al. 2020). This also implies the concept of a properly understood individual participation and responsibility for the world and the future of SD for the world. It is an individual responsibility that should be inherent in everyone; that is, it does not allow the transfer of responsibility to others. A participation and responsibility that is aware that life on Earth is threatened by the frivolous and indifferent actions of those who have ceased to hear and perceive their role as the caring custodians of the world and of all creation. In this sense, the media can be an extended hand for anyone who wants to talk about the need for sustainability thanks to individual involvement in the production of information broadcasts through new media or social networks, information, and popularity link with special attention on the topic of sustainability and reaches a wider range of people.

3. Slovakia and Its Participation at Sustainable Development

In the context of the Slovakia, the concept of SD is regulated by Act no. 17/1992 Coll. on the environment. It defines SD in paragraph 6 as "development that preserves the ability of current and future generations to meet their basic living needs without reducing the diversity of nature..." (Zákon o Životnom Prostredí 1992). Although an increasing number of studies have been conducted concerning humanity's irrevocable liability for the protection of nature as well as for the protection of the environment (Milne and Gray 2012; Harvey 2016; Hegtvedt et al. 2019; Klarin 2018; Molinoario et al. 2019; Zhai and Chang 2019; Sharma 2020; and so on), in Slovakia, the implementation of SD is only in its early stages. The process of incorporating the goals of SD into Slovakia, as one of post-communist country (Slivka and Valčo 2012; Rončáková 2021), started only in 2016. Even the "National Strategy for Sustainable Development," a Slovak strategic document, is not yet finalized (Indicators of Sustainable Development 2020).

The view of the ecological behavior of Slovaks is best illustrated by the results of a representative public opinion survey among 1607 respondents. It turned out that Slovaks value their own comfort, well-being, and entertainment the most; in three quarters of the respondents (77.7%), they are the most important components for their happy and satisfied life. This group declared environmental behavior only when it was "at the expense of their comfort or money or it does not burden them." The other 17.7% of respondents indicated a resigned attitude or complete indifference to the issue of participation and environmental responsibility. Moreover, only 4.5% of Slovaks behave ecologically although this requires extra effort and may be at the expense of living standards (Prieskum: Slováci sú Ekologickí Lenivci 2008). Šmajs (2006, p. 26) noted this and in his monograph from 2006 stated that loss of effort and individual participation leads people in Slovakia to the "evolution of anti-natural culture".

On the other hand, some progress can still be seen in Slovakia. In support of the principles of SD, in recent years, valuable debate about the impact of sustainability on the environment has been ongoing. Measures resulting from the debate have been introduced to the public as well as the implementation of conceptual and legislative steps, social

projects, and political programs. Thanks to public, academic, and scientific debate, the concept of sustainability is adapting to the new needs over time and is experiencing the “fruit” of its stability, as well as innovation and new possibilities.

The state and non-profit organizations, as well as social scientists, charities, churches, and volunteers unanimously agree that the most effective tool for evaluating SD (and at the same time a tool common to all involved) are the so-called “indicators of SD”. These are measurable quantities, which reflect the state of the set strategic goals comprehensively and objectively, while providing us with information on the state, development, and processes in their quantitative and qualitative expression (Tkáčová et al. 2021). As they are common to all actors involved in SD activities, they also provide a fitting, necessary, and uniform key for the evaluation of these actions, including the evaluation of the fulfilment and implementation of objectives (Sustainable Development Indicators 2008).

The Slovak strategic document “National Strategy for Sustainable Development” consists of four areas that address and define the issue of sustainability in the context of Slovakia. Within these four main areas, the document distinguishes between specific indicators that we consider interesting, given the connection with our own research:

- The environmental area forms ecological criteria, which assess the human impact on the environment. It addresses indicators such as rational use of water, forest losses, soil erosion, air protection, protection of biodiversity, response to natural disasters and the fight against global environmental problems, preparedness, urbanization, and so on.
- The economic area forms economic criteria, which assess how and where people earn their livelihood. It monitors the area of economic growth, the economic performance and assumptions of its further development, management of waste production, environmental transport of people or goods, economic development in rural areas, rational use of energy, the use of natural resources in relation to the socio-economic conditions, and so on.
- The social area forms social criteria, which assess the character of daily life as expressed through infrastructure, amenities, and leisure activities. It focuses on the health of the general public and factors influencing the health status of the population, health care, poverty reduction, hunger in the world, demographic development, urbanization trends, and transport and so on.
- The institutional area addresses issues of the implementation of environmental management systems, monitors the issue of participation and global responsibility, focuses on care for the environment, and so on (Indicators of Sustainable Development 2020; Classification and Delineation of Urban Areas in a Census 2020).

The four areas also form the basic framework for the content of articles or radio and television reports in the media in Slovakia. Moreover, today’s digital transformation through social media and innovation is rather a great and effective opportunity for the environment. In our opinion, it can play a major role in preventing or resolving ecological crises. We can see that the fear of losing natural resources is taking a toll on present generations and they are switching towards SD.

4. Materials and Methods of the Research

The research presented in this study consisted of qualitative research with 120 young adults. We were interested to see in which of the four areas of SD respondents perceive the need for their own participation the most, and which each consider as the most significant of the SD goals for the contemporary world. The research was conducted through a questionnaire, which contained several open qualitative questions. Although more difficult to categorize and interpret, we chose the path of seven open-ended questions. Our goal was not to present any variants of answers to the respondents. The method was a benefit, as we discovered many attitudes and interesting ideas from the respondents which suitably dealt with the researched issues. The chosen qualitative method of research proved to be suitable, as respondents were able to justify their statements in more detail.

The research sample consisted of 120 young adults in the age range 18–25 years from several Slovak universities. Our aim was to create a research sample consisting of young adults who will soon become employees and creators of gross domestic product, i.e., active members of society, and thus active participants in the economic status of current society. In our opinion, this is not negligible in this research, given the assumption that respondents in a similar or close age category will have basically very similar opinions on individual responsibility in current SD as well as experiences about participation in current SD. Finally, we chose respondents in this age range because we believe in the existence of generational experiences that are mutual for persons of the same age.

The age directly influences the boundaries of the market and the market segments (i.e., the preference of consumers in the field of certain products or services), “which also has a direct impact on the perception of an individual’s participation in the sustainability of the world” (Tkáčová et al. 2021). This article extends the previous research and findings by means of a Christian approach, which links theological and scientific discourse with the reflections of research findings among 120 university students from several universities in Slovakia. Discursive reflections based on research findings will raise further consideration of possibilities from the point of view of the researched young adults, including opportunities for environmental sustainability shaped by spirituality.

In addition, we focus on social media in this article; we consider it an attractive tool for presenting God’s mandate to man, of course with the use of secular language. Social media is the biggest source of information amongst today’s young adults (Pew Research Center 2018a, 2018b, 2019; Anderson and Caumont 2014; Wakefield 2016; Ofcom’s Annual News Consumption Report 2019; Nielsen et al. 2020). Immediacy and timeliness of media content adds to the research a focus on two current aspects, i.e., the current view of young respondents on the need for their own participation on SD and the tasks that respondents perceived in relation with current SD.

Two hypotheses were formulated in the research:

Hypotheses 1 (H1). *Respondents perceive the need for their own participation the most in the environmental area of SD.*

Hypotheses 2 (H2). *Within the environmental area of SD, respondents will consider “replacement of one-use products in favor of organic agricultural products” as the most significant task for the SD of today’s world.*

Because we consider the establishment of reliability as very important in content analysis, we provide checks of the validity and reliability of data as well as testing of the codes that have been designed. The codes were tested to check their consistency. Further semantic validity and the correlation were provided to check to see if the researched phrases and words (as a part of researched categories) have similar meaning and to make sure that they all belong to the same category.

5. Results

The research findings provide responses to the following questions:

Q1: In which of the four areas of SD do respondents perceive the need for their own participation the most?

Q2: Which individual tasks are thought by the young adults to be the most significant for the SD of today’s world?

Authors see the fact that respondents did not leave out any of the four areas of SD, which are defined and explained by “National Strategy for Sustainable Development”, as a positive. Students in the sample declared a couple interesting individual tasks that they consider to be the most significant for the current SD of today’s world. On the left side of Table 1 is shown the order of significance of the areas of SD based on the need for researched young adults’ own participation (Q1). The areas that are reflected by respondents to be the most significant for current SD (Q2) are shown on the right side of Table 1. As these were open-ended questions from the questionnaire, respondents were able to provide several

answers; therefore, the sum of the responses in the following table does not correspond to the total sum of 100%. No statistical differences based on gender were noted in the research.

Table 1. Findings of the research—order of areas and individual tasks for current SD according to young adults.

Order of Areas	Individual Tasks for Current SD (in %)	
Environmental area (Total 79.68%)	(1)	Stopping dumping of solid and liquid waste in nature (39.01%)
	(2)	Replacement of one-use products in favor of organic agricultural products (24.07)
	(3)	Demands that improve the quality of a person's life without negatively affecting nature and environment (16.6%)
Institutional area (Total 70.55%)	(1)	Using an alternative and renewable energy source (35.69%)
	(2)	Global participation in the securing of world peace (17.43%)
	(3)	Global participation, responsibility, and care in the context of rights of others (17.43%)
Economic area (Total 64.77%)	(1)	The need for waste recycling (24.9%)
	(2)	The reduction of people's individual waste (23.24%)
	(3)	Reducing car traffic and supporting alternative modes of transport (16.6%)
Social area (Total 51.46%)	(1)	Focusing on poverty (29.05%)
	(2)	Decline in demographic developments (11.62%)
	(3)	Reducing noise due to business production and human activity (10.79%)

Researched young adults especially acknowledged individual participation and responsibility in the first of the four research areas that explain the issue of sustainability in the context of Slovakia, i.e., the environmental area. It seems that respondents understand that a greater number of people living in a specific area leads to an increasingly built-up environment that offers more services to support that population. Therefore, students communicated the necessity of urgently protecting nature, stating “stopping dumping nature with solid and liquid waste” (39.01%), “replacement of one-use products in favor of organic agricultural products” (24.07%), and “demands that improve the quality of a person's life without negatively affecting nature and environment” (16.6%).

Respondents also perceive their own participation in SD in the institutional area, which is mainly aimed at the implementation of environmental systems with emphasis on the issue of global interest and care for the environment. Respondents put forward a proposal for using “alternative and renewable energy sources” (e.g., biomass energy, heat pumps, solar heating and cooling technologies, wind energy, hydro energy, etc.) (35.69%). They also commented on the issue of “global participation in the context of securing the world's peace” (17.43%). Indicators leading participation and responsibility in a global context are equally shared with those respondents who call for “global participation, responsibility, and care in the context of the rights of others” (17.43%).

Economic criteria basically assess how wealth is generated within a region. In the context of the economic area, we can see that respondents focus primarily on individual participation on the economical as well as rational and suitable use of natural resources and the waste generation or waste treatment. The questionnaires state “the need for waste recycling” (24.9%) and further “the reduction of people's individual waste” (23.24%). Students are not foreign to the idea of environmental passenger transport, as they propose “reducing car traffic and supporting alternative modes of transport” (16.6%), i.e., riding bicycles or scooters, including carpool transport, i.e., the sharing of more people or things.

Social criteria focus on the values, behavior, and perceptions of people in the field of education, health, or transportation services. Similarly, the social area is represented in

research findings, even though it is the least frequent in percentage terms. First of all, our respondents see the necessity of “the focus on poverty in the world” (29.05%). Respondents are sceptical on the “decline in demographic developments” (11.62%) and comment on urbanization trends, especially in the context of the need to “reduce noise due to business production and human activity” (10.79%).

The research confirmed the first hypothesis. The respondents actually perceived the need for their own participation the most in the environmental area of SD (H1). On the other hand, the second hypothesis was not confirmed. Respondents consider “stopping dumping nature with solid and liquid waste” as the most important task for the SD of today’s world, instead of “replacement of one-use products in favor of organic agricultural products” (H2).

We consider the reliability of the data as an important part of the research process. To know if the data is reliable, we provided several steps, especially checking the validity and reliability of researched data and testing of the codes that were designed during the qualitative research. After all, we tried to clearly present results after completing the analysis in an article format that can be understood by the recipients. This involved review of the final results, the arranging all the information in a sequence, and finally presenting it in the design of the article.

6. Discussion

In this article, we have tried to present a Christian ideal of individual participation and individual responsibility for the world and SD of the world (Genesis 1:28, 2:15). We pointed out that the theological-ethical ideal reminds man of his participation and responsibility—the whole world and each area of human activity must become the object of human intense interest (Kišš 2006). Social media, as creators of public opinion, undoubtedly represents one of the most effective ways to attractively present “God’s mandate to man”. Despite the fact that recent media in sustainability communication mostly analyzes only the content about selected themes (Schmidt et al. 2013; Barkemeyer et al. 2017) or explores only some of the characteristics of media’s communication theory (Holt and Barkemeyer 2012), we see that social media has enabled individuals to communicate with hundreds or even thousands of other people’s ideas, opinions, or services across the world. In addition, social media enables users to learn about new ideas and social movements as their family members, friends, or colleagues become involved in them (Pew Research Center 2018a, 2018b; Lottridge and Bentley 2018; Lee et al. 2011; Lenhart 2015; Kämpel et al. 2015; Oeldorf-Hirsch and Sundar 2015; Wong and Burkell 2017). Thus, informed individuals through social media can be a voice for reducing waste, for utilizing poverty alleviation programs effectively, and can play a responsible role in promoting environmental protection in various perspectives. In addition, the goals of sustainability play a role for the use of social media as it is suitable for developing goals that require people to think globally and participate or act locally.

We researched among young adults the issue of individual participation for current SD from their point of view. First, we analyzed the findings of the research in relation to the four main areas of SD, which were defined and explained by the “National Strategy for Sustainable Development of the Slovak Republic” (Indicators of Sustainable Development 2020). The findings of the research answered, according to the four areas of SD that are in this strategic document, how 120 research young adults see the need for their own participation the most (Q1). Secondly, we provided the views of respondents on the tasks that a person has for current SD of the world today (Q2). The research focused on the two current aspects, i.e., the current view of young respondents on research issues, and individual tasks that respondents reflected in relation with current SD.

Research students perceive all four areas of SD, which were clearly defined and explained by The National Strategic Document on Sustainable Development in Slovakia (Indicators of Sustainable Development 2020). The environmental area was the most often represented in the research findings, which addresses indicators such as rational

use of water, forest losses, soil erosion, air protection, protection of biodiversity, response to natural disasters and the fight against global environmental problems, preparedness, urbanization, and so on.

The results further showed that researched students perceive at least 12 areas that relate to their individual participation in SD. Our qualitative research proves that the respondents are aware of the necessity of the responsible role of good care of the world as well as of the SD of the world.

Respondents are aware of their own tasks, especially in:

- (1) Stopping dumping nature with solid and liquid waste (39.01%)—i.e., the task in the context of the environmental area;
- (2) Use of alternative and renewable energy sources (35.69%)—i.e., the task in the context of the institutional area;
- (3) Focusing on poverty (29.05%)—i.e., the task in the context of the social area; and
- (4) The need for waste recycling (24.9%)—i.e., the task in the context of the economic area.

Respondents do not associate their role in society with God, but with the need to care for the world from which man benefits. It seems that the meaning of what *Imago Dei* is (i.e., man acts in the world “in the name of God”, not instead of God) is foreign to students. However, the world and human activity in it are perceived by respondents as “two sides of the same coin”, so the subject of a person’s real interest must be the protection and good care of the whole environment to preserve human beings.

Respondents are especially aware that:

1. Everyday human activities have a negative impact on the individual components of the environment and ask for human solidarity with the rest of creation;
2. The environment needs to be maintained in its functional form for the present as well as future generations;
3. The current problems of a devastated environment are becoming global problems, that affect everyone;
4. Efforts to date have failed to alleviate the destructive impact of man on the environment, with the result that respondents verbalize their own frustration and fear of uncertainty about future problems; and
5. Human beings rule throughout the whole creation and thus they are called to participate and use the Earth’s resources responsibly.

Thanks to the public, academic, and scientific debate, the concept of sustainability is adapting to the new needs over time, experiencing its innovation and good results. Based on previous research, we can see that the fear of losing natural resources is taking a toll on present generations and they are switching to SD. The younger generations have therefore started using social media tools for better promotion and marketing of suitable development goals (Tkáčová et al. 2021; Sustainable Development Indicators 2008). In addition, young adults in our research group consider social media as one of the strongest platforms for addressing sustainability issues (such as global warming, climatic changes, or survival under scarcity of resources) in an open forum. Based on related research (Lottridge and Bentley 2018; Lee et al. 2011; Lenhart 2015; Kumpel et al. 2015; Oeldorf-Hirsch and Sundar 2015; Tkáčová et al. 2021; Wong and Burkell 2017) as well as our qualitative research findings, we can even speak about new phenomena—problems of our planet more often attract the attention of ordinary young people, who share messages and co-create other content about SD and do all of that in a personal and attractive way.

7. Conclusions

The issue of good care for and protection of creation runs through human history and determines the importance and evaluation of a wide range of human activities on a daily basis. Unfortunately, we do not always understand that. The theoretical part of this article introduced mistakes that have been repeated throughout history because of a misunderstanding of human responsibility for what has been entrusted to man from

the beginning. Further sections of the manuscript introduced the concept of a properly understood individual responsibility of man from the point of view of Christian ethics.

From the point of view of Christian ethics, it is ideal if one is acquainted with the responsible role and proper care, protection, and sustainability for the world and its SD. This is the role God has given man; man's mandate adapts to tasks towards other parts of creation to ensure his existence and continuity. From a positive view of the Creator's mandate, it follows that man and the world are inextricably linked, and man has a responsibility to the world. It is a mistake and a questioning of the value of the world if this is not the case and one takes an indifferent attitude towards the world and its social problems (i.e., Ethical Nestorianism), tries to isolate itself from the world (i.e., Ethical Docetism), reports the reduction of actions (so-called Ethical Arianism) or vice versa, or he wants to rule the world "from the pulpit" (i.e., Ethical Monophysitism) (Kišš 2006). Such understandings of the world must be described as negative. They clearly represent a misunderstanding of the theology of creation and the individual participation and responsibility of man, that is, his mandate to care and propagate (Genesis 1:28, 2:15). The theological-ethical ideal reminds us of the necessity of participation as well as responsibility of humans for the whole world, which has to become the object of intense interest of all people.

This ideal was followed by our own research which had a goal to study the perception of respondents' individual tasks for SD. Research findings answered the question of in which of the four areas of SD, which were clearly defined by The National Strategic Document on Sustainable Development in Slovakia, do 120 respondents see needs of their participation the most. We also evaluated the qualitative findings in the group of young adults that confirm the perception of the students' own individual participation and responsibility for the SD of society and the common world.

Based on the empirical research and related literature, we introduced social media as a very effective way of spreading awareness of the problem of SD to society. Despite the fact that research on using social media in the promotion of SD started to emerge about one decade ago, several studies proved that social media creates a link between stakeholder involvements; gives place for communication with different communities and for sharing messages or inspirational stories; is a suitable and proven helper in sustainable marketing, advertising, and promotion; exists on the basis of technology that is cheap, rapid and practically without time or territorial limitation; etc. (Pew Research Center 2018a, 2018b; Kobylarek 2015; Wakefield 2016; Ofcom's Annual News Consumption Report 2019; Nielsen et al. 2020). Thanks to all these things, social media seems to be a very effective way of spreading links about SD to society. In the article, we further pointed out that even more than the possibilities, online space, and social media technology, the social media users themselves are a necessary and often very beneficial part of the process. Social media users can act as engaged citizens and reach out to a wide audience with topics in the context of SD, by sharing information and news about SD and co-creating additional content about SD. Thus, social media users can communicate their own attitudes and decisions, apply the principles of sustainability, appeal to sustainability indicators, and be a voice that also presents information about SD in everyday decisions. They can share their own reports on SD, inspirational stories, and/or motivations or challenges to action focused on sustainability, etc. Promoting SD, precisely through social media, is a great advantage in this effort, as it allows users in the online space to co-create an extremely comprehensive concept of SD understandable to all (which in parallel increases public support).

The findings of our qualitative research indicate the importance that the young respondents perceived in all four areas, defined by The National Strategic Document on Sustainable Development in Slovakia, as well as the resulting indicators of SD. Moreover, in the context of the current view of young respondents on the research issue, we discovered that respondents associate the role of sustainability with the need to care for the world from which man benefits (Q1). The importance of the research findings can also be seen in

a recorded total of 12 main areas that the respondents see as their significant individual tasks for the world's SD (Q2). Our research proves that the respondents are aware of the necessity of the individual's responsible role of good care of the world as well as of the SD of the world, particularly in stopping the dumping of nature with solid and liquid waste (environmental area), in using alternative and renewable energy sources (institutional area), in focusing on poverty (social area), and in the need for waste recycling (economic area).

A person's interests in the effects of his or her own activity is crucial. We consider this perception to be key, despite the fact that the research findings did not touch many other areas that belong to the issue of current SD at all, for example civilization diseases (including vulnerabilities to COVID-19), gender pay gap, unfavorable earnings ratio in a rural area against the city, and so on. This apparent negative can also be considered a beneficial finding. The topics considered by the respondents of our qualitative research are valuable orientations of what are common and co-determining for the same groups of people (i.e., young adults). Those will soon become active members of society (as participants in the economic benefits of society) on the one side, and as users of resources, with a specific preference for activities, services, goods, or values on the other side.

Surprisingly, experts point out that the topic of SD was mostly on the fringes of media interest (Holt and Barkemeyer 2012; Schmidt et al. 2013; Barkemeyer et al. 2017; Janoušková et al. 2019). Along with the failure of the media, non-profit and non-governmental organizations, politicians, and educators was also the failure "to a large extent in making the SD concept broadly appealing" (Janoušková et al. 2019). Therefore, our research findings in the research group of young adults open the debate about positive opportunities for social media that is used daily by respondents. Thus, it is necessary to look for effective ways to encourage youth participation in activities that would acquaint this specific group with the current needs in the field of SD as well as find ways that these activities connect with the benefits of social media. Moreover, in this sense, initiatives within schools and school facilities, leisure centers, and initiatives within cities and municipalities, non-governmental organizations, and state policies are proving to be key recommendations for future research and practice. In parallel, the challenges of future research are emerging in relation with studies focusing on mapping the effectiveness of these initiatives, i.e., studies which would monitor not only the current state of affairs, but also the implementation of new solutions and the degree of improvement. We see the awareness, education, and commitment of the young generation as an essential start to the above recommendations.

To increase interest in SD (in Slovakia or even more widely), the whole society, governments, churches, schools, personalities, and each individual can, through social media, not only expect but also remind specific action within SD principles and SD goals, as well as express concern over specific topics (for example, non-humanely raised animals). Finally, it seems very important to remind the whole human community that the definition of sustainability continues to broaden; thus, it includes not only consequences of environmental impacts but also social concerns such as concerns about poverty, consumer protection, or unfair wages.

Finally, the increasing interest in SD is to be the joint effort of all those who have personally survived the encounter with God and are creating communion with God. As Valčo pointed out, both the deep personal connection with God and communication with our neighbors is not something foreign to God, but "are a reflection of the extension of His own life (as life-in-communion)." This is finally evidenced by the doctrine of the creation of man in the image of God (Valčo et al. 2019, p. 186), which is a testimony to completely undeserved communion (of love and grace), and as such has been the subject of our interest in this article.

Our qualitative research findings suggest that the media and social media might be welcome disseminators of SD content among young adults. Thus, in our opinion, these young people might also be valuable partners of Christian churches (not only in Slovakia) that consider caring for creation as central to faith as it is an integral part of Christian mission and an expression of praise, thanks, and worship to God.

In addition, in the context of our qualitative research findings, we also found that social media provides the largest source of information for today's generation of young adults and develops the fastest path (i.e., the social media path) for their participation in SD goals. Young users of social media, aware of their responsibility for SD, are thus an immediate tool that in the secular world clearly shows the need for active human participation and responsibility for the SD of the world now and in the future.

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