

Article

Catholic Ecological Organizations in Poland and Italy: History, Actions, and Organizational Challenges

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Abstract: The paper characterizes four Polish and Italian Catholic organizations that operate within the ecological field. The study of these organizations zooms in on the process of “greening of Catholicism” in Poland and Italy taking place. Studied Catholic organizations in Poland and Italy operate within different social and religious contexts. They face challenges, including resistance from traditionalists who view ecology as a leftist notion. To overcome this, the organizations studied frame ecological issues as religious duties, drawing on diverse traditions within Catholicism and emphasizing figures like John Paul II. They use religious resources such as Catholic identities, values, and symbols to appeal to a broader audience beyond traditional activists. Yet, their emphasis on Catholicism hinders cooperation with secular environmental groups and limits engagement with left-wing environmental politics.

Keywords: religion; Catholicism; ecology; Poland; Italy



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1. Introduction

The ecological crisis is becoming an increasingly important challenge (National Intelligence Council 2017), and therefore, the question of how religions, as systems with relevant impact on people’s attitudes and practices, respond to it is becoming an important element of socio-cultural and political reflection (White 1967; Grim and Tucker 2014; Sponsel 2012; Vaughan Lee 2013). Regardless of how one imagines or defines religion and religious identity, it is embedded in the context in which it is shaped and spread. Religion is ecological in itself since it forms part of humanity’s evolutionary history. Even if we ignore certain romantic visions such as Ernest Renan’s, which considered the “origins” of monotheistic faith in the desert, with its silence and landscape, as a privileged place to meet the one God, it is clear that many aspects of traditional religions cannot be fully understood outside their environment, which has profoundly influenced their development. As we are finding out today, to our cost, that environmental issues are connected with the ways in which humankind inhabits the cosmos, their destiny is also, therefore, interwoven with the religious visions of the world which has produced them.

From a social perspective, the discourse on the relationship between religion and ecology is predominantly structured around the argument proposed by Lynn White (1967). White asserted that the Bible, particularly the Book of Genesis, promotes a disenchantment with nature, leading to a reduced concern for the environment in Western societies and fostering an exploitative attitude toward nature. According to White, Christianity has become “the most anthropocentric religion the world has ever seen,” and this anthropocentrism has influenced Western technology and science (White 1967, p. 1205).

To test this hypothesis, Dekker, Ester, and Nas (Dekker et al. 1997) conducted a cross-national analysis, which indicated that Christianity does not uniquely influence environmental attitudes in modern advanced societies. Their findings suggest that Christianity

is neither the cause of environmental problems nor a clear solution. Instead, the modernization process—characterized by industrialization, urbanization, scaling up, and economic growth—has fundamentally altered human–nature relationships, affecting anthropocentric views among both Christians and non-Christians alike (Dekker et al. 1997, p. 456).

In response to White’s thesis, the concept of the “greening of religions” has emerged. This concept explores how religion can contribute to addressing contemporary environmental problems, thereby promoting a form of re-enchantment with nature (see, for example, Gottlieb 2006a, 2006b; Konisky 2017). Some studies indicate that Roman Catholics are less inclined to believe in anthropogenic climate change (Jewdokimow 2023) compared to evangelical Christians and individuals of other or no religious affiliations (Ecker et al. 2024). Other research suggests a link between religiosity and ecological behaviors (Baring et al. 2024). The term “greening of Catholicism” refers to the growing emphasis within the Catholic Church on environmental issues and ecological responsibility and represents a significant shift in the Church’s engagement with contemporary global issues, highlighting the importance of environmental stewardship as a core component of faith and moral responsibility. This movement incorporates ecological principles into Catholic teachings, practices, and social action, advocating for the protection of the environment as a moral and spiritual duty. The concept is characterized by several key elements such as theological foundation (rooted in the belief that the Earth is a creation of God, and therefore, humanity has a responsibility to care for it. This perspective draws on Biblical teachings about stewardship of the Earth), papal encyclicals and statements (significant contributions from the magisterium of the Church, such as Pope Francis’s encyclical *Laudato Si’* (2015; later: LS), which calls for urgent action to address environmental degradation and climate change. This document highlights the interconnectedness of social, economic, and environmental justice), integration of ecology into doctrine (the inclusion of ecological concerns into Catholic social teaching, emphasizing the moral imperative to protect the environment for the well-being of all creation, particularly the poor and future generations) and parish and community initiatives (local and global efforts by Catholic organizations, parishes, and communities to promote sustainable practices, reduce carbon footprints, and advocate for environmental justice; these initiatives often include educational programs, advocacy for policy changes, and hands-on environmental projects.)

An important element of this shift is the integral ecology—a holistic framework within Catholic thought that emphasizes the interconnectedness of environmental, social, economic, and spiritual dimensions of life. This concept, introduced in Pope Francis’s encyclical *Laudato Si’* (2015), promotes a comprehensive approach to addressing global issues. It recognizes that all aspects of life are deeply connected. Environmental, social, economic, and spiritual issues are interrelated, and addressing one area necessitates considering its impact on others. It promotes the holistic approach, calling for a unified and comprehensive strategy to solve global problems. This approach integrates ecological sustainability, social justice, and economic equity, reflecting the belief that these areas cannot be effectively addressed in isolation. It also stresses human dignity and the common good, putting in the center the respect for human dignity and the promotion of the common good. It emphasizes that environmental degradation disproportionately affects the poor and vulnerable, and therefore, ecological efforts must also aim to uplift these communities. It also advocates for a transformation in how individuals and societies relate to the natural world. This ecological conversion involves a change in attitude and behavior, promoting simpler, more sustainable lifestyles (ecological conversion) (*Laudato Si’* 2015, para. 5).

The topic of religion and ecology has attracted increasing scholarly attention (Hart 2017; Grim and Tucker 2014; Tomalin et al. 2019; Sawicki 2017; Hervieu-Leger 1993; Bertina 2014; Bloch 1998). Today, we see sociologists seeking to delimit the broad concept of ecology in relation to religion while scrutinizing selected aspects of ecology such environmental sustainability (Koehrsen 2015), or energetic sustainability (Parker 2015; Becci and Monnot 2016; Pepper and Leonard 2015).

Robert S. Gottlieb asserts that, over the past two decades, the relationship between religion and ecology has experienced significant growth in theological writings, scholarly work, institutional commitment, and public action. Theologians from various religious traditions, as well as numerous nondenominational spiritual writers, have critically examined religions' attitudes toward nature and their role in the environmental crisis. This scrutiny has led to the development of new theologies that recover marginalized elements of tradition, offer profound critiques of the past, and present new visions of God, the sacred, the earth, and humanity. Religious morality has expanded to encompass our relationships with other species and ecosystems, and religious practices now include rituals that express grief and remorse, as well as celebrations of what remains. Furthermore, contemporary dialogues address how traditional religious views of nature should be reinterpreted or altered in response to the environmental crisis, integrating these discussions with critiques of economics, technology, energy policies, science, transportation, agriculture, taxation, and education (Gottlieb 2006b).

However, for various reasons upon which we do not need to dwell here, in some countries many studies in religion ignore this explosion of religious interest in ecology (the ecological turn in religion). This scientific negligence is in stark contrast to the changes taking place in both religious systems and religiosity.

2. Ecological Organizations and Catholicism

The interest in ecology is not only theoretical, but it also takes institutional shape. Beyond the controversy surrounding the greening of religion, a new approach has emerged in the study of the relationship between religion and ecology. This approach shifts the focus from the general question of whether religion is inherently pro- or anti-ecological to an examination of the functioning of ecological and environmental religious organizations through the lens of sociological neo-institutionalism (see, for example, Campbell 2005; Diani 1995).

The post-Second World War economic boom, which raised the standard of living in expanding cities, also increased the risks connected with industrial contamination (Della Seta 1999). Collectively, these transformations drove many spiritual seekers to perform a kind of *fuga mundi* by distancing themselves from the prevailing model of a capitalist society and by seeking alternative lifestyles and communitarian solutions. The first social movements and political parties sensitive to ecological problems introduced the topic of the environment into public debate starting from the 1960s and 1970s, when new ecosophies such as Arne Naess's deep ecology (soliciting a holistic and spiritual rethinking of our relations with nature), began to enjoy international success. The environmental crisis and the Chernobyl nuclear disaster of 1986 which shook the Western world reinforced the necessity to safeguard the environment and to promote eco-friendly lifestyles.

Thus, the first spiritual communities pursuing self-sufficiency and a different relationship with nature were instituted, communities which have taken root and now proliferate. During the last thirty years, organizations associated with different religions have launched a number of initiatives towards dealing with environmental crises. In Poland, different scholars were linking ecological and religious organizations with the topic of civil society, for instance (Gliński 2006, 2010; Sadłoń 2020).

Also, religious organizations have chosen to confront ecological issues as they develop worldwide as all religions have undergone an ecological shift in the last thirty years. This also applies to the Catholic context on which we concentrate within this research (*Laudato Si'*, the encyclical letter from 2015, the foundation of Catholic ecological doctrine and the driver for ecological actions, is the result of this very shift). The Eco-Catholic movement, despite being a minority within the broader Catholic Church, aims to transform both religious and societal culture by promoting ideas of stewardship, eco-justice, and integral ecology. The appearance of green spirituality within Catholicism is the result of an environmental consciousness formed by the fusion of various factors.

3. Research Problem

This paper explores the process of greening of Catholicism in Poland and Italy by analyzing Catholic ecological organizations. Our research problem is rooted in the understanding that religion is an important factor shaping individual and group identity and actions, which significantly influence ecological decisions and attitudes. As D. Wiktor-Mach and K. Pędziwiatr suggest, to deepen the understanding of religious environmentalism, it is essential to explore how church institutions engage with environmental challenges through concrete actions, such as overhauling their energy infrastructure. This shift toward a more material analysis allows for a comprehensive examination of the practical measures taken by religious organizations to address ecological concerns (Wiktor-Mach and Pędziwiatr 2024, p. 16).

Ellingson (2016) showed that religious organizations dealing with ecological and environmental issues today follow a “bridging” strategy, which means engaging their religious assets (traditions, vocabulary, etc.) in dealing with and speaking about ecological/environmental issues. As Brown sums up, the emergence of ecological/environmental religious organizations does not mean that all self-identified Christians have become models of ecological sustainability, but that the language of environmentalism is finding expression in Christian categories and framings such as stewardship, sacramentalism, and prophetic justice (Brown 2019, p. 4). The extent to which faith traditions embrace environmentalism depends on the narratives surrounding religion and ecology, with efforts to stay within religious boundaries posing limits to discourse (Wiktor-Mach and Pędziwiatr 2024).

Analyzing Polish and Italian media discourse, which shapes social imagination, one would not discern an obvious link between religion and ecology; religious voices frequently accuse ecology of ideologization (thereby rejecting both its scientific foundations and normative assumptions) (Jewdokimow et al. 2022), while ecological voices accuse religion of anti-ecology (thus replicating the argument of Lynn White Jr. 1967, who held Christianity responsible for the reduction of concern for the environment in the West) (Bobrowicz and Nowak 2021).

Since Poland and Italy are both countries with a very large number of Catholics, discovering the limits and challenges faced by these organizations will contribute to our understanding of whether Catholicism in Poland and Italy can really address the climate crisis by, inter alia, transforming believers’ attitudes and practices towards the environment. The proposed research is highly relevant because no sociological studies exist—both in Poland and in Italy—about this issue; this is also more striking considering that, since Catholicism is one of the major world religions, it has the potential to make a difference in the ecological sphere.

In this paper—remaining in the Catholic context—and focusing on Polish and Italian Catholic pro-ecological organizations and initiatives, addressing the question of the greening of Catholicism also stands for reflecting on how the ecological crisis is recognized from a religious perspective, and how Catholicism responds to it. We investigate the process of the “greening” of Catholicism in Poland and Italy by analyzing Catholic ecological organizations. We focus on selected Catholic organizations conducting pro-ecological initiatives, investigating their course, motivations of actors, development barriers, perception by secular and religious relevant actors from their environment, but also the connection between faith and ecological views of the social actors. Focusing on Catholic organizations that engage in pro-ecological initiatives, we want to discover factors that both facilitate and hinder religion in addressing the climate crisis and hence, to scrutinize whether the greening of Catholicism in Poland and Italy is an authentic movement towards change or not.

Our research is guided by two key hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: *The Catholic ecological movements legitimize ecological discourse within the Church. Before the publication of the Laudato Si’ encyclical letter in 2015, the discourse on ecology within Catholicism was often entangled in conservative narratives (which criticized ecology as a*

being against human being and as an ideological leftist construct), limiting its scope and impact. Pope Francis provided an institutional impetus for de-conceptualizing these limitations, legitimizing ecological discourse within the Catholic framework. This research will explore the impact of the official papal teaching on the legitimation of ecological discourse within the Church. The Laudato Si' encyclical constructed a foundation for Catholic ecological doctrine, marking a significant shift towards environmental awareness and action in Catholic teachings.

Hypothesis 2: *Emerging Post-Traditional and Post-Liberal Values in Polish and Italian Catholicism.*

In Poland and Italy, ecology can be seen as a manifestation of the “renaturalization” of Catholicism. Traditionally, the relationship with nature was significant but subordinated to agricultural and stewardship concerns. However, in contemporary times, there is an observable shift towards post-traditional and post-liberal values, as demonstrated by the emergence of eco-religion organizations. This broader theological change, which may be termed an ecological shift, suggests a growing integration of ecological consciousness into religious practice and belief. This thesis is supported by numerous contributions highlighting the rise of eco-religion organizations across different religions and a broader theological shift towards environmentalism.

By investigating these hypotheses, our research aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the factors that both facilitate and hinder the Catholic Church in Poland and Italy in addressing the climate crisis. We aim to determine whether the greening of Catholicism is an authentic movement towards change and how it influences the attitudes and practices of believers towards the environment.

4. Methodology

For our study, we selected Catholic ecological organizations operating in Italy and Poland. [Fraternita' Evangelii Gaudium](#) (n.d.) is a specific Italian organization that «responds to the call to proclaim the Gospel of the Lord's resurrection under by sharing among different states of life as a prophecy of communion in the church for the world»¹. Caritas Poland, a part of Caritas Internationalis, is a charitable organization which actively engages in ecological initiatives and the Laudato Si' movement in Poland and Italy, which is specifically dedicated to ecological issues and operates internationally.

To collect data, we conducted half structured interviews with the representatives of four ecological organizations (two in Poland and two in Italy) and analyzed online websites of the organizations (information on the organizations' goals and actions which they published). In every organization, interviews with three representatives have been conducted, selecting persons who are in charge in the organization—which was our main criteria since these individuals have a broad view on the organization (giving a total of 12 interviews in both countries, six in each). Every interview lasted from 35 to 90 min and was guided by a set of questions around three main topics: history of an organization, goals, logic and fundamentals of their actions, and internal and external challenges. All interviews were recorded and transcribed; transcripts were analyzed using the thematic analysis method which seeks answers for the questions in a given data set. The thematic categories were systematically classified into the following 4 families:

1. The diachronic evolution of the organization, tracing its development from inception to the present day.
2. Both explicit and implicit strategies for prosocial action.
3. Internal challenges, encompassing organizational difficulties and resource acquisition issues.
4. External challenges, the most encompassing category, which includes not only the organization's interactions with the surrounding social and political environment but also, and notably, its self-perception regarding potential social hostilities.

The same analytic method was implemented for the digital data for the organizations' websites.

In the case of Poland, there are only three Catholic ecological organizations, so we have chosen two major organizations for the study. In the case of Italy, there are many more organizations of this kind.

Following a neo-institutional approach, we aim to contrast and compare these organizations and their activities by adopting the “most similar system design” approach (Fideli 1998). This approach allows us to compare similar Catholic organizations in these two countries to research their similarities and differences and assess the impact of the socio-cultural and political context on their course of action.

In the case study format described by Yin (2018) and Stake (1995), we analyze the development of Catholic ecological organizations in Poland and Italy. Our analysis focuses on several dimensions. First, we examine the history of each organization to understand their origins and evolution. Second, we look at the actions they have undertaken, including their goals, scope, and underlying logic. Finally, we explore the challenges these organizations face, considering both internal issues within the organizations and external pressures from their broader environment. This comprehensive approach allows us to understand the dynamics and impacts of these Catholic ecological organizations in their respective countries.

5. Specific Italian Catholic Ecological Organization

The founder of *Fraternità Evangelii Gaudium*, Katia Roncalli, comes from a Bergamo family of peasant origin that counts among its members Pope John XXIII, of whom she is a great-grandniece. Katia’s childhood, however, was lived in an aconfessional, if not atheistic, and certainly socialist cultural context (her grandfather had rebelled against sharecropping). The multicultural family context led her to live in the USA at an early age. During her high school years, Katia began to feel the inner presence of a spiritual need and search that led her to take an interest in the activities of a local parish oratory. During a summer camp, listening to the parable of the “Good Samaritan” awakened in her the awareness of that need and thus began the formative journey that, first at the Poor Clare Monastery in Bergamo and then with the arrival in Assisi, led her to fulfill her formal path of spiritual accompaniment and the pursuit of an active life vocation, taking her vows as a Franciscan nun and embracing consecrated life.

From 2006–2008, Katia began to perceive ever more clearly the difficulty the faithful experience was in channeling her specific vocation into official codified forms. She witnessed what she calls “vocational abortions” (Interview 1, FEG Italy, 2022) (vocations that have failed to express themselves and be fulfilled) and perceived the need to reach ordinary people with that basic evangelization that the Franciscan spirit suggests.

Reading the 2013 papal encyclical *Evangelii Gaudium*, with its programmatic lines of reforming the relationship between the ecclesiastical institution and contemporary life, finally sheds light on what Katia now perceives as her specific vocation. Animated by the principle that the good news is for everyone and that it is presented not only in words but also in the form of practiced fraternity, experienced through encounters with people, Roncalli thus founded the *Evangelii Gaudium Fraternity*. The founding statute is dated 1 November 2018 and describes the association as interdenominational. Since that time, the community has grown to count today, between Italy and Slovenia, around ten houses housing communities in which consecrated persons and lay people live together. These are joined by about 350 members who continue to lead their private lives while sharing objectives, activities, and evangelical commitment. These can also be considered full members.

In a Franciscan perspective enriched by the inspiration provided by St. Pedro de Alcantara, the opening of the Statute reads “The Fraternity is at the service of all specific vocations, a vocation for vocations, so that each person, in his or her own state of life, may seek that hundredfold to which the Gospel calls and contribute in a meaningful and responsible manner to the building up of the ecclesial community.” (Interview 2, FEG, Italy, 2022).

In pursuing this support for the development of the specific vocation of each member of the faithful, the EGF acts in the territory through the zonal fraternities through which they propose forms of ecological catechesis aimed at spreading new models of conscious consumption, recovery, and conservation of the “common home” (LS, para. 1). The main source of inspiration in this regard is the encyclical *Laudato Si’* (24 May 2015), in which the lay concept of the environment is defined. The ecological issue is the driving force behind the development of a practice of faith that knows how to perceive the social, political, economic, and environmental responsibility of the faithful.

The fraternity responds to the call “to proclaim the Gospel of the Lord’s resurrection in the sign of sharing between different states of life as a prophecy of communion in the church for the world” (interview). Within this framework, the Fraternity is therefore committed to the following:

- To accompany its members to fulfill their own project of holiness according to their state of life for the good of the Church and for the proclamation of the Gospel;
- Grow in the love of God the Father through redeeming and constructive fraternal relationships;
- Renew local ecclesial contexts in a spirit of minority to build a Church with an ever more fraternal face;
- Respond to the cry of the least and the poor, making available the human and professional skills of each one, through projects of sharing, social promotion, and evangelization in collaboration with civil and ecclesial institutions.

The EGF aims to address the climate, political, and economic challenges of the globalized world, identifying as insidious problems of our time the US- or Chinese-driven consumption patterns, both perceived as harmful for the reasons outlined above. In this perspective, the model proposed by EGF presents itself as a sort of “third way” between Western consumerism and the communism/socialism of the former Soviet bloc, a way of combining encyclicals and—hence—different agendas of Pope Francis’ magisterium.

The fundamental challenges of the EGF revolve around the recovery and reconstruction of a world tested by the latest challenges (first and foremost COVID and climate change), through a “toolbox” that allows a direction and a method to take on the complexity of real life. In a world plagued by so many global socio-economic tragedies, Roncalli questions the meaning of human survival and starts with a question: why have we survived in this age of trials while so many have died and will die? We are, according to Roncalli, to give a new direction to our world, no longer in neutrality but by making a concrete commitment. Each one with her/his specific vocation, all in the spirit of service and brotherhood: “Daring to go beyond the drifts of individualism and communitarianism” (Interview 1, FEG, Italy, 2022).

Roncalli suggests that an organizational form is truly Christian if it goes beyond two codes: that of efficiency and that of fraternity. Everyone has the right to participate in the common good according to their own life project, but it is necessary to move out of the Eurocentric dimension. Since, as children, we begin to say “I and mine”, we lose the relationship; we become individuals on the condition of becoming possessors or consumers. Whoever does not consume, whoever does not produce is what Pope Francis calls “the waste of society” (Interview 2, FEG, Italy, 2022). On the contrary, the individual good must coincide with the common good (a true sum of individual goods), in a perspective that also warns against those humanitarian or savings projects, which, arising from distorted perspectives of image seeking, are just as harmful as the predatory perspectives of the unbridled consumerism of the 1980s, or with respect to the forms of neo-statalism that stand in contrast to mainstream-driven liberalism.

According to Roncalli, profit maximization, common to both anthropological and sociological models and visible in the logic of profit as well as in the perspective of dialectical materialism, is the primary cause of control dynamics (on the social level) and climate crises (on the environmental level). If one acquires the awareness that man is not an individual but a person, whose nature is relational, one understands the need to return

to “evangelizing the social” by including in that evangelization the need to elaborate a new economic movement. The agenda of the EGF is the updating of the social doctrine of the church according to the directions expressed by the encyclical of the same name, by the Economy of Francis expressed in *Laudato Si'*: the conceptual structure that derives from this is a transformation of the old concept of Catholic finance, in which the forms of investment and finance oriented towards social and environmental justice are privileged, and which were therefore subject to those distorted logics of adherence to the global market.

6. Caritas International

According to interviews and data available on the Internet, Caritas Internationalis is a global network of 162 national Catholic relief and development agencies that operate across the world. Their work is inspired by the Gospel and guided by the core values of dignity, solidarity, and stewardship on behalf of the world’s most vulnerable people. Caritas Internationalis reflects the social mission of the Catholic Church and strives to alleviate poverty, promote justice, and restore dignity. Caritas organizations work on various humanitarian issues such as poverty alleviation, disaster relief, healthcare, education, and social justice.

Caritas Internationalis launched the “Together We” campaign in 2021. This campaign focuses on Integral Ecology, emphasizing the interconnectedness of all living beings and our shared responsibility for the Earth. The campaign aims to put into practice the teachings of “*Laudato Si'* and *Fratelli Tutti*”, two encyclicals by Pope Francis. It encourages actions at the grassroots level that combat poverty, restore dignity to marginalized communities, and protect nature. As part of this campaign, Caritas promotes a comprehensive guidebook called “Our Common Home”², empowering individuals and communities to address urgent environmental challenges and create a sustainable, socially just future. Additionally, Caritas actively advocates for “agro-ecology”, which goes beyond farming methods. It is a mindset that aligns agriculture with nature, respecting the Earth, conserving biodiversity, and promoting sustainable food systems.

In 2022, Caritas Internationalis celebrated its “Global Awareness Week” to mark nearly a year since the launch of the “Together We” campaign. Inspired by Pope Francis’ call for “integral ecology” (LS, para. 10), this campaign encourages people to come together and carry out actions that foster solidarity, care for creation, and protect the environment.

Caritas Polska is an integral part of the global Caritas network. Caritas Poland has a long and impactful history of providing aid and support to those in need. Originating from a growing necessity for organized charitable efforts, Caritas emerged in Germany during the early 20th century. In Poland, its roots began to take hold in the period between the two World Wars. The formalization of Caritas in Poland occurred with the establishment of the Institute of Caritas in 1929. During the challenging years of communist rule in Poland, Caritas faced significant obstacles. Initially met with suspicion by the authorities, the organization’s activities were closely monitored. However, in 1950, the government assumed control of Caritas institutions, though they continued their charitable work under state supervision, adapting to the circumstances as best they could.

With the advent of democracy in Poland in 1990, Caritas Poland underwent a rejuvenation. Operating under the auspices of the Polish Bishops’ Conference, it emerged as the largest charity organization in the country. Comprising 44 regional Caritas groups, it expanded its reach and influence, coordinating national campaigns and extending aid to victims of disasters and conflicts worldwide. At its core, Caritas Poland embodies the values of compassion and solidarity inherent in the Catholic faith. Grounded in the principles of social justice and love for one’s neighbor, Caritas is dedicated to providing multifaceted assistance to marginalized and vulnerable individuals. Their mission encompasses various forms of support, from material aid to emotional and spiritual care, striving to alleviate suffering and restore dignity to those in need.

Caritas is the largest charity organization in Poland, with a diverse structure consisting of 45 independent diocesan Caritas sections and a central national section established by the

Catholic Bishops Conference. Diocesan sections operate at the regional level and organize approximately 1000 centers specialized in social assistance, medical care, and education. Caritas Poland is responsible for national campaigns and providing humanitarian aid. It conducts various campaigns, such as the Caritas Christmas candle campaign benefiting children, scholarship programs, and initiatives addressing homelessness and marginalization. Approximately 90,000 Caritas volunteers, 3200 Parish Caritas Teams, and 2600 Caritas School Clubs contribute to its activities. Caritas Poland is affiliated with the international organizational network labeled as “Caritas Internationalis”.

Since 2019, Caritas Poland has included ecology in its agenda, following motivation from the Vatican, particularly from Caritas Internationalis. This ecological engagement was inspired by a grant from the National Fund for Environmental Protection and Water Management (NFEP&WM), a governmental organization established in 1989. The grant inaugurated institutional changes within Caritas Poland, prompting the organization to reformulate its goals in a more social and ecological manner.³

Caritas Polska is actively involved in ecological projects, demonstrating its commitment to environmental well-being. Caritas Polska launched “Integral Ecology of Laudato Si’ in Action” project with a clear objective: to practically implement the principles of “integral ecology” as outlined in Pope Francis’ encyclical “Laudato Si’”. The project receives support from the National Fund for Environmental Protection and Water Management. The project emphasizes an integrated approach that considers both environmental sustainability and social justice. It recognizes the interconnectedness of ecological, economic, and social aspects. Caritas Polska believes that caring for the Earth goes hand in hand with caring for its inhabitants. Caritas Polska engages in educational activities to raise awareness about environmental issues. They emphasize ecological responsibility and the need for sustainable practices. By educating local communities, they empower individuals to take concrete steps toward ecological stewardship. The heart of this initiative lies in local Caritas communities and societies. Caritas Polska encourages active participation at the grassroots level. By involving local partners, including parishes, schools, and community centers, they create a network of eco-conscious individuals committed to making a difference. The project draws inspiration from Pope Francis’ encyclical “Laudato Si’”. In this powerful document, Pope Francis calls for a holistic understanding of our relationship with the Earth. He emphasizes care for our common home, ecological conversion, and solidarity with the marginalized. Caritas Polska translates these principles into practical actions within its local communities, fostering a sense of responsibility for the planet.

In collaboration with diocesan Caritas sections and Catholic parishes, Caritas Poland engaged in local ecological projects, becoming an “ecological authority” and expanding its network. This transformation reflects Caritas Poland’s commitment to integrating ecological concerns into its mission and operations.

7. Laudato Si’ Movement in Poland and Italy

The ([Laudato Si’ Movement n.d.](#)) was established on 15 January 2015, following Pope Francis’ eponymous encyclical. The ([Laudato Si’ Movement n.d.](#)) was originally named the Global Catholic Climate Movement and rebranded to the ([Laudato Si’ Movement n.d.](#)) only in July of 2022. Its founding principle is the harmonious confluence (kairos) of Bergoglio’s new ecological viewpoint and the Paris Climate Agreement (COP21⁴). The Pope’s visit to Tacloban, the epicenter of the 2013 typhoon Haiyan, which claimed over 10,000 lives and left 13 million people homeless, is seen by the movement as having special symbolic significance. In order to “Inspire and mobilize the Catholic community to care for our common home and achieve climate and ecological justice in collaboration with all people of goodwill,”⁵ the movement’s principles of action expressly employ the terminology used in the encyclical. The movement is a network of Catholic organizations and laypeople from across the world who meet for prayer gatherings and to plan events that are motivated by Pope Francis’ definition of “integral ecology” in the encyclical.

The movement's transnational nature has a global imprint, which allows it to offer three main goals (Gupta et al. 2008). First and foremost, the movement aims at introducing and promoting a new ecological consciousness among Christians while preserving a separation line between biological ecology with a secular bent and its own integral ecology, which is viewed as a synthesis of environmental, social, and cultural initiatives. The movement also aims to implement dissemination meetings on conscious consumerism and provide an example for achieving zero emissions and a reduced environmental effect.⁶ In order to meet the 1.5 °C Paris Agreement objective and stop the decline in biodiversity, the Church must be mobilized to speak up prophetically for climate and ecological justice.

The Social Doctrine of the Church has been connected to the movement's environmental agenda, which has expanded its goals and revised its trajectories in a modern context where ecological challenges represent a socio-cultural imperative for any organization that wants to position itself credibly in the global scenario. According to the greening of religion theory, parishioners become more ecologically active as a result of the significance of environmental protection to Catholic religious practice (Daw et al. 2023).

The first goal seems to imply that the movement intentionally pursues the two directions described by Amanda Baugh (2019), working to create an explicit ecology identity for the contemporary Catholic community and to make it possible for environmentally friendly behaviors to be incorporated by identifying biblical passages that emphasize care for creation. The ecological re-reading of the Stations of the Cross, a document provided to all the organizations involved in the movement, makes this dialectic particularly clear. This brief brochure contains two sentences that beautifully describe the procedure. A prayer that draws a parallel between the exploitation of the soil and the eleventh station, where Jesus is crucified, is included as follows:

"Jesus, you've been deprived of both your clothes and your dignity. The planet is also depleted of its mineral resources and nutrient-rich soil. Help us research and implement renewable energy sources, as well as reduce our use, so that the earth can reclaim her wonderful wealth".⁷

The following station, which depicts Jesus' death, is read again from the same analogous standpoint:

"Lord Jesus, we have been oblivious to the wonder and sacred destiny of your creation because of our flawed conceptions of progress. Natural resource conflicts are the nails we use to crucify you repeatedly. Please forgive our avarice and awaken in us your ever-present, all-sufficient presence". (Laudato Si' Movement n.d.)

The development of *Laudato Si'* Animators, the movement's important grassroots pedagogical figures, makes clear the premise of this new hermeneutic for the development of an ecologically conscious Catholic public (Hitzhuser and Tucker 2013). These volunteers serve as trainers for local communities, mediating between the micro and meso dimensions, and are active in their parishes and the member associations of the movement to spread the encyclical's ecological spirituality, more sustainable lifestyles, and the fight for greater social equity.

The (Laudato Si' Movement n.d.) appears to aim to bring together the three extremes of theology, the institutional level, and bottom-up engagement. If the environmental journey of the Catholic Church begins with the ecological concerns in the apostolic exhortation the movement activities would be the first steps in that process. In this regard, there are three key difficulties ahead. Prior to unraveling a relationship in which the distinctions and reciprocal distances are currently quite clear, it will be crucial to observe which perspectives of dialogue will be feasible between the *Laudato Si'* formulation of integral ecology—the true identity core of the green Catholic formulation (Kosche 2023)—and the galaxy of secular environmentalist associations and groups. At the heart of the matter is clearly the relation of human and the environment, as «today, of course, Christian thought is stressing the significance of the natural environment as God's creation and the stewardship role of human kind but, obviously, without abandoning the principle of the central role humanity

plays in the divine drama» (Marangudakis 2008, p. 246). Second, the more conservative Catholic clergy circles will need to be dealt with in terms of their respective cosmological presumptions as well as the quantitative aspect of the movement's participation and the mixture of political demands, economic reforms, and social justice with which it is permeated (Maier and Monti 2023). Third, the (Laudato Si' Movement n.d.) is a valiant attempt to revive a youth appeal and generational change that have been dramatically diminishing in recent decades.

One of our respondents (Interview 2, LSM, Poland, 2023), in fact, is a meteorologist whose participation ensured expertise enabling scientific-based dissemination in parishes, integrated with the fundamental principles of the landmark encyclical *Laudato Si'*. The Catholic Climate Movement in Poland aims to combine faith-based principles with environmental engagement, encompassing the complex domains of religion, social organization, and environmental campaigning. The movement demonstrates how religious organizations may function as influential agents of social change by rallying Catholic parishes to address climate change and ecological crisis. As the Catholic Church is increasingly acknowledging the interdependence of environmental concerns and social justice, as well as the need to impact grassroots initiatives and public conversation, the participation of Catholic parishes in environmental activism exemplifies wider and, in some respect, unexpected societal changes in perspectives on sustainability and collaborative efforts, underscoring the influence of religious establishments in molding public awareness and promoting community involvement. At the core of this ethos lies the acknowledgment of the intrinsic worth of every entity, rooted in the relatively recent conviction that mankind bears a religious duty to safeguard the planet and its denizens. The fundamental principles of the CCMP place significant emphasis on the interdependence of ecological, social, and spiritual interconnection, arguing the need to advocate for the integrated strategy asserted by the *Laudato Si'*, which aims to address both the underlying causes and the manifestations of environmental crises. Drawing upon the tradition of Catholic theology and ethics, the CCMP seeks to mobilize Catholic communities—starting and sometimes limiting to parishes—to adopt sustainable lifestyles, lobby for policy reforms, and participate in collective action to safeguard environmental and social well-being. The establishment of the CCMP is a significant turning point in Poland's environmental movement, as it leverages the moral influence of the Catholic Church to address the pressing ecological issues of the contemporary era and the worldwide imperative for a collective environmental ethic (Bauman 2014).

In this context, the CCMP serves as a tool to translate the environmental lexicon for the Catholic audience, mobilizing communities and legitimating through the moral authority of Catholic associationism. By grounding its initiatives in Catholic social teaching, which emphasizes the intrinsic value of creation and the interconnectedness of all life, the CCMP tries to offer a moral framework for addressing environmental issues. Moreover, the CCMP's collaborative approach, trying to engage with diverse stakeholders including policymakers and civil society organizations, amplifies its impact and fosters collective action through educational programs and advocacy campaigns.

However, this approach can be seen as the main constraint of the organization, which is to establish itself in a more theoretical frame of disseminating the ideas of *Laudato Si'*, but to have a lackluster tangible effect. This may appear to be a contrasting approach to that taken by numerous lay and youth environmental organizations, which prioritize taking direct action rather than developing a cohesive conceptual framework or effectively connecting activism with the realms of politics and economics.⁸ The intersection of levels is indeed a territory within which Catholic ecological organizations must tread carefully:

On the one hand, the greening of Christianity could indicate to some a natural assimilation of post-material or secular values and the adoption of the accompanying discourse. Since environmentalism, in its core, is highly political, the greening of the tradition involves reclaiming a political voice [. . .]. Whilst it has become increasingly more permissible for environmentalism to be political, religious environmentalism is still scrutinized from many quarters. Stepping outside well-defined boundaries is questioned on both sides, whether

the transgressors are religious environmentalists or environmental religionists. In fact, some of its most vehement critics accuse environmentalism for precisely discrediting such tendencies as being religious and political (Nita 2016, p. 25).

Nevertheless, the CCMP has evolved from a grassroots movement into a multifaceted organization with a broad range of initiatives. In its early stages, the CCMP focused on raising awareness within Catholic communities about the moral imperative of caring for the environment and the interconnectedness of ecological issues with social justice. Since its establishment, the CCMP has expanded its purview by convening collective meetings on more extensive subjects, rather than solely focusing on the dissemination of the encyclical's contents. Moreover, the CCMP has adapted its strategies to engage diverse stakeholders, including policymakers, businesses, academia, and civil society, recognizing the importance of building broad-based alliances to effect meaningful change. Thus, the movement seems to implement initiatives to demonstrate the feasibility and benefits of sustainable living, including community gardening projects, renewable energy installations, and eco-friendly infrastructure development. By employing these educational strategies and initiatives for parishes, the CCMP seeks to catalyze a holistic and transformative response to environmental challenges, rooted in the imperative of caring for the common home, acting as a link between the institutionalized Church and the grassroots audience.

The CCMP has encountered criticism from both secular ecological organizations and political entities across multiple domains. A prominent criticism is the impression that the lobbying endeavors of the CCMP may exhibit a tendency to promote religious doctrine at the expense of scientific facts and secular values. Secular ecological organizations may contend that the CCMP's focus on Catholic social teaching and spiritual values may obstruct the implementation of evidence-based environmental policies and remedies, therefore holding back advancements in tackling urgent ecological issues. Furthermore, it is worth noting that political critics may raise inquiries regarding the impact of the CCMP on public communication and the formulation of policies. They may express apprehensions regarding the degree to which religious establishments should participate in creating environmental agendas.

Moreover, prevalent media criticism revolves around the perceived bias or lack of impartiality in media coverage of the CCMP's activities and initiatives, a pattern of criticism that is also observed in the Italian media context. However, the mainstream media could face criticism for either neglecting or minimizing the CCMP's contributions to environmental conversations, especially if they primarily concentrate on secular or non-religious environmental groups. Critics contend that this bias could perhaps arise from a hesitancy to actively consider religious viewpoints on matters pertaining to the environment, or from a preference to uphold a secular narrative within the realm of public communication. Thus, the media's portrayal of the CCMP's actions may prioritize controversies or confrontations, such as disputes between the CCMP and secular ecological organizations, rather than emphasizing areas of cooperation or common objectives. The act of selectively framing information has the potential to propagate misconceptions regarding the aims and purposes of the CCMP, which may in turn undermine its credibility and influence within the public sphere. Consequently, the CCMP has a substantial obstacle in influencing public opinions and gaining backing for its environmental advocacy endeavors due to possible media criticism.

The Polish branch of the Laudato Si Movement labeled as the Catholic Climate Movement (*Światowy Ruch Katolików na Rzecz Środowiska n.d.*) (CCMP) was founded in 2018, immediately putting in place a recruiting effort to secure a staff with the appropriate skills both in the organizational sphere and—of course—on climate and environmental emergencies.

The group started with 4 staff members and 20 animators, while today these are numbering around 250. A critical issue that seems to emerge from the interviews is the disparity of information between the actual staff members and the animators, the latter having less environmental education and having assumed certain ecological habits in the

wake of the general contemporary cultural mindset rather than as a result of a personal process of environmental awareness. CCMP has arisen in response to Poland's rich religious legacy and its changing environmental difficulties. Poland, a nation with a Christian majority, has a profound affiliation with the Catholic Church, which has historically exerted a substantial influence on the formation of cultural values and conventions. On the other hand, the nation has had urgent environmental challenges in recent times, including air pollution, water contamination, and deforestation, which have been worsened by its significant dependence on coal and other fossil fuels. As a nation heavily reliant on coal and other fossil fuels, Poland ranks among the highest emitters of greenhouse gasses in Europe, contributing to air pollution and climate change.

The movement's impact in Italy is obviously amplified by the country's cultural and religious context. Catholicism remains a significant cultural force, and the Pope's encyclical carries considerable weight not only within the Church but also in broader society and in political debate. The movement leverages this influence to promote ecological awareness, aligning environmental issues with deeply rooted religious values such as the dignity of the person, the common good, and the preferential option for the poor. This alignment enables the movement to address ecological issues not merely as technical or scientific concerns but as moral and spiritual challenges that demand a collective response. In addition to its cultural resonance, the Italian branch of the Laudato Si Movement has strategically positioned itself within the political landscape. As Italian political environment shows a complex interplay of local, national, and European ecological issues, the movement has skillfully navigated this landscape by advocating for policies that reflect its commitment to integral ecology. This perspective is pursued by engaging with political actors across the spectrum, seeking to influence policy development and implementation in ways that promote sustainability and social equity:

"I think it's really important that we don't just act locally, but also engage with institutions. There's a lot of work to be done in this regard because, while individual actions are definitely important, we can't achieve big results unless we raise awareness among politicians at both local and international levels".

(Interview 11, LSM, Italy, 2023)

This strategic engagement is evident in the movement's support for legislation aimed at protecting natural resources, reducing carbon emissions, and promoting renewable energy, as well as its critique of policies that fail to address the root causes of environmental degradation. For instance, the movement has been actively involved in the "*Tempo del Creato*" (Time of Creation)⁹ initiative, an annual event observed by Christian communities worldwide, but particularly emphasized in Italy, encouraging reflection and action on ecological issues and engaging numerous Italian dioceses and parishes. One of the most notable instances of the Italian movement's political engagement was its support for Italy's National Strategy for Sustainable Development (SNSvS),¹⁰ which aligns with many of the principles outlined in Laudato Si. The movement also actively participated in discussions leading up to the Italian government's commitment to the European Green Deal, which seeks to make the EU climate neutral by 2050. The Italian government's endorsement of this deal, which includes measures to reduce carbon emissions and promote renewable energy, was influenced by widespread public support, partly mobilized by advocacy groups like the Laudato Si Movement. A correspondence that is also consciously recognized at the grassroots level is as follows:

"I think it was a great alignment of intentions. First of all, I feel like I've really seen how the key themes of the encyclical are in full harmony with the Green Deal. Plus, this has helped raise awareness not just among Catholics, but among people in general. Paying attention to the environment, nature, and what I like to call the beauties of Creation is, and should be, a priority. It's a concern for all humans, not just about raising awareness among Catholics, but really everyone".

(Interview 2, LSM, Italy, 2023)

The Italian and Polish branches of the Laudato Si Movement, as national extensions of a broader international network, represent a sociologically significant model of how global religious movements can navigate and influence diverse local contexts. The top-down strategies they employ—characterized by centralized guidance and adaptation of global ecological principles to local realities—illustrate the complex interplay between global religious directives and local cultural practices. This institutionalized approach to Catholic environmentalism enables these movements to act as mediators between the universal teachings of the Church and the particular social, political, and religious landscapes of Italy and Poland.

The adaptability of these movements to different national contexts can be understood through the lens of religious transnationalism, where religious ideologies and practices transcend national boundaries but are reinterpreted and reshaped according to local circumstances. This adaptability is crucial for maintaining the relevance and resonance of the movement's message in distinct environments. In Italy, where Catholicism remains deeply embedded in the cultural fabric, the Laudato Si Movement has aligned itself with national policies and societal concerns, effectively framing ecological issues as moral imperatives that resonate with Italy's Catholic identity. In Poland, where the Church plays a significant role in public life but faces a different set of socio-political challenges, the movement adapts its strategies to address both environmental and broader socio-religious issues, thereby fostering a form of environmentalism that is both contextually relevant and theologically grounded. The methodological flexibility of the Laudato Si Movement in these two countries exemplifies the capacity of Catholic ecology to manifest the principles of "integral ecology" in ways that are contextually sensitive and ecumenically inclusive. This approach allows the movement to engage a wide range of stakeholders, from religious communities to political entities, thereby broadening the scope of its impact.

8. Discussion

The approaches to environmental campaigning employed by Catholic ecological organizations in Italy and Poland demonstrate both distinctions and resemblances, which may be attributed to their distinct socio-cultural contexts as well as shared religious ideals and principles. A significant distinction may be observed in the historical and cultural contexts of the two nations, which influence the different Catholic ecological groups' aims and areas of attention. While both the Polish Catholic Climate Movement and its Italian counterpart share a common commitment to environmental stewardship rooted in Catholic social teaching, there are notable differences in their approaches and contexts. A complex framework because, first of all, it involves dealing with institutional bodies that have distinct sensitivities as «a connection with natural surroundings is substantially more pronounced for certain orders and nearly non-existent for others in the study area» (Frascaroli 2013, p. 597). The CCMP operates within a socio-political landscape characterized by significant industrialization and dependence on fossil fuels, resulting in unique environmental challenges such as air pollution and deforestation. In response, the organization has focused on grassroots mobilization, community empowerment, and bottom-up advocacy for policy changes to address these pressing issues that intersect with broader social and economic challenges. And political too, as a respondent from the CCMP told us,

"It is not always easy to make people understand what ecological needs are here in Poland, because for many here if you talk about the environment you are automatically a communist. I mean, for young people today it is a bit different, but it is still an idea that recurs. And perhaps it is more difficult precisely because Pope Francis is often considered a left-wing pope, and here everyone is obviously still very attached to Pope John Paul II, it is normal, so a lot of work needs to be done". (Interview 3, LSM, Poland 2023)

In contrast, the Italian movements we took under analysis may emphasize collaboration with governmental agencies, educational institutions, and civil society organizations

to promote sustainable development and advance environmental justice. As an Italian ([Laudato Si' Movement n.d.](#)) respondent underlined,

“It seems to me that Italy is quite in step with the needs of the environment. Maybe it used to be different, but now there’s some attention from the political world, with laws to protect nature and even incentives. In short, today, it feels easier to raise awareness because institutions are starting to recognize the problems”. (Interview 3, LSM, Italy, 2023)

Additionally, cultural and historical factors may influence the strategies and priorities of each movement, reflecting the distinct traditions and values of their respective countries. Despite these differences, both movements share a common goal of promoting ecological sustainability, fostering dialogue, and inspiring action within Catholic communities and beyond. By drawing upon their specific strengths and resources, the CCMP and Movimento Laudato Si’ contribute to a broader global movement for environmental advocacy and social change, rooted in the principles of faith, justice, and solidarity. The most crucial concerns likely revolve around the potential overlaps between religion-based ecological thought and the wider array of secular environmental organizations, a conceptual domain that remains highly divided. The inevitability of cohabitation and mutual interaction between the two approaches in the worldwide scenario is accompanied by the recognition of significant margins of identity:

On the other end of the polarity, is the view that religious groups are fundamentally differentiated by their religiosity, theological particularity, or transcendental mode of spiritual reflection. Such an emphasis on the uniqueness of religious approaches to sustainability conceptually correlates with the notion that religious and secular groups can and should operate independently ([Berry 2014](#), p. 280).

The diversity between the two approaches—the religious and the secular—interrogates all the organizations examined because it articulates the dialectic between the analogous awareness of ecological urgency and the lack of overlapping strategies,¹¹ a dichotomy expressing different needs for interaction at institutional and grassroots level. It should be interesting to arrange the two different national frames in a comparative relationship that allows us to highlight the salient features of two families of factors. Firstly, the micro, meso, or macro levels where organizations operate, in both cases deeply linked to the respective socio-political contexts within which the possibilities of building different repertoires of action are rooted. Following this first trajectory, a movement like the Catholic Climate Movement operates at the meso level, dedicating its dissemination tools to parishes and interacting more closely with the local institutional levels of the Catholic Church.

Differently, *Fraternitas Evangelii Gaudium* exhibits a more hierarchical organizational structure that reflects its institutional ties to the Roman Church. At the apex of the organizational hierarchy lies the leadership, consisting of clergy members and lay leaders who assume responsibility for supervising the organization’s mission, values, and strategic trajectory. Under the guidance of its leadership, the *Fraternitas* could be organized into many departments or committees, led by its leadership, to focus on certain topics such as environmental education, activism, and community engagement. The people allocated to these departments may comprise individuals who are volunteers, professionals, or specialists who possess specific expertise in the fields of ecology, sustainability, and theology. Heading to the base, *Fraternitas Evangelii Gaudium* possesses the capacity to operate through a network of regional chapters or affiliates, serving as pivotal hubs for community engagement and grassroots activism. The leadership structures and decision-making methods of local chapters may vary, since they are shaped by the overarching goals and objectives set by the central leadership. However, the *Fraternitas* aims to adjust its actions according to the concerns that its participants consider to be the most urgent, specifically those external challenges that provide the most risk to the “common home”:

“So, as I was saying, the ideas and activities we engage in are responses, in the sense that there’s a lot of preliminary work and listening involved. For

example, the Laudato Si workshop I've been participating was created because the Fraternitas gathered the desire of many people to reflect and try to find common criteria for changing lifestyles. There's a big question about the future—many young couples have children and are wondering what kind of air they'll be breathing in 30 years". (Interview 2, FEG, Italy, 2022)

The second aspect pertains to the networking capabilities of the organizations, facilitated by their shared religious identity, values, and missions. These organizations leverage with different grades of intensity their connections with other faith-based groups, non-governmental organizations, governmental agencies, academic institutions, and civil society organizations, showing different results in amplifying their impact and variable influence in addressing environmental challenges.

The articulation of an organization's potential for partnership building through networking is a significant challenge in terms of effectively pooling resources, exchanging best practices, and coordinating advocacy activities at various levels, including local, national, and international. Moreover, cultivating a more proactive approach towards networking can facilitate the exchange of ideas and active participation across a wide range of individuals and groups, so promoting a shared feeling of unity and collaborative efforts towards the goals of environmental sustainability and societal equity. By tapping into existing networks and forging new alliances, Catholic organizations may play, in the future, a crucial role in mobilizing individuals and communities to take concrete steps towards a more sustainable and equitable future.

Fraternitas Evangelii Gaudium places significant emphasis on establishing a comprehensive link between environmental care and spiritual renewal. This is achieved through the integration of catechesis and institutions' targeted initiatives, while also acknowledging the economic and political considerations at play, as the following quote can fruitfully underline:

"So we worked a lot on the fact that the universal destination of goods precedes the right of private property and that the right to exist comes before the right to possess. [...] We worked a whole year on this in the Laudato Si space, which is actually multifaceted because this is a political issue as well as an economic issue. We studied helping people understand what the consequences of the neoliberal system and those of the communitarian socialist system are". (Interview 1, FEG, Italy, 2022)

Fraternitas Evangelii Gaudium actively engages in community-based programs with the objective of fostering a sense of fraternity and unity. These initiatives revolve around the promotion of sustainable development, the dissemination of environmental knowledge, and the implementation of ethical consumption behaviors. Conversely, Polish Caritas aims to address environmental issues within the broader context of social fairness and poverty reduction, focusing on meeting the immediate needs of disadvantaged individuals affected by environmental deterioration, such as providing clean water, ensuring food security, and offering disaster relief. Notwithstanding these disparities, both entities exhibit a dedication to Catholic social doctrine, which underscores the inherent worth of every individual and the interdependence of social, economic, and environmental equity.

The historical association between environmental activism in Italy and Catholicism has played a significant role in shaping individuals' attitudes and behaviors towards the environment, hence building a socio-religious framework. This specific tradition integrates historical and religious symbolism, as demonstrated by the adoration of Saint Francis of Assisi, a patron saint linked to ecology that is widely recognized for his deep affection for the process of creation and his dedication to promoting harmony among all living beings. Catholic ecological organizations in Italy utilize rituals, festivals, and religious teachings to strengthen the ethical obligation of preserving the land, presenting environmental concerns within a spiritual framework that appeals to both adherents and non-adherents. In addition, the extensive historical connections between the Catholic Church and Italian society offer

Catholic ecological organizations a solid institutional foundation and support system, enabling them to work together with environmental activists, scholars, and legislators. In contrast, the Catholic ecological organizations in Poland function within a distinct socio-political context that has been influenced by the historical impact of industrialization and policies implemented during the Communist era. The expeditious shift towards a market-based economic system has given rise to environmental issues awareness, including the contamination of air and water, the clearing of forests, and the depletion of biodiversity. These issues have a disproportionate impact on underprivileged populations, and in light of these pressing environmental concerns, Polish Catholic ecological organizations may employ religious doctrines and moral influence to tackle these pressing environmental matters, actively participating in advocacy efforts, grassroots activism, and community mobilization. However, it is important to acknowledge that there may be resistance from established stakeholders and political institutions, highlighting the complex interplay of religion, politics, and environmental governance within Poland's post-communist society.

Finally, it is important to highlight that the reception and interpretation of *Laudato Si'* within the organizations examined in this research primarily target grassroots Catholics and parishes, and there appears to be limited interaction with the liminal context of so-called ecotheologists like Rosemary Ruether or Sallie McFague, who rely on biblical narratives of a lost paradise as a foundation for environmental ethics (Sideris 2006).¹² This specific option prompts reflection on the diverse range of religion-based environmentalist viewpoints. Simultaneously, it may propose potential avenues for future research to investigate the various theological orientations in shaping the societal concept of environment. Nonetheless, the methods and aims of Catholic ecological organizations in Italy and Poland may be influenced by contextual considerations. However, their similar ideals and principles may serve as a solid basis for potential cooperation efforts in tackling the worldwide environmental issue. In the now very distant 1997, Mary Tucker conducted a comprehensive analysis of the then emerging connection between ecology and religions, whereby she critically questioned the collaborative capacities that underpin the evolution of this relationship. The question was «can we go beyond the paralysing statistics of environmental degradation to create the common ethical grounds for sustainable life for future generations?» (Tucker 1997, p. 23), and potential answers appear to be even more pressing in the present day.

9. Conclusions

The Catholic organizations in Poland and Italy operate within different social and religious contexts. They face challenges, including resistance from traditionalists who view ecology as a leftist notion. To overcome this, the movement frames ecological issues as religious duties, drawing on diverse traditions within Catholicism and emphasizing figures like John Paul II. They use religious resources such as identities, values, and symbols to appeal to a broader audience beyond traditional activists. Yet, their emphasis on Catholicism hinders cooperation with secular environmental groups and limits engagement with left-wing environmental politics.

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Notes

- ¹ <https://www.fraternitaevangelicaudium.com/la-missione.html> (accessed on 30 August 2024).
- ² www.caritas.eu (Caritas Europa n.d.).
- ³ www.caritas.pl (Caritas n.d.).
- ⁴ <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/it/policies/climate-change/paris-agreement/> (accessed on 30 August 2024).
- ⁵ <https://laudatosimovement.org/> (accessed on 30 August 2024).
- ⁶ This objective is described by the Italian movement as “total sustainability,” the realization of which depends on achieving zero impact. However, climatologists and environmental sociologists disagree on a number of key points about the viability of a hypothetical total sustainability. See Baumgartner and Zielowski (2007) for a basic introduction to the subject.
- ⁷ <https://laudatosimovement.org/it/download/via-crucis-ecologica> (accessed on 30 August 2024).
- ⁸ The difference seems to be particularly pronounced between the deep-ecology conceptualisation and the comparatively recent environmentalist stance of the Catholic Church: «On the other hand, deep ecology goes ‘deeper’ than Christian theology, since for this worldview nature is ‘intrinsically valuable’ and not in reference to any anthropocentric or theocentric cosmic order. Apparently, this allows for a significantly common ground between the two worldviews; neither Christians nor deep ecologists will oppose clean seas or fresh air. But their worldviews do not overlap» (Marangudakis 2008, p. 247).
- ⁹ <https://seasonofcreation.org/it/about-it/> (accessed on 30 August 2024).
- ¹⁰ <https://www.mase.gov.it/pagina/strategia-nazionale-lo-sviluppo-sostenibile> (accessed on 30 August 2024).
- ¹¹ In this perspective, the US context presents an interesting opportunity, as certain women’s monastic groups are actively implementing environmentally sustainable and situated practices: «In the “intergradations” of Catholic vowed religious life and the culture of American environmentalism, green sisters in effect embody resistance toward and creative affirmation of both tradition and change, reconciling the inherent conflicts between institutional convention and grassroots community adaptation» (Taylor 2003, p. 557).
- ¹² The reflections that arose from the interviews appear to convey ecological conceptualizations that are based on top-down approaches. The interpretative frameworks appear to be mostly based on internal directives within the Catholic Church, ignoring or underestimating the wider debate that is emerging beyond the institution, which is likewise Catholic in nature.

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