

## From Policy To Culture: The Role of Principals in Institutionalizing Ecological Catechesis in Catholic Senior High Schools

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Keywords	ABSTRACT
Catholic education; ecological catechesis; Eastern Indonesia; institutional culture; school leadership	This study examines the role of Catholic school principals in sustaining ecological catechesis programs in Catholic senior high schools in the Diocese of Ruteng, Eastern Indonesia. While ecological catechesis has increasingly been promoted within Catholic education, its long-term sustainability often depends on institutional leadership rather than individual teacher initiatives. Using a qualitative intrinsic case study design, the research draws on semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and document analysis to explore how principals support ecological catechesis through school policies, leadership practices, and cultural institutionalization. The findings reveal that principals contribute to program sustainability by articulating an ecological vision grounded in Catholic social teaching, translating it into formal regulations and budget priorities, and fostering ecological practices as part of school culture. However, structural constraints such as limited resources, competing academic demands, and socio-economic pressures continue to challenge institutional consistency. This study highlights the underexplored pastoral-ecological leadership of Catholic principals and offers contextual insights for strengthening ecological education in faith-based schools.

### INTRODUCTION

Environmental degradation has become a central concern in education globally, requiring schools not only to convey knowledge about ecological issues but to embody sustainability values and practices in their institutional life (De Oliveira et al., 2023). While research in Catholic education has explored how teachers function as agents of ecological formation (Baring et al., 2024), relatively little attention has been paid to the role of school leadership in sustaining ecological initiatives beyond isolated classroom practices (Koh et al., 2023; Miao & Nduneseokwu, 2025). In many faith-based schools, ecological catechesis remains highly dependent on individual teacher commitment, leaving it vulnerable to discontinuity when personnel changes or when broader institutional support is lacking. This gap is particularly significant in Catholic school contexts where the interplay between educational vision, pastoral imperatives, and ecological consciousness can shape long-term institutional culture.

School leadership is widely recognized as a critical determinant in translating sustainability objectives into daily practice. Effective principals can influence organizational culture, policy implementation, and collective commitment toward environmental goals (Nurul Jadid & Nur, 2025). Transformational and sustainable leadership paradigms emphasize that school leaders do more than manage administrative tasks; they foster shared values, support

teacher agency, and align school structures with broader social and environmental goals (Yoserizal et al., 2024; How & Ishak, 2021). Specifically, sustainability-oriented leadership involves articulating a clear vision, embedding sustainability in organizational policy, and encouraging collaborative action among stakeholders. Yet, there is a growing need to investigate these dynamics in contexts where religious identity and ecological stewardship intersect.

In Catholic education, the Church's teaching on integral ecology, as articulated in *Laudato Si'*, offers a theological foundation for sustainability that transcends technical environmental education by framing ecological care as a moral and spiritual obligation. Catholic schools have begun to adopt frameworks such as *Laudato Si'* Schools to guide their sustainability commitments, integrating environmental ethics with faith formation (*Living Laudato Si'* Schools Framework). In this regard, school leaders play an essential role in ensuring that such frameworks are institutionalized rather than implemented as episodic activities. This role includes shaping policies that reflect ecological values, allocating resources to sustain ecological programs, and modelling practices that reinforce the moral significance of environmental care.

The novelty of this study lies in its integrated focus on pastoral-ecological leadership, a concept that combines the spiritual and moral imperatives of Catholic social teaching with the practical demands of educational leadership. While previous research has addressed either sustainability leadership or Catholic education separately, this study brings these fields together to examine how principals operationalize the principles of integral ecology within school governance and culture. This approach offers a nuanced understanding of leadership that is both contextually grounded and theoretically informed.

Despite these emerging frameworks, empirical research on how Catholic school principals support and sustain ecological catechesis remains sparse, especially in regions where ecological vulnerability is closely linked to socio-economic realities. In Eastern Indonesia, Catholic schools operate within environments facing significant environmental challenges, making leadership support for sustainability initiatives particularly urgent and complex. Therefore, this study aims to explore how Catholic school principals contribute to the sustainability of ecological catechesis programs, how their leadership shapes institutional culture, and what contextual factors enable or constrain such efforts. By foregrounding leadership from an ecological and pastoral perspective, this research seeks to contribute new insights into educational leadership and sustainability in faith-based schooling.

## **METHOD**

This study employed a qualitative research approach to explore how Catholic school principals support the sustainability of ecological catechesis programs in 6 Catholic senior high schools within the Diocese of Ruteng, Eastern Indonesia, during March until May 2025. A qualitative design was selected because the study aims to understand leadership meanings, institutional practices, and contextual dynamics as experienced and interpreted by participants, rather than to measure predetermined variables (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam, 2009). An intrinsic case study strategy was adopted to allow an in-depth examination of ecological catechesis as a leadership- and culture-driven process situated within a specific ecclesial and socio-ecological context (Stake, 1995).

The research setting was chosen due to the region’s acute environmental challenges—such as deforestation, waste management issues, and land-use change—which intersect with local socio-economic conditions and influence school-based ecological initiatives. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, focusing on those directly involved in school leadership and ecological catechesis implementation (Patton, 2015). Six principals served as the primary participants, while 6 religious education teachers, 60 selected students were included as supporting informants to strengthen contextual understanding and enable triangulation of perspectives (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. Interviews explored principals’ leadership vision, policy decisions, resource allocation, and strategies for institutionalizing ecological values. Observations were conducted during school activities related to ecological programs, religious events, and daily routines to capture how ecological commitments were enacted in practice. Document analysis included school policies, budget plans, program reports, and diocesan pastoral texts (Panitia Sinode III Keuskupan Ruteng, 2017; Puspas Ruteng, 2024; Komisi Kateketik Keuskupan Ruteng, 2024) to situate leadership practices within broader institutional frameworks (Bowen, 2009; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015).

Data analysis followed an inductive thematic approach. Interview transcripts, field notes, and documents were coded iteratively to identify patterns related to leadership, policy, and ecological institutional culture. Themes were developed through constant comparison and refined through analytic memoing and reflexive interpretation (Braun & Clarke, 2006). To ensure trustworthiness, the study applied triangulation across data sources, member checking, and reflexive procedures to reduce interpretive bias, while ethical standards such as informed consent, confidentiality, and pastoral sensitivity were upheld throughout the research process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The thematic analysis of interviews, observations, and document analysis identified five major themes that illuminate how Catholic school principals support the sustainability of ecological catechesis programs in Catholic senior high schools. These themes demonstrate that principals play a decisive role in shaping ecological catechesis not only through symbolic leadership but also through policy-making, institutional culture formation, and resource governance. At the same time, the findings reveal that leadership support is exercised within contextual constraints that influence the continuity and effectiveness of ecological initiatives.

**Table 1. Thematic Findings on Principals’ Leadership Support for Sustainable Ecological Catechesis**

Theme	Core Meaning	Empirical Description	Theoretical Link
<b>1. Ecological Vision as Institutional Direction</b>	Principals sustain ecological catechesis by framing it as part of the school’s Catholic identity and mission.	Principals articulate ecological responsibility as a moral and spiritual commitment rooted in Catholic teaching. Ecological catechesis is positioned as a core dimension of character formation and faith-based	Transformational leadership; Integral ecology

		education rather than an extracurricular activity.	
<b>2. Policy and Regulation as Sustainability Instruments</b>	Sustainability is strengthened when ecological values are formalized into school rules and official programs.	Principals institutionalize ecological catechesis through written regulations (plastic reduction, waste discipline, school cleanliness norms), program schedules, and accountability mechanisms. These policies reduce dependency on individual teacher initiative.	Institutionalization; Policy enactment
<b>3. Resource Allocation and Infrastructure Support</b>	Program continuity depends on principals' capacity to allocate resources and provide enabling infrastructure.	Principals allocate budget lines for ecological programs, provide facilities (waste bins, composting areas, school gardens), and integrate ecological priorities into annual school planning. Sustainability is reinforced when ecological initiatives are embedded in financial and logistical structures.	Leadership for sustainability; Organizational capacity
<b>4. Ecological Culture Formation through Ritual and Modeling</b>	Principals shape ecological catechesis by cultivating institutional culture through symbols, routines, and moral exemplarity.	Ecological commitments are embedded in school rituals (prayers, liturgical celebrations, ecological themes), daily routines, and principal modeling. Students and teachers perceive ecological care as a shared moral norm sustained through repeated communal practice.	Cultural leadership; Moral habitus
<b>5. Negotiating Structural and Socio-Economic Constraints</b>	Leadership support is limited by external pressures and structural barriers that complicate sustainability.	Principals face challenges such as limited funding, competing academic demands, staff turnover, and socio-economic realities where families rely on environmentally harmful livelihoods. Principals negotiate between ecological ideals and local realities, often adopting pragmatic compromises.	Agency–structure interaction; Contextual leadership

Overall, the findings indicate that Catholic school principals contribute significantly to the sustainability of ecological catechesis programs by providing institutional direction, policy structures, and cultural reinforcement. Their leadership shifts ecological catechesis from teacher-dependent initiatives toward institutionalized practices embedded in school governance and culture. However, the sustainability of ecological catechesis remains contingent upon structural conditions and socio-economic realities that require principals to balance moral ideals with pragmatic constraints.

The findings of this study provide nuanced insights into how Catholic school principals sustain ecological catechesis programs, highlighting the interplay between leadership vision, institutional policy, cultural embedding, and contextual challenges. Each theme identified in the findings reflects both theoretical expectations and the practical realities of implementing sustainable ecological education in faith-based schools.

### **Ecological Vision as Institutional Direction**

Principals who articulated a clear ecological vision effectively positioned environmental care within the moral and spiritual framework of Catholic education. This aligns with transformational leadership theory, which emphasizes vision-setting as central to influencing organizational culture and stakeholder behavior (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Leithwood et al., 2020). By framing ecological responsibility as a moral imperative, principals connected sustainability to Catholic social teaching and the principles of integral ecology (Francis, 2015). Similar studies have shown that when school leaders integrate ethical and spiritual dimensions into environmental education, teachers and students are more likely to internalize ecological values as part of the school's identity rather than as optional activities (Boustani, 2025; Groome, 2021). Thus, the vision-driven approach not only motivates participation but legitimizes ecological catechesis as essential to the school's faith-based mission.

### **Policy and Regulation as Sustainability Instruments**

Formalizing ecological practices through school policies proved crucial in sustaining programs beyond the efforts of individual teachers. This finding resonates with institutional theory, which posits that embedding values into organizational rules, routines, and structures enhances longevity and reduces reliance on personal initiative (Scott, 2014; Wals & Jickling, 2024). Principals' use of regulations, schedules, and accountability mechanisms mirrors global best practices in educational sustainability leadership, where codified policies serve as instruments for maintaining environmental commitments despite personnel changes or competing priorities (Haddad et al., 2023; Nurul Jadid & Nur, 2025). By linking policy to moral and spiritual rationale, principals reinforced the legitimacy of ecological programs in ways that are culturally resonant for faith-based schools.

### **Resource Allocation and Infrastructure Support**

The findings demonstrate that sustainability depends on principals' capacity to allocate financial and infrastructural resources effectively. This confirms prior research that leadership for sustainability requires strategic resourcing alongside vision and policy (Yoserizal et al., 2024; Leithwood et al., 2020). Providing dedicated budgets, composting facilities, and school gardens not only enables program execution but signals institutional commitment, enhancing collective ownership among staff and students. In faith-based contexts, such support is a tangible expression of pastoral care, linking stewardship of creation with ethical leadership (Marsh, 2020).

### **Ecological Culture Formation through Ritual and Modeling**

Principals cultivated ecological culture through both symbolic actions and routine practices, reinforcing the internalization of environmental values. This aligns with research on moral habitus, suggesting that repeated practices embedded in organizational rituals shape durable ethical dispositions among community members (Bourdieu, 1977; Whitehouse & Varley, 2022). Integrating ecological themes into prayers, liturgies, and daily routines reflects pastoral-ecological leadership, where modeling behaviors and communal reinforcement

contribute to the normalization of sustainability as part of the school's identity (Grace et al., 2017; Groome, 2021).

### **Negotiating Structural and Socio-Economic Constraints**

Despite strong leadership, structural limitations and socio-economic pressures constrained program sustainability. Principals navigated limited funding, staff turnover, and families' reliance on environmentally harmful practices by adopting pragmatic strategies, echoing the agency–structure interaction highlighted in educational leadership literature (Spillane et al., 2011). This underscores that even visionary leadership requires contextual sensitivity and adaptive problem-solving, particularly in regions facing ecological vulnerability and socio-economic complexity (De Oliveira et al., 2023).

Collectively, these findings illustrate that sustainable ecological catechesis in Catholic schools emerges from the integration of visionary leadership, formalized policy, resource provisioning, cultural embedding, and pragmatic contextual negotiation. Principals act as both pastoral and ecological agents, translating Catholic social teaching into enduring institutional practices that foster environmental stewardship. These insights contribute to international discourse on educational sustainability leadership by highlighting the unique role of faith-based values in shaping both vision and practice.

### **CONCLUSION**

This study highlights the pivotal role of Catholic school principals in sustaining ecological catechesis programs within senior high schools in the Diocese of Ruteng. Principals function as both educational and pastoral leaders, translating Catholic social teaching and the principles of integral ecology into clear institutional visions, policies, and practices. By articulating ecological responsibility as a moral and spiritual imperative, they foster commitment among teachers and students, ensuring that sustainability becomes an integral part of the school's identity rather than a peripheral activity.

The findings demonstrate that the longevity and effectiveness of ecological catechesis depend not only on visionary leadership but also on structural support, including formalized policies, budget allocation, and infrastructural resources. Furthermore, embedding ecological values into daily routines, rituals, and symbolic practices strengthens the school's ecological culture, creating durable habits and shared norms that persist despite staff turnover or competing priorities. Principals' capacity to negotiate socio-economic and environmental constraints underscores the importance of adaptive leadership that balances moral ideals with pragmatic realities.

These insights have practical and theoretical implications for Catholic education and sustainability leadership. For policymakers and diocesan authorities, supporting principals with resources, training, and frameworks such as the *Laudato Si'* Schools model can enhance the institutionalization of ecological catechesis. For scholars, this study contributes to the literature on pastoral-ecological leadership, demonstrating how faith-based values, policy, and cultural embedding intersect to sustain environmental education. Future research may extend this inquiry to other regions and educational levels, examining how ecological catechesis interacts with local environmental, social, and economic contexts to shape enduring institutional practices.

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