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Foundations and Implications of the Integral Ecology and Sustainable Development Goals in Catholic University Education

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Abstract: The Agenda provided by the SDGs (Sustainable Development Goals) represent an opportunity to eradicate poverty, preserve the planet, promote peace, and develop a more prosperous society. This global horizon is reinforced by the religious proposal of the Encyclical “Laudato si’”, in which Pope Francis reflects on the anthropological, social, and spiritual repercussions of the interaction of human beings with their environmental reality. With the term integral ecology, the Catholic leader proposes processes to put an end of poverty, exclusion, and environmental degradation. This research aims to explore the cornerstones and application of the SDGs and integral ecology in the framework of the Catholic university. The study brings Agenda 2030 into dialogue with the Christian ethical perspective of human development and integral ecology by showing their complementarity. It develops the inclusion of the SDGs and integral ecology objectives in the mission and strategic plan of the Catholic university. For this reason, an action plan is projected in which the values of sustainability are transversally structured in the diverse areas of the university, such as governance, teaching, research, transfer of knowledge and social impact, extracurricular activity, green procurement, infrastructure, energy, waste, water, and mobility.

Keywords: sustainable development goals; integral ecology; catholic university; strategic plan



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1. Introduction

“Transforming our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development” is the resolution adopted as a result of the commitment of 193 nations to end poverty, protect the planet, ensure peace, and promote a more prosperous world ([United Nations 2015b](#)). On 25 September 2015, the Member States of UN (United Nations) agreed on 17 goals and 169 targets of the SDGs (Sustainable Development Goals), which sought to harmonize economic growth, social inclusion, and environmental protection. The UN General Assembly approved this resolution which, in continuity with the Millennium Development Goals, aimed to take a step forward by projecting new goals for 2030 to complete the unachieved objectives for 2015 ([United Nations 2000](#)).

The same year in which these SDGs were agreed upon, Pope Francis formulated the category integral ecology in the Encyclical “Laudato si’”. While the 2030 Agenda proposed concrete goals focused on the harmonization of economic growth, social inclusion, and environmental protection, the Church document “On Care for the Common Home”, written for the entire human family, delved into the anthropological, social, and spiritual implications of human interaction with the environment. Furthermore, the Pontiff invited citizens worldwide to seek holistic solutions and to work together for sustainable development ([Francis 2015](#), pp. 137–62).

The current educational context is placed within this horizon of sustainability which, from the competencies approach of the European Higher Education Area, must creatively address the training needs demanded by the challenges of this millennium ([Declaration of](#)

the European Ministers of Education 1999). In this respect, Catholic university education has the task of engaging in multidimensional education that not only focuses on technical know-how, but also on humanistic values of justice, solidarity, and sustainability (The International Federation of Catholic Universities 2022). As a result, the question about the environmental issue and the culture of sustainability in the educational context arises. Particularly, the main objective of this study is to address the role of the Catholic university in relation to the SDGs and integral ecology. In addition, the specific objectives focus on the following research questions: what is the response of the Catholic university to the call of Pope Francis for integral ecology and how is this approach to sustainability in Christian social thought integrated with the SDGs? How could the horizon of the 2030 Agenda, focused on the harmonization of economic growth, social inclusion, and environmental protection, impact upon all areas of the Catholic university? How should the Catholic university be aligned with the fourth SDG on ensuring inclusive, equitable, and quality education? What strategic plan should guide governance, teaching, research, transfer of knowledge and social impact, extracurricular activity, green procurement, infrastructure, energy, waste, water, and mobility to respond to the ecological education proposed by “Laudato si’”?

To address these questions, this study first introduces the concern for development and the emergence of SDGs in the international context. The paper then presents the ethical perspective of human development and integral ecology in Christian social thought in order to explore its commonalities and differences with the 2030 Agenda. Next, it examines the significance and commitment of the Catholic university education to integral ecology and the SDGs. Finally, it proposes a strategic action plan for integral ecology and the SDGs at the Catholic university.

2. The Concern for Development and the Emergence of the Sustainable Development Goals

In order to comprehend the background of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, it is crucial to go back to the San Francisco Conference, where 50 countries signed the UN Charter, which advocates fundamental human rights, equality, justice, respect for international law, social progress, and freedom (United Nations 1945). The Universal Declaration of Human Rights proposes for the first time the worldwide defense of essential human rights, which must be protected by all peoples and nations (United Nations 1948). Later, the problem of development is on the global scene in the 1960s, to such an extent that initiatives emerge as the First United Nations Development Decade, which is intended as a strategy to increase economic growth (United Nations 1961). Moreover, the United Nations Development Programme is created in 1966 by the General Assembly of the UN, whose mission emphasizes the concern for the development of peoples (Murphy 2006).

In order to explain how the rights of the people have been developed, Karel Vašák offers a classification into three generations of human rights (Vašák 1979). While the so-called first generation of human rights are related to civil, political rights, and the rights to freedom, with its roots in the 17th century; the second generation is regarding economic, social, and cultural rights, which is a response to the unregulated capitalism of the mid-19th century. However, these rights are not officially signed until the second half of the 20th century (United Nations 1966a, 1966b). After World War II, new concerns arise about issues such as peace, development, the heritage of peoples, and the environment. Consequently, the third generation of rights develops, relating to solidarity and the collective rights of peoples, whose implementation involves the international community (Vašák 1979).¹

Since the 1970s, the right to the environment is recognized as a fundamental problem for future generations in the so-called Stockholm Declaration (United Nations 1972). Moreover, the issue of development and the environment begin to be interconnected at the Rio de Janeiro Conference (United Nations 1992), as well as numerous UN summits address human development, poverty eradication, and the climate crisis, leading up to the Millennium Declaration (United Nations 2000).² The Development Goals establish eight

objectives, which are based on the values of freedom, equality, solidarity, tolerance, respect for nature, and shared responsibility (United Nations 2000, p. 6).³ In this sense, one of the objectives of the Declaration is to ensure sustainability, but the environmental issue is not yet perceived as a central topic interrelated with the other goals (United Nations 2000).

This international commitment has a significant impact on the fight to reduce extreme poverty, promote universal education, control disease, and create sensitivity to environmental sustainability. Furthermore, this Declaration creates an awareness of global problems such as nuclear safety, financial crises, contagious diseases, and global warming. However, the same progress on these issues are not achieved in other goals such as maternal mortality, malnutrition, and hunger, which are still urgent challenges at a global level nowadays (FAO et al. 2022; WHO et al. 2023). Additionally, those objectives do not address the crisis in a structural manner, without identifying the inconsistent policies, production, and consumption of developed countries (Larrú 2020, p. 60)

Before the deadline for achieving the Millennium Development Goals, another agenda begins to be prepared. A significant moment in this itinerary is the Rio+20 Conference, where the Member States decide to design new development goals and sustainable consumption and production patterns on the basis of the Millennium Declaration (United Nations 2012). The Conference paves the way for the 2030 Agenda, with the beginnings of planning to achieve both human development and environmental sustainability goals. (United Nations 2012).

Following the Rio+20 Conference, various meetings and working groups formed by leaders from the public and private sectors are held until the resolution “Transforming our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development” is approved (United Nations 2015b). The 17 goals and 169 targets are integrated across the three indivisible dimensions of sustainable development: the economic, social, and environmental. Hence, the SDGs conceive the environment as an intersecting issue that relates to the other objectives linked to the economic and social spheres. Therefore, the eradication of poverty in all its forms and dimensions, the realization of human rights, the achievement of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls, and the protection of the environment are fundamental cornerstones for these objectives according to the Preamble of the Resolution (United Nations 2015b).⁴ In order to measure the effectiveness of the agreed commitments, the 2030 Agenda includes the option for countries to assess the achievement of the goals at the national, regional, and global levels (United Nations 2015b). The same year, at the UN Climate Change Conference (COP21) in Paris, a historic agreement is reached, which is to substantially reduce global greenhouse gas emissions to keep global temperature well below 2 °C, and to pursue efforts to limit it to 1.5 °C above pre-industrial levels (United Nations 2015a). This significant agreement marks the beginning of a shift towards a net-zero emissions world, which is essential to achieving the SDGs. It also represents a historic move for the UN to declare a healthy environment a human right (United Nations 2022). The 2030 Agenda has not been exempted from criticism from different perspectives. One of the most outstanding concerns, which goes beyond ideological positioning, is the incompatibility between economic growth and environmental sustainability (Spaiser et al. 2017). Despite the discrepancies in the different ways of understanding reality, and the fact that the implementation of this agreement is far from accomplishing the proposed goals, it is a great achievement that 193 states have consensually adopted a global action to solve the major social, economic, political, and environmental challenges (Sustainable Development Solutions Network 2024). In any case, progress on agreements and implementation will be necessary to negotiate the next global sustainable development agenda to continue the SDGs beyond 2030.

3. The Complementarity of Integral Ecology with Sustainable Development Goals

The Social Doctrine of the Church does not seek to provide a technical solution to the problems of development, but rather to reflect on human beings and society in the light of the Christian message of Jesus of Nazareth in the Gospel (Paul VI 1967, p. 123; John Paul II

1987, p. 41). Following this principle, the Catholic Church intends to contribute its thinking in a civil and international context, as has been the norm since the publication of the Encyclical “*Rerum Novarum*”, which is the first document on social issues (Leo XIII 1891). In the second half of the twentieth century, especially since the Second Vatican Council, the Catholic Church shares the concern for development with other civil organizations. The Pastoral Constitution emphasizes that development must be integral and in solidarity: integral development, because it encompasses not only the material dimension, but also the intellectual, moral, spiritual, and religious ones; and development in solidarity, because it is a matter for all human beings, regardless of race or region of the world (Paul VI 1965).

Later, the Encyclical “*Populorum Progressio*” addresses specifically the issue of integral human development as a complete and a common development of mankind (Paul VI 1967). The Encyclical “*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*” reflects on the issue of development in terms of solidarity, stressing that development must be aimed at the common good (John Paul II 1987), making a concise reference to the problem of the environment in relation to development (John Paul II 1987, p. 26). It is the beginning of the reflection on the ecological implications of development, which is addressed in greater detail in the Encyclical “*Centesimus Annus*”. This document states the misconception of development in relation to consumption, since the human being wastes the resources of the Earth “in an excessive and disordered way”, and defines the destruction of the natural environment as an “anthropological error” (John Paul II 1991, pp. 36, 37). Subsequently, the Encyclical “*Caritas in Veritate*” reflects on development as a vocation, which implies respect for truth and charity, and a responsible freedom towards human beings and nature (Benedict XVI 2009, pp. 16–18, 48–49, 51).

Up to this point, central to the conceptual framework of the Social Doctrine of the Church was the category of integral human development. The same year in which the 2030 Agenda is approved, with its concrete goals focused on harmonizing economic growth, social inclusion, and environmental protection (United Nations 2015b), the Encyclical “*Laudato si*” proposes the new category integral ecology, which is the result of a terminological evolution that seeks to include integral solutions for the interactions between natural and social systems (Francis 2015, pp. 137–62). Subsequently, whereas in the academic and civil institutional sphere, the concept of development has moved towards sustainable development, in the Catholic sphere, integral human development has evolved into the concept of integral ecology (Tatay 2018).

The Encyclical “*Laudato si*” delves into the anthropological, social, and spiritual implications of the interaction of human beings with their environmental reality, and calls for solution strategies from an integrated approach to tackle poverty, restore dignity to the excluded, and, at the same time, protect nature (Francis 2015, pp. 137–62). In addition to criticizing a distorted, misguided, and tyrannical anthropocentrism, the Pontificate suggests an ecological conversion in which spirituality can encourage people to protect the planet (Francis 2015, pp. 68–69, 118–19, 122, 216–21). This global action on climate change consists of the defense of justice for the most excluded, the integration of the biosphere into the economic scope, the path of new national and local policies, the adoption of sustainable lifestyles, and the promotion of an education in the spirit of this integral ecological culture (Francis 2015, pp. 137–62, 176–81, 202–15).

Eight years since the publication of “*Laudato si*”, the Apostolic Exhortation “*Laudate Deum*” shows the concern for the global climate crisis, criticizing the technological and economic power that underlies the current process of environmental degradation. In the document, the Pope expresses his climate dream in relation to COP28, so that an energy transition can be agreed upon in order to abandon fossil fuels and move towards clean energies (Francis 2023).⁵

Considering the three dimensions of sustainable development outlined by the SDGs—economic, social, and environmental—the Social Doctrine of the Church offers a specific approach that can complete the technical nature of the 2030 Agenda. For this reason, the Holy See participated in the intergovernmental negotiations of the SDGs and subsequently

issued a document describing the 2030 Agenda as “proper and laudable aspirations” (Auza 2016, p. 1). For the purpose of interpreting the SDGs in light of the integral human development vision of the Social Doctrine of the Church, the first part of the document is devoted to underlining principles such as the dignity of the poor, the complementarity of spiritual and material means, justice, education, rule of law, peace, common good and universal fraternity (Auza 2016, pp. 6–14). That report states on record that “Holy See agrees with most of the goals and targets enumerated in the Agenda”, and make “clarifications and reservations on some of the concepts used” related to the issue of the way of understanding the human person: dignity, gender—appealing to the biological identity, health—including the issue of abortion or maternal surrogacy, family—suggesting the way of understanding marriage, freedom of religion, and integral human development instead of using the expression sustainable development (Auza 2016, pp. 18–25).

At an urgent time like the present, global warming could exceed 1.5 °C and reach 2 °C. In this 21st century, which has the challenge that CO₂ and other greenhouse gas emissions must be drastically reduced in the coming decades (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change 2021, p. 18), it is significant to explore the meaning of sustainability from all its dimensions: ecological, political, ethical, socio-economic, democratic, cultural, and theological (Vogt and Weber 2019). While the 2030 Agenda provides practical guidelines, integral ecology contextualizes the issues from the perspective of Christian anthropology and spirituality (Martínez 2020, pp. 34–35). Moreover, the focus of the SDGs, centered on the economy, society, and the environment, can be complemented with that of Christian social thought, which approaches these three dimensions of reality from spiritual, ethical, cultural, and theological reflection (Tatay 2020, p. 250). As a result, it is complementary to combine the SDGs with that of integral ecology in order to give practical and meaningful answers to the problems of our world. In this sense, the university community represents an important catalyst for the achievement of these challenges.

4. The Commitment of the Catholic University Education to Integral Ecology and the SDGs

Since the last century, companies are increasingly focusing more and more on their actions in Social Corporate Responsibility, as well as citizens are becoming more attentive to the impact of corporate actions on society (Moir 2001). In the sphere of education, the concept of University Social Responsibility has appeared, which refers to the influence of the university and its commitment to society (Wigmore-Álvarez and Ruiz-Lozano 2012). The four steps of University Social Responsibility have been defined as follows: commitment, acquired by the entire university community in line with the mission of the institution; self-diagnosis, which maps and assesses training, research, knowledge, and social participation; compliance, which contrasts the results of the diagnosis with the mission of the university and plans the implementation of new projects; and evaluation and accountability, which assesses and communicates the results, improving the strategic plans (Vallaeyes et al. 2009; SDSN Australia/Pacific 2017, pp. 31–34). This way to implement the SDGs and the integral ecology proposal is through a university-wide strategic process (SDSN 2020, VIII), to be applied and assessed in a university context (REDS 2020, pp. 12–27). The communication of the results requires corporate responsibility communication plan (Dawkins 2004), which in Catholic university context should be based on the communication of Christian ethics focuses on the truth, human dignity and common good (Sánchez-Camacho 2022, p. 402).

This study focuses on the first step mentioned above, which is intended to establish the foundations of a university institutional project of integral ecology. It requires an institutional policy on sustainability from governance, a team that coordinates sustainable actions and the entire university community: professors, researchers, administrative staff, students, and alumni (Vallaeyes et al. 2009, pp. 31–35). At current times, the social responsibility of the university must be oriented towards the horizon of the 2030 Agenda. The SDGs are a global agreement that includes a set of urgent priorities to guide all countries. For this reason, the university could be a catalyst for innovation, economic development, and social

training, and has a fundamental role to play in achieving the fulfillment of the 2030 Agenda (SDSN Australia/Pacific 2017, pp. 5–6). Indeed, university and the SDGs mutually benefit from the commitment to the 2030 Agenda. Firstly, the institution of higher education is helped by increasing demand for training on the SDGs, improving its reputation globally as a responsible organization, providing a framework for demonstrating its impact, generating new funding streams, and fostering collaboration with new partners. Secondly, the university supports the accomplishment of the SDGs by promoting knowledge and innovation to the SDGs, training those responsible for implementing the SDGs, serving as a model for achieving the SDGs in governance, administration, and university culture, and developing leadership to guide the SDG response (SDSN Australia/Pacific 2017, pp. 7–9).

In Catholic university context, in addition to the SDGs, the objectives of integral ecology are opportunities to be incorporated in its strategic plan, with the objective of promoting and coordinating mainly teaching initiatives, research, social impact and extracurricular activities related to ecological and social commitment. The objectives of the integral ecology of the Catholic university complement the SDGs. They are grounded in the *Laudato Si'* Goals, which redefine the actions of the university community in its relationship with society and the environment (*Laudato Si' Action Platform 2023*). This Goals for Action of the Dicastery for the Service of Integral Human Development and the Encyclical of Pope Francis call on Catholic higher education to live this ecological conversion from a holistic approach: environmental ecology, taking action to protect the environment; social ecology, promoting both social and environmental justice and defending both human life and other forms of life on Earth; economic ecology, including the economy as a subsystem of the human society integrated into the biosphere; daily life ecology, making moderate use of resources and energy; educational ecology, rethinking the academic and extracurricular programs of the educational institution; spiritual ecology, seeking the meaning of life on Earth in communion with nature; and cultural ecology, preserving the natural, historical, artistic, and cultural heritage (Francis 2015, pp. 138–62, 202–45).

The Catholic university must commit to goal 4 of the SDGs by ensuring inclusive, equitable, and quality education. Specifically, target 7 is key for students to be trained in theoretical and practical knowledge in sustainable development, human rights, gender equality, culture of peace, global citizenship, and cultural diversity (United Nations 2015b). Environmental education aims to be based on scientific information and on the awareness and prevention of environmental risks, but it must also encourage students to think critically and ethically about a sustainable lifestyle on the path of an “ecological citizenship” (Francis 2015, pp. 210–11). The quality of education must not only be marked by technical knowledge. Assuming such an approach would lead to a technocratic paradigm in which all technological development is intended to serve economic interests (Francis 2015, p. 109). Educational innovation should turn the student into a protagonist in the construction of his own learning, in such a way as to stimulate meaningful learning (Ausubel 1963), as well as to encourage critical thinking (Sternberg 1986).

In order to face the socio-environmental crisis, profound transformations in lifestyle and economy are necessary, keeping in mind the ecological ceiling, to ensure that humanity does not collectively overshoot the planetary boundaries that protect the nature (Raworth 2017). The efforts in education will be inadequate and ineffectual unless it is tried to promote a new way of thinking about human beings, life, society, and the relationship with the Earth. As Pope Francis emphasizes, this “efforts at education will be inadequate and ineffectual unless we strive to promote a new way of thinking about human beings, life, society and our relationship with nature” (Francis 2015, p. 215).

5. The Strategic Action Plan for Integral Ecology and the SDGs at the Catholic University

Current challenges urgently require a change in the lifestyle of people and a transformation in the way they act and think. To achieve this, it is required to adopt new skills, attitudes, and behaviors that will lead to more sustainable societies. Education

systems need to respond to this need by defining relevant learning objectives and content, introducing pedagogies that empower learners, and encouraging institutions to include sustainability principles in their management structures (UNESCO 2017, p. 48). In the Global Compact on Education, the last objective indicated by Pope Francis refers to the Encyclical “*Laudato si’*”, which highlights the global dimension of the current crisis by calling for reflection on how the common home is being built and what is the future of the planet (Congregatio de Institutione Catholica 2019; Morin 2012). In this document, the Pope suggests different ways of action for Catholic university education: encouragement of activities that protect the environment; admiration of creation and development of care for the common home; promotion of the conversion to renewable energies; and green space planning in proportion to the members of the university community.

The university, by its nature connected to transfer of knowledge, social transformation, and environmental protection, has the capacity to contribute in a critical and constructive way to sustainable development (Martínez 2020). In this scenario, Catholic university education needs to develop its teaching, research, and management activities with the utmost respect for the environment, encouraging sustainability actions (Francis 2015, pp. 209–15). This article section is the strategic action plan for integral ecology and the SDGs at the Catholic university, whose principles should be at the service of a human, just, and ecological education. This purpose is aligned with “*Laudato si’*” in affirming the intention to “unite the whole human family in the pursuit of sustainable and integral development” (Francis 2015, p. 13). The ecological action plan should be a transversal approach to the different aspects of the university: governance, teaching, research, transfer of knowledge and social impact, extracurricular activity, green procurement, infrastructure, energy, waste and recycling, water, and mobility. The following is a description of the proposed sustainable action plan for the university.

5.1. Governance

Environmental governance is key to achieving sustainable development. The decision-making processes and the work of Catholic university institutions should follow informed, coherent, unified, and integral methods, which are basic elements for accountability and responsible governance based on the values of Catholic education. Moreover, it must be supported by adequate regulatory frameworks that facilitate these processes, having integral ecology as a horizon. Based on this commitment, the development of governance in sustainability is a priority, which involves management decision making in teaching, research, knowledge transfer and social impact, extracurricular activities, infrastructure, energy, waste and recycling, water, and mobility. This structure, in addition to being included in the strategic project, could be specified in an integral ecology plan that will mark the direction of the university in terms of sustainability.

The governance could consist of an integral ecology unit under a vice-rectorate (CRUE 2022, pp. 5, 40) to coordinate and promote all activities and conduct the process of commitment, self-diagnosis, compliance, and evaluation and accountability (Vallaeyts et al. 2009; SDSN Australia/Pacific 2017, pp. 31–34). Within the integral ecology unit, it would be beneficial to create delegates from the different faculties to implement the objectives in each university center, as well as an advisory council of professors and researchers who, from a transdisciplinary perspective, assist in the implementation of the proposed objectives. As an end point of the process, annual or biannual sustainability reports are recommended practices in relation to the evaluation and communication of results (SDSN Australia/Pacific 2017, pp. 40–41). Institutional communication is essential for accountability, as well as raising awareness of the adoption of practices that favor sustainable development (Túñez et al. 2018). In this sense, digital resources, such as a website or messages on social media, are useful tools for this purpose (Castells 1996, pp. 163–215).

5.2. Teaching

Quality education is an important cornerstone formulated in SDG 4 (United Nations 2015b). One of its goals is to ensure all students acquire the theoretical and practical knowledge, as a transversal area, necessary to promote sustainable development (Navarro Mendizábal 2019). Universities have an important role to play in the implementation of the SDGs, primarily due to their wide range of educational activities such as undergraduate and graduate education, internships, management and corporate training, distance learning, and student associations (SDSN Australia/Pacific 2017). Catholic university education, in addition to articulating in its action plan the aspirations of the SDGs, should include the objectives of integral ecology (Francis 2015, pp. 137–62, 176–81, 202–15), training its students with key competencies coherent with environmental sustainability for their future professional performance (Mendes 2021, pp. 348–49).

Consequently, faculties should promote environmental contents in their academic curricula from different perspectives according to the discipline. The competency framework promoted by European Higher Education Area helps to implement aptitudes related to the SDGs and integral ecology in undergraduate and graduate studies, bachelor's and master's theses, and doctoral programs (Declaration of the European Ministers of Education 1999). In addition, specific undergraduate and graduate programs on integral ecology could be established, which not only seek to deepen knowledge in environmental sciences, but also in the research of a new paradigm about the human being, society, and its relationship with nature (Francis 2015, p. 215).

5.3. Research

In Catholic university education, the promotion of research activity focused on the SDGs and integral ecology is a priority. Indeed, it is necessary to develop research projects within the university to better understand the ecosystems and to analyze the human impact on the environment (Francis 2015, p. 42). Several of the SDGs' targets refer directly to the need for research-related activities as a key issue (United Nations 2015b). For this reason, there is a need to promote the SDGs as a research topic within the Catholic university from the perspective of integral ecology, which implies the promotion of free scientific research, but with certain limits that do not degrade either human life or the ecosystems (Francis 2015, p. 136). Therefore, it is significant to encourage transdisciplinary research approaches required to address the environmental impact and solutions holistically, combining both scientific acknowledgement and transformative effect on the planet and society, especially focused on the poor (Martínez 2019, p. 290).

In order to undertake this project, it is essential to raise awareness of university research activity (REDS 2020, p. 5; SDSN Australia/Pacific 2017, pp. 16–20). In recent years, there has been an important increase in the research activity of universities in sustainability (CRUE 2022, pp. 16–17). In academic centers, such as chairs, institutes, and research groups, scholars from their lines of research could be associated with a specific project to share knowledge and innovation with other colleagues. These projects, resulting in index journal publications, could have a crucial influence on the academic community and, therefore, on the transformation of society with the decision making of human beings (Bastow et al. 2014, p. 2), which inevitably has a decisive impact on the environment.

5.4. Knowledge Transfer and Social Impact

The university community has a considerable impact on society and the environment. It is visible through the promotion of the link between research, innovation, transfer, and training, which makes it a key asset for companies and the public sector (SDSN 2020, p. 5). Furthermore, if the professional pursuit of professors, researchers, administrative staff, alumni, and collaborators is aimed at the SDGs and integral ecology, their actions could have a significant effect not only on society but also on the environment. For this reason, since the university is a catalyst for economic growth and the welfare of society, the horizon of integral ecology and the SDGs provide a challenge for academia (CRUE 2021, p. 2).

Due to the advantage of their strategic position in society, universities can guide, inspire, and contribute to the local, national, and international implementation of the SDGs (SDSN Australia/Pacific 2017, pp. 27–30). The main actors of the university are the students, who, after the training period, will be professionals and will have a direct involvement in society. At the same time, the collaboration of the university with companies and social and ecclesiastical organizations also generates a positive impact, as well as talks, participation in conferences, publication of books, or contributions to the press by professors and researchers. At this point, with an intended sustainable action, the university can aim at the creation of an ecological culture that will benefit society and help to overcome the myths of modernity such as individualism, unlimited progress, competition, consumerism, and the unregulated market, which make the planet less sustainable (Francis 2015, p. 210).

5.5. Extracurricular Activity

Environmental awareness can also be promoted through activities that are not necessarily integrated into the academic curriculum. Once seen as a distraction from formal learning, in recent decades extracurricular activities represent an important vehicle for students to find meaning in their lives through experience (Haensly et al. 1985). It has even been suggested that this type of activities in the university represents a guarantee for the sustainable development of society (Makarov and Pisarenko 2020). The initiative of accompanying and promoting the Catholic university community towards an integral sustainable development is fundamental (Sosa 2019). The programming of socio-environmental awareness activities fits into this extracurricular initiative. It is about complementing the integral formation of the members of the university community by placing them in the social, cultural, spiritual, and environmental reality in order to live the vocation, and explore and commit themselves to ecological conversion (Francis 2015, p. 217).

The transversality offered by environmental education is an optimal tool to contribute to other aspects of the SDGs and integral ecology, such as solidarity, art, sport, spirituality, and integral attention to students. These types of nonformal learning promote awareness of global socio-environmental problems, adopting responsible attitudes towards the environment in daily life as stated in target 4.7 (United Nations 2015b) and embracing a new ecological culture that looks at a reality of everything being interrelated (Francis 2015, pp. 137, 143–46).

5.6. Sustainable Campus

In the university, sustainability should be conceived as an integral approach, not only from the environmental dimension but also from the social and economic one to achieve a proper environmental management (CRUE 2022, p. 7). The university must be in compliance with national and international regulations that rule sustainability.⁶ Particularly, the higher education institution must not only teach, research, and transfer knowledge, but also develop good sustainability policies. It must monitor the environmental aspects derived from university activity and mobility, as well as the consumption of raw materials and the generation of waste and emissions. It must also adopt the necessary measures for the protection of the environment, including green procurement; the construction and renovation of buildings; sustainability and energy efficiency; the use of technologies, resources, and materials that reduce energy consumption; the minimization of environmental impact; spaces that respect the natural environment; the protection of green areas; the promotion of biodiversity and natural ecosystems; the promotion of sustainable mobility; and the adoption of sustainable landscaping practices (CRUE 2022, pp. 20–21). The following is a description of the different strategic aspects for the achievement of a sustainable campus.

5.6.1. Green Procurement

Green purchasing and contracting are relevant measures to curb climate change, seek efficiency in the use of natural resources, promote small and medium sized enterprises, and foster eco-innovation. The promotion of green purchasing is related to SDG 12 on

responsible production and consumption. This SDG proposes to achieve environmental management of chemicals and wastes. It also aims to ensure the efficient use of natural resources. Similarly, SDG 8 with its target 4 calls for progressively improving this task, seeking to decouple the economic growth from environmental degradation (United Nations 2015b). Subsequently, the inclusion of ecological criteria in the purchase of products and contracting of services, known as green procurement, means integrating the environmental component into decision making at all levels in the context of university governance. Green purchasing is not only a powerful tool to reduce the environmental impact of universities but also the overall economic expenditure (Fernández 2022, pp. 124–25).

The incorporation of ethical and sustainable considerations in the different policies, procedures, and purchasing activities is a sign of the values of the university (Canónico-Sarabia 2022, pp. 79–80). The manifestation of these principles could be found in the implementation of a management plan for green procurement and contracting with suppliers and other strategic partners that develop good sustainable practices. Some of the guiding criteria for activating good conduct is to gradually establish the principle of the circular economy and develop green purchasing policy in product supply contracts, prioritizing eco-labeling and local production, so that the manufacturing process has less impact on the environment. The products procured must be free of hazardous substances, be reused or recycled materials, generate less waste, and become more energy efficient (Francis 2015, p. 180). Another good practice is to introduce environmental criteria in the technical and administrative specifications approved for the awarding of tenders for consultancy, assistance, works, installations, and services, which should include environmental and sustainable aspects in their execution (CRUE 2005, p. 2). A change in purchasing style and even a slowdown in the consumption can lead to another mode of progress and development (Francis 2015, pp. 191, 203).

5.6.2. Infrastructure

Sustainable infrastructures are key to reducing climate change. These are facilities and systems designed to provide essential services that comply with principles that lessen the negative impact of human beings on the natural environment. The infrastructure is related to SDGs 9 and 11, for the construction of resilient and sustainable structures that ensure inclusive, safe, and sustainable human settlements. It is also connected to SDG 15 regarding the protection and conservation of terrestrial ecosystems in such a way that campuses can be understood as urban ecosystems, including green areas and natural or semi-natural spaces (United Nations 2015b).

The university should undertake new environmentally sustainable design proposals. Moreover, the construction and rehabilitation of buildings is part of this task, including generating accessible spaces that are respectful of the natural environment. Relevant in this matter is the modernization of existing buildings by increasing resource efficiency and adopting technologies that are environmentally sustainable. A priority is to facilitate the use of construction products that are durable, repairable, recyclable, and easy to remanufacture. Ultimately, it is a matter of using materials that are increasingly compatible with nature, integrating best environmental practices in their daily management (García 2023). The search for beauty in design is not enough, because there is another, more meaningful dimension of beauty: the quality of life of people and the harmony with the environment (Francis 2015, p. 150).

5.6.3. Energy

The welfare society cannot be understood without energy consumption. That is why energy is essential for the growth of society and economic development. Energy is related to SDG 7, which aims to ensure universal access to sustainable, affordable, and secure energy. Among the targets proposed by this SDG is to significantly increase the share of renewable energy and double the global rate of energy efficiency. It also has important

implications for SDG 13 on climate action, since part of greenhouse gas emissions come from the production and consumption of energy (United Nations 2015b).

The university must address the current energy challenges in a way that embeds science, ethics, spirituality, and action. In this sense, the Apostolic Exhortation “*Laudate Deum*” calls for an energy transition to abandon fossil fuels and move towards clean energies (Francis 2023, p. 55). The institutional strategic plan should consider energy efficiency in relation to buildings, research projects on energy and human welfare, and the mobility of the university community (Tatay 2020, pp. 252–53). In this sense, the university must respond to the call for fuel divestment, overcoming the obstacles of resistance from those who are not willing to reinvest away from fossil fuels (Francis 2015, p. 55). Furthermore, by limiting the consumption of non-renewable energy, it limits social injustice and contributes to the ecological debt owed to developing peoples and their ecosystems (Francis 2015, p. 52).

5.6.4. Waste

Since the continuous growth in waste is a serious problem for the environment, waste management is a fundamental method of addressing this issue. This sustainable action is related to SDG 12 on responsible production and consumption, which aims to achieve the sound management of chemicals and all wastes. The way the products are processed has a decisive impact on environmental wellbeing, which is addressed by SDG 3 on health (United Nations 2015b) The problem of waste is intimately linked to the so-called “throwaway culture”, which affects both excluded human beings and things that quickly become waste (Francis 2015, p. 2).

In the university, there is a need for a determined effort to reduce all waste and increase recycling. It is necessary to implement a holistic approach to the management of waste generated, getting increasingly closer to achieving the goals proposed in the SDG 11. In this regard, progress must be made towards the promotion of circular economy measures, which involves reusing materials as often as possible to create additional value, extending the life cycle of the products (García 2016, p. 2). The adoption of a circular production model is a way to reverse the “throwaway culture”, which affects the entire planet and the present and future generations (Francis 2015, p. 22).

5.6.5. Water

A major environmental challenge of our time is to ensure sufficient clean water to sustain life on Earth and guarantee it for future generations. Access to clean water, sanitation, and hygiene represents the most basic human need for health care and well-being. The area of water management is closely related to SDG 6 on ensuring the universal availability of water and its sustainable management. Some of the targets of this SDG propose the improvement of water quality by reducing pollution, as well as increasing the efficient use of water resources worldwide (United Nations 2015b).

The university should conduct environmental education campaigns to raise awareness about saving and non-pollution, considering the binomial of water and sustainable development (UNESCO 2017). Furthermore, the sacramental meaning of water in Christianity, which refers to life, can contribute to reinforce the reality that water is indispensable for human life and for sustaining terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems (Francis 2015, pp. 28, 235). For this reason, it is crucial to undertake good practices on the proper treatment of wastewater, the irrigation of green spaces with treated water, and the calculation of the personal water footprint of each member of the university community (CRUE 2022, pp. 24–25). Otherwise, it will contribute to water scarcity within a few decades, affecting billions of people and generating a major source of conflict (Francis 2015, p. 31).

5.6.6. Mobility

Sustainable mobility has considerable environmental, economic, urban, and health benefits, reducing environmental pollution and noise. The area of sustainable mobility

is related to SDG 11, which aims to provide a universal, safe, affordable, accessible, and sustainable transportation system. Transportation is also linked to SDG 13 on climate action, since a significant portion of greenhouse gas emissions from universities are derived from the travel of the university community. Furthermore, reducing and improving air pollution is connected to SDG 3 on health and wellbeing, whose target 9 aims to minimize the number of deaths and illnesses caused by air contamination (United Nations 2015b).

The university can contribute to decarbonization, taking advantage of the opportunities for connection between the campus and the different strategic points of the city with public transport. In addition, the university could implement electric charging points to encourage the use of electric vehicles, as well as promote car sharing. Another pertinent measure is the reduction in the need for commuting by remote working (Zamora 2021). The European Mobility Week is an opportunity to address sustainable mobility in the university, which involves an awareness campaign aimed at raising public consciousness regarding the use of public transport, bicycles, and pedestrians, and promoting the necessary investment for new infrastructures (European Secretariat 2024). In any case, ecological activity should be adopted on a daily life, through an ecological culture in the university to oppose a misguided anthropocentric vision, which leads a misguided way of life (Francis 2015, p. 122). Conversely, “if we can overcome individualism, we will truly be able to develop a different lifestyle and bring about significant changes in society” (Francis 2015, p. 208).

6. Conclusions

In the face of the climate crisis, the university is a key actor in society. As a place of knowledge, it can make a significant contribution to society by exploring low emission solutions, new efficient commitments on renewable energy, and economic compensations for the countries most affected by the environmental crisis. Moreover, through the different branches of knowledge, the university can seek solutions on energy for the elimination of coal, oil, and gas production, as well as to focus on renewable energies such as wind, solar, hydro, and geothermal. In addition, the higher education institution plays an important role in industry, construction, agriculture, and forestry sectors, as well as in other areas of health, social sciences, and humanities that can contribute their own perspective on the environment.

In relation to the questions raised at the beginning of this study, the SDGs aim to achieve the mission of eliminating poverty, protecting the planet, fostering peace, and ensuring the development of a more equitable and prosperous society. The contribution that the university can make to the implementation of the SDGs is important due to its social impact because of teaching and research. Similarly, the SDGs also provide content that benefits an academic world that cannot do its work disconnected from social and environmental needs. In the Catholic university context, the 2015 global agreement could be complemented by the Catholic proposal of the Encyclical “*Laudato si’*”, in which Pope Francis reflects on the implications of human beings and their environmental impact from a social, anthropological, and spiritual approach. The Pontiff called for integral ecological conversion to preserve the common home and the most vulnerable people. The institution of higher education could be a valuable catalyst if this task is driven by its different activities to foster this integral transformation.

This call to ecological conversion could be integrated into the mission and strategic governance of the Catholic university, with a defined plan of action in which transversal sustainability is addressed in the areas of governance, teaching, research, knowledge transfer and social impact, extracurricular activities, green purchasing, infrastructure, energy, waste, water, and mobility. After the commitment acquired by the university community, there remains a laborious work of self-diagnosis, compliance, and evaluation and accountability with a communication strategy. But this first step in planning a sustainable strategy is essential to lay the foundations for helping to train and raise awareness among students, alumni, and society to respond freely and proactively to the protection of the planet, the defense of justice for the most excluded, the promotion of the biosphere in the economic

system, the adoption of sustainable lifestyles, and education in the spirit of this integral ecological culture, which are fundamental challenges facing our common home today.

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Notes

- ¹ There is a critical approach to the formulation of Karel Vašák, which shows that the growing emphasis on collective and international rights are difficult to classify using his approach (Domaradzki et al. 2019).
- ² Significant examples of these summits are the World Summit for Children in New York (UNICEF 1990), the Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro (United Nations 1992), and Summit for Social Development in Copenhagen (United Nations 1995).
- ³ The eight objectives that results from the Declaration are as follows: Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger; achieve universal primary education; promote gender equality and empower women; reduce child mortality; improve maternal health; combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases; ensure environmental sustainability; and Global partnership for development (United Nations 2000).
- ⁴ The seventeen goals are as follows: End poverty in all its forms everywhere; end hunger, achieve food security, improved nutrition, and promote sustainable agriculture; ensure healthy lives, and promote well-being for all at all ages; ensure inclusive, equitable quality education, and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all Goal; achieve gender equality, and empower all women and girls; ensure availability, and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all; ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all; promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent work for all; build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization, and foster innovation; reduce inequality within and among countries; make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable; ensure sustainable consumption, and production patterns; take urgent action to combat climate change, and its impacts; conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas, and marine resources for sustainable development; protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss; promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions at all levels; strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development (United Nations 2015b).
- ⁵ COP28 finally agreed on a loss and damage fund to financially support the most fragile nations affected by the consequences of climate change and made call on “transition away” from fossil fuels. It is a historic development, marking the first time that a measure on an energy transition is adopted at a climate summit (United Nations 2023).
- ⁶ Universities find in the European context a new framework of competences on climate change and sustainable development (European Council 2019). In this same line, progress is being made in the Spanish scenario with the promotion of the Law on Climate Change and Energy Transition (Ley 2021, de 20 de mayo, de cambio climático y transición energética 2021).

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