



Journal of Frontiers in Multidisciplinary Research

Catholic Ecological Theology and Public Health: Reimagining the Relationship between Creation and Healthcare in the United States

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Article Info

E-ISSN: 3050-9726

P-ISSN: 3050-9718

Volume: 06

Issue: 02

July – December 2025

Received: 11-09-2025

Accepted: 13-10-2025

Published: 15-11-2025

Page No: 589-597

Abstract

Among the major factors that affect public health in the United States are systemic inequities, climate change, and poor physical environment. To address these factors, this article aims at creating a nexus between care for creation and care for humanity. Relying predominantly on the magisterium, interdisciplinary literatures in environmental health and bioethics, it draws inference on how ecological frameworks can provide critical resources for reimagining healthcare systems in the United States. It goes beyond fragmented biomedical model to propose Catholic ecological theology, which is anchored on integral ecology and human dignity. By reimagining healthcare through the lens of Catholic ecological theology, we can achieve better results in healthcare by creating a system that incorporates environment outcomes to the clinical outcomes when tackling health related issues. Drawing from the Catholic social teachings and from the practical experience of Catholic health care institutions, this article demonstrates how ecological theology can inspire sustainable, equitable, and holistic approaches in healthcare.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.54660/.JFMR.2025.6.2.589-597>

Keywords: Catholic ecological theology, public health ethics, human dignity, healthcare justice, integral ecology, sustainability, common good

1. Introduction

Around the world, healthcare system is usually one of the most inequitable institutions, and the United States is not an exception. She has undeniably made so much advancement in healthcare over the years but still needs to put more effort in reducing disparities at the national level (Rockville, 2017). The United States allocates more resources to healthcare compared to other developed countries, yet some of her key health outcomes are still below those of other high-income nations, with significant gaps in the universal health coverage (Goldstein, 2024). This is partly because the public health is affected negatively by disparities which are mainly related to ethnicity, disability status, gender, migration status, socioeconomic background, and geographic location (Lisa A. Cooper *et al.*, 2018). These health disparities are markers of social injustice and are unjust, uncalled for, and avoidable (Braveman *et al.*, 2011). On the other hand, there are also challenges triggered by ecological crises—climate change, pollution, and biodiversity loss, which are also major health determinants. According to World Health Organization (WHO), an estimated 25% of deaths and disease could be prevented by maintaining safe environments, since environmental factors have been accounted to be responsible for almost one third of the disease burden in some region (WHO, 2023). These environmental factors have continued to pose great challenge to healthcare professionals, policymakers, and scholars over the years as they grapple for potent grounds to lay the foundation of an effective public health. Catholic ecological theology therefore offers a renewed hope and resources for reimagining the healthcare. The Laudato Si' of Pope Francis has advanced the vision of “integral ecology” as a way of reconciling humanity with the planet by stressing the inseparability of care for creation and care for humanity. This article focuses on the intersection between ecological theology and public health, by exploring how Catholic ecological thought can reshape the healthcare landscape in the United States.

It will achieve this by exploring the theological underpinning of Catholic ecology, with special emphasis on its biblical, tradition, and magisterial roots. It will examine the contemporary public health issues in the United States, with emphasis on the ecological determinants of health and systemic injustices. It will endeavor to reimagine healthcare through the framework of Catholic ecological theology, by identifying key ethical and structural implications. With some case studies on a couple of Catholic health care facilities in the United States, it will demonstrate the practical relevance of the vision of Catholic ecological theology in the healthcare sector. Lastly, it will attempt at exploring the theological implication of Catholic ecology for the healthcare in the United States while proposing the way forward for the policymakers.

2. Theoretical Framework: Catholic Ecological Theology

Catholic Ecological Theology is centered on the idea that creation is a divine gift, and that human being is integrally related to the natural world (Francis, 2015). As a gift, human being ought to be responsible towards each other and towards the rest of creation, knowing that all created things are precious to God and imbued with intrinsic value and destined for flourishing alongside humanity (Benedict XVI, 2009). Human being should be able to live harmoniously with the rest of God's creation which includes the physical environment. Believers' commitment to a healthy environment for all arises directly from their faith in God as the Creator of all life (John Paul II, 1990). Human being is responsible for the complex system of all the living and non-living surroundings on Earth, which includes the atmosphere, water, land, living organisms, and their intricate interactions. Everything God created is good (Genesis 1:31). As rational creatures, our ability to participate in the eternal law, gives us the responsibility to discern and promote the good, with the rational capacity to choose to be responsible stewards of our environment, instead of choosing to exploit and destroy it (Aquinas, 1981, ST I-II, q. 91). When "we pull down our common home, we are despoiling the ground made sacred by God's presence, when we pollute the planet's streams, we are defiling the waters sanctified by the brooding of the Spirit of God at the dawn of creation, and when we impoverish biodiversity, we are going against God's own creative project" (Kureethadam, 2014: 77). Ecological Theology brings back our attention to the consequences of our poor conscious choices, beliefs and values on our environment with their severe negative impact on our health. Hence, an unhealthy environment equals a sick nature and a sick humanity by extension. Catholic Ecological Theology therefore invites us to embrace an integral ecology which prioritize the whole of God's creative work in a such way that helps both human being and the rest of God's creations to live in harmony.

2.1. Integral Ecology

Integral Ecology encompass in an integrative way the intricate relationship between people and their environment (Potter and Magill, 2021). It resists the fragmentation of ecological, social, and bodily concerns to capture the interconnectedness between humans and the natural world (Deans-Drummond *et al.*, 2019). When we talk about the environment, we are referring to the bond that exist between the society in which we live and the nature that harbors it. Nature is not merely a setting in which we live, or an entity

separate from us, rather we are integral part of nature, exist within it and in continual contact with it. We confront not two distinct crises, but a single, multifaceted crisis that is simultaneously social and environmental (Francis, 2015: 139). Our state of health is linked to the ecological and social determinants, and therefore we are faced with the need to prioritize the common good, the preservation of human dignity, and solidarity which are values that directly inform healthcare ethics. An integral ecology in line with Pope Francis demands, "an integrated approach to combating poverty, restoring dignity to the excluded, and at the same time protecting nature" (Francis, 2015: 139). It is geared towards a holistic approach to ecology in such a way that those dying of hunger, the pristine ecosystems, and indeed nature in general will be protected. Integral ecology therefore invites us to respect human dignity, promote common good, and to be faithful stewards of our environment.

2.2. Human Dignity and the Common Good

Ecological theology is grounded on the principle of both common good and human dignity. Second Vatican Council understands common good as, "the sum of those conditions of social life which allow social groups and their individual members relatively thorough and ready access to their own fulfilment" (Pope Paul VI, 1965: 26). The social nature of common good makes it an integral part of ecology and indeed a part of human environment that is in crisis. Common good connotes inclusivity; that is a situation where everyone has equal dignity. It is intimately bound up with human nature, and it always considers the human person (John XXIII, 1963: 55). It does not discriminate, rather it strives for the common good of all persons and neither the greatest good for the greatest number, nor the privileging of any group of people (Dees, 2017). In the light of the Catholic social teaching, common good is made up of three important elements: firstly, 'respect for the person', which implies the public authorities respecting the fundamental and inalienable rights of each person. Secondly, 'caring for the social well-being and development of the group'. And thirdly, 'peace', which implies that the public authorities are to ensure the security of the society and its members through means that are morally acceptable (United States Catholic Conference, 2000: 1907-1909). A true society is the one that gives her members the opportunity to flourish and to participate in all social spheres of life including the healthcare. Every human being in the community has dignity and deserves to live a healthy life. The Church therefore takes it as an evangelical duty to stand in solidarity with the poor, to discern the justice of their claims, without neglecting the good of others within the framework of the common good (John-Paul II, 1987: 39). It is common for some vulnerable members of the community to be ignored, common good therefore implies the improvement of the health and well-being of everyone, not just individuals or a faction in the community. It invites us to respect human dignity by nipping in the bud every form of systemic inequalities as a cankerworm affecting healthcare availability and dignity of every human being.

2.3. Theological Anthropology

Catholic ecological theology reassessed the relationship between God, human being and other creations, by assigning human being the role of a steward instead of that of a dictator who dominates other creatures. Human being should understand the concept of "dominion" over the earth (Gen

1:28), not from the point of view of ownership, but from that of responsible stewards over the earth (Gen 2:15). The earth was created to favor every member of the community, without anyone assuming the position of the creation's absolute master (Peters, 1984). The dominion spoken of by God in the Book of Genesis is best understood as a call to stewardship of the natural world (Regenstein, 1991). Pope Francis faulted the logic of literal domination of the earth by man, arguing that it constitutes a mistaken interpretation of the Bible in the light of the Church's authentic teaching. He acknowledged that many Christians have fallen into the error of making such incorrect interpretation of the Scriptures and invites everyone to firmly reject the belief that by being created in the image of God and given dominion over the earth warrant unrestrained domination over the rest of God's creations (Francis, 2015: 67). We need to re-examine our stand as human beings with regards to our relationship with other creatures. The fact that we are the only creature created in God's own image, does not cancel the reality that other creatures have their own purpose. Catholic ecological theology restores human being to his place within a web of relationships that include God, other people, and the natural world. Human being gifted with love and intelligence and drawn by the fullness revealed in Christ, is called to guide all of God's creations back to God who created them (Francis, 2015: 83). The divine mandate of human being at creation is therefore, to take care of all creatures which also includes the environment, by protecting and helping to sustain them. Realizing that we are only sharing the planet with other creations enables us to submit ourselves to constant review in order to put our ego in check as we render services to humanity as stewards of God's creation.

3. The Image of Public Health in The United States

Public health may be defined as the collective effort of society to create and sustain conditions that allow everyone to be healthy (DeSalvo *et al.*, 2017). In a broad sense, "it is the science and the art of preventing disease, prolonging life, and promoting physical health and efficiency through organized community efforts for the sanitation of the environment, the control of community infections, the education of the individual in principles of personal hygiene, the organization of medical and nursing service for the early diagnosis and preventive treatment of disease, and the development of the social machinery which will ensure to every individual in the community a standard of living adequate for the maintenance of health; organizing these benefits in such fashion as to enable every citizen to realize his birthright of health and longevity" (Kemper, 2015). Over the past century, the United States has achieved substantial gains in population health and life expectancy as a result of sustained public health efforts and the availability of high-quality clinical care (DeSalvo *et al.*, 2017). She has improved in her ability to use relevant data to improve public health surveillance, response, and intervention. She has advanced in the area of data modernization and analytics, and telemedicine. Also, her digital health tools are revolutionizing the way in which public health departments monitor, prepare, and respond to health threats and also promote population health (Goldstein, 2024). However, in spite of all these progress, public health in the United States still contend with multilayered non-medical challenges shaped by evolving environmental, systemic, socioeconomic, and economic health and stability (Michaud *et al.*, 2025).

These challenges reveal the need for a framework that integrates environmental, social, spiritual, and clinical dimensions of health.

3.1. Environmental Determinants of Health

Environmental related health issues are among the most pressing public health issues in the United States. Environmental health revolves around the relationship between people and their environment (American Public Health Association, 2025). From the time of Hippocrates' essay "Air, Water and Places," (c. 400 B.C), people have come to recognize the nexus between human health and the environment (Institute of Medicine (US) Committee on Assuring the Health of the Public in the 21st Century, 2002). Our environment determines the quality of our health. However, across the United States, environmental conditions are unevenly and interdependently distributed (Samoli *et al.*, 2019). Certain populations are "more vulnerable to adverse environmental conditions and the resulting health disparities, including communities of color, low-income groups, individuals experiencing homelessness, older adults, pregnant women, and children" (Schneider *et al.*, 2019). Indigenous people, black and other people of color as well as low-wealth communities, are disproportionately affected by environmental health hazards, disinvestment, and structural racism, all of which adversely impact their health and well-being (American Public Health Association, 2025). The poor population in United States are more likely to reside in an environment exposed to harmful agents which can affect their health directly, or indirectly by affecting their health behaviors. Factors like poor water quality and air pollution can directly compromise human health (Ou *et al.*, 2019). This is because water can contain harmful pathogens, which cause waterborne illnesses, or chemicals, which lead to other health problems (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2024). Hence, wealthy people who likely can afford quality environment with green space and walkable neighborhoods have been attributed to have indirectly improved health (Kowaleski-Jones *et al.*, 2018). Hence, disparity in the environment and health consequences raises concern for environmental justice and fair treatment to all.

3.2. Healthcare Inequities

Healthcare inequality is a consequence of avoidable difference in health outcomes and quality of care between groups. Access to care in the United States is stratified by income, race, and geography, with millions lacking adequate insurance. The disparities in accessing full health potential among population groups are reflected in shorter life span and high prevalence of heart diseases, stroke, cancer, diabetes, substance use, trauma, violence, child death, and low birth weight among populations that are disadvantaged socially compared with their counterparts who are socially advantaged (Lisa A Cooper *et al.*, 2018). Chronic diseases remain prevalent and unevenly distributed, creating substantial health disparities. Many of these conditions are common, expensive, and preventable (National Institutes of Health, 2025). The COVID-19 pandemic reveals how ecological disruptions and systemic inequalities can intensify health crises. A report indicated that during the Omicron surge, Black New Yorkers experienced COVID-19 hospitalizations at more than double the rate of their white counterparts (Morse and Joseph, 2022). These inequities are amplified by ecological factors, since communities most

exposed to pollution and climate risks are usually those with lesser access to healthcare, and usually the marginalized groups.

3.3. Systemic Fragmentation

Systemic fragmentation creates a gap where the public health initiatives often operate separately from healthcare systems, and environmental policies remain disconnected from health policy. It is a key factor when it comes to the public health in the United States, no thanks to the domineering biomedical model of healthcare which often isolates treatment from prevention and ignores other vital determinants of health, especially the environmental determinants. The healthcare system has continued to struggle with structural fragmentation and operational inefficiencies, as the coexistence of multiple payers, facilities, providers, and regulatory frameworks perpetuates gaps in care coordination and communication (Goldstein, 2024). This has remained a hinderance on the way of increasingly frantic efforts to nurture improvements in the healthcare (Stangt, 2009). It does not only limit healthcare effectiveness, but it also increases costs and overutilization of certain services that don't necessarily improve outcomes (Goldstein, 2024). It has degenerated into "a highly corporatized system controlled by a decreasing number of increasingly powerful conglomerates where profit is often the main metric of performance and success" (Else, 2025). This dysfunctional system often creates health burden for patients trapped in its illusory approach to health. It undermines healthcare outcomes by targeting only an aspect of human sickness, while leaving out other vital aspects. There is therefore a need to embrace holistic approaches to health instead of engaging in a dysfunctional compartmentalization that yields poor health outcomes.

4. Reimagining Healthcare Through Catholic Ecology

The Catholic ecological theology recognizes that ecological imbalance fuels public health emergencies and proposes integral ecology as a major solution. With the renewed health awareness in the contemporary healthcare, global public health is undergoing transformations as many other dimensions of an increasingly globalized society. This change is an invitation to explore further the role of human environment in the healthcare system in our age besieged by the rise of climate change (Watts *et al.*, 2018). We are also invited to look towards the role of Catholic Ecological theology in public health, considering the verse experience and impact of the Catholic Church in the healthcare services globally. In the United States alone, the Catholic Health Association represent an extensive network of 1,600 long-term care, over 600 hospitals and ancillary health facilities operating in all 50 states of the country, making it the largest consortium of non-profit healthcare providers nationwide. It also provides 14.5% of acute hospitals in the country (Moran, 2023). This wealth of experiences places the Catholic Church at a vintage position to use her understanding of ecology to paint a broader picture of public health that gives room for both preventive care and holistic healing. Catholic ecology is of the vision that the health of ecosystems and the health of human communities are inseparable, and advocates for an authentic care for our own lives as well as our genuine relationships with nature (Francis, 2015: 70). Ecology therefore is inseparable from the larger social, cultural, economic, ethical, and religious contexts in which it unfolds,

as well as from its connection with soft and hard sciences (Lane, 2020). This implies that for positive impacts to be achieved in public health, there is need to integrate ecological, social, and biomedical concerns in the public health with the aim of improving health outcomes.

4.1. Integral Ecology and Preventive Care

The logic of integral ecology mirrors the value of preventive care in health as both moral and practical imperative (Else, 2025). It is a logic that holds that if we are careful to do the right things always and at the right time, we can save ourselves from future damages. In other words, by preserving our environment, we are also protecting ourselves from future harm. There is a symbiotic relationship that ought to exist between human being and the environment. When this relationship becomes parasitic, it raises a plethora of ethical questions on the way we treat our environment (Potter and Magill, 2021). Nature cannot be conceived as something external to us, or as a passive environment in which we dwell; rather, we belong to it, sharing a profound and ongoing relationship of mutual dependence and interaction (Francis, 2015: 139). When people are exposed to environmental hazards such as polluted air or lead-contaminated drinking water, they are at a higher risk of developing serious health conditions like asthma, cardiovascular disease, dementia, and cancer (American Public Health Association, 2025). This implies that if we can make sure that everyone has access to good drinking water, we are likely to prevent a whole lot of sickness that take the lives of citizens on yearly basis. Addressing issues of water safety, air quality, and climate resilience is of advantage to healthcare, and should be taken seriously if we are really focused on providing good healthcare for the citizens. By adopting a preventive approach both to the environment and in our healthcare system, we are not only aligning with public health goals but also adding a theological rationale rooted in ecological stewardship and justice.

4.2. Human Dignity and Health Equity

The Catholic ecology highlights that the earth is fundamentally a mutual heritage, whose benefits are intended for all. This idea from a broader perspective incorporates a social perspective that acknowledges and upholds the fundamental rights of the poor and the marginalized (Francis, 2015: 93). Common good will involve 'respect for the person', which implies the public authorities respecting the fundamental and inalienable rights of each person (John-Paul II, 1987). There is a need to respect the dignity of every human person. This respect extends to the health sector, where every person should have the right to good health as part of the common good. Health inequalities are principally influenced by social determinants of health, encompassing the socioeconomic and environmental conditions that affect individuals throughout the course of life; from birth to old age (Chunara *et al.*, 2024). Equity in the healthcare therefore demands that every person is given the opportunity to receive the best access to a healthy life, without anyone being on a disadvantaged position as a result of social position or other socially determined circumstances (Weinstein *et al.*, 2017; Patton-López, 2022). Achieving health equity requires a collective societal commitment to confronting the challenges embedded within the social determinants of health, including poverty, residential segregation, racism and discrimination, inadequate education, little or no employment

opportunity, unequal access to quality healthcare, substandard housing, lack of public safety, and absence of community resources that enable individuals to sustain and optimize their health (Braveman, 2014). When Catholic ecological theology speaks of environmental justice, it is advocating for the dignity of the marginalized in the society, safety of the environment and by extension the inequities in the healthcare sector.

4.3. Sustainability in Healthcare Infrastructure

Some of the negative activities of human being towards his environment has continued to dramatically alter the chemical makeup of the global atmosphere, with far-reaching climatic effects (Mastrandrea and Scheider, 2010). We have the atmospheric pollution which are usually occasioned by human exposure to key air pollutants such as nitrogen dioxide, ozone, and particulate matter, together with its components like organic carbon and volatile organic compounds, which degrade both environment and human health (Akachi Y. *et al.*, 2009). These atmospheric pollutants produce a wide range of health hazards that are potentially harmful to the poor who are mostly victims and leads to millions of untimely deaths (Francis, 2015). The healthcare institutions in the United States are among the large-scale consumers of energy and producers of waste, making the running of their facility likely to have negative consequences on the environment, and by extension on human beings who inhabit the environment. The ecological theology reminds healthcare institutions to integrate sustainability into their infrastructure, from reducing carbon footprints to adopting green building practices. The Catholic health care institutions are also charged as significant actors in the United States healthcare landscape to take the lead in protecting the environment and to become models of ethical leadership in healthcare. It is therefore an imperative that the healthcare which prioritizes the preservation of life should also integrate ecological stewardship as the hallmark of their operation.

4.4. Solidarity and Community-Based Care

Healthcare should not be seen from the perspective of a commodity, but rather as a communal responsibility. This means that healthcare should be relational and community-centered, and not to be reduced to individual treatment. This idea goes in line with ecological theology whose emphasizes is on solidarity, and on social ecology which is a fruit of action that originates from the basic social group, down to the family, stretching to the local, national, and international communities (Francis, 2015: 142). A healthy social life can bring light and vitality to environments otherwise perceived as undesirable; this is possible through the presence of close and warm relationships, the building up of communities, and when each person feels within them to be part of a network of solidarity and belonging (Francis, 2015: 148). Such setting creates the sense of dignity to the people involved. The community health initiatives, parish-based health ministries, and collaborations with environmental organizations embody the principle of social ecology. Solidarity on the other hand is helpful in providing the conceptual foundation for investing greater effort in capacity building within low-resource contexts. Such endeavors call for an ongoing conversion within the Church itself, implying that deeper partnerships could mutually enrich both the Church and public health (Rozier, 2020). This partnership could grow big to include the collective resources of Catholic universities,

healthcare ministries, parish communities, and social service institutions. Public health therefore could leverage on the ecological principle of solidarity to be able to offer better care to every member of the human community under their care.

5. Case Studies: Catholic Health Care In The United States

Over 800 million people annually receive healthcare at a Catholic hospital in the United States (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2014). As a way of raising ecological awareness in line with the Catholic social teaching on ecology the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops inaugurated the Catholic Climate Covenant 2006. Since then, this movement has attracted more than 20 national partners prominent among them is the Catholic Health Association whose goal is to advocate for climate-sensitive health policies. Catholic health care providers discern in the unfolding climate crisis a profound threat to human health, one that will intensify with continued planetary warming. With respect to the Church's moral and ecological vision, the Catholic healthcare institutions are thus called to mitigate the environmental burden of their healing work as an expression of stewardship and solidarity with creation (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2025). In compliance to this appeal, Catholic health care institutions are taking the lead by integrating environmental stewardship as part of their mission and incorporating ecological justice into their ethics.

5.1. CommonSpirit Health Operational Emissions Cut

CommonSpirit Health believes that there is a bond between the wellbeing of the planet and that of the people. They also acknowledge that the health sector is among the biggest contributors to ecological crisis, and as one of the largest health systems in the United States, they promised to lead by example through their commitment to minimizing the climate footprint of healthcare. In addition, they are strengthening their capacity to withstand the impacts of extreme weather and shifting disease patterns, engaging in educational initiatives for staff and the wider community, and promoting policies that protect public health from climate-related risks. Their pledges include halving operational emissions by 2030 and attaining net-negative carbon emissions by 2040 (CommonSpirit Health, 2023). They are set to achieve this goal, "by leveraging new energy efficient technologies; engaging with supply chain companies to support them in reducing their emissions; evaluating investment portfolios for climate impacts; and using credible offsets only where emissions cannot be reduced through other measures, such as energy efficiency and renewable energy procurement" (CommonSpirit Health, 2022). They have made progress in this goal through the development of climate action plan (CAP). And as of this year 2025, they were able to engage top 30 healthcare vendors to begin acting on climate, and with a firm resolve to follow other yearly goal till they achieve net-zero greenhouse gas emissions throughout their building portfolio by 2040.

5.2. Ascension's Advocate for Compassionate and Just Society

Ascension Hospital is also committed to address the impact of climate change on the health and wellbeing of the communities they operate. They are also committed to reduce their carbon footprint and minimize waste, with the intention of achieving a net zero carbon by 2040 (Ascension, 2024).

They connected their mission to their passion to advocate in words and action for a compassionate and just society inspired by Catholic social teaching. They are resolved to explore the visible relationship between the social determinants of health and sustainability, by upholding the common good and dignity of all people as they strive toward a fair access to resources to support community health and the living conditions of the individuals they are serving. Their major focus is on the patient, with special attention on those who are poor and vulnerable. They are achieving these ecological goals by deploying all available tools and as well as resources to track when, and where, climate-related weather events may affect the communities in which they serve (Asension, 2024). Their efforts are yielding positive results in the lives of different communities that they are currently serving in the United States.

5.3. Bon Secours Mercy Health's Environmental Stewardship

Bon Secours Mercy Health is focused on creating a sustainable culture by embracing partnerships and environmental stewardship, by working in agreement with others to secure the environment and improve the health of communities both at present and for generations to come. Their ministry's values and mission align with moral and Catholic social teaching, which guides them in their resolve to focus on what is right for our world and for the wellbeing of others. Among the progress they have made in their ecological path to health is achieving organization-wide recycling outcomes aligned with the median performance benchmark established by Practice Greenhealth. They have also been able to eliminate, "the use of desflurane as an anesthetic gas to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, translating to the avoidance of approximately 1,671 metric tons of carbon dioxide being released into the atmosphere" (Bon Secours Mercy Health, 2022). Their commitment to environmental stewardship should be a good example for other health institutions to emulate.

However, there are possibly other Catholic and non-Catholic health care institutions that are making impressive efforts in the path of ecological stewardship. Our emphasis in on those inspired by Catholic ecological theology are committed to the mission of protecting their environment and keeping safe the communities they serve, while demonstrating how theological commitments can shape institutional practices with measurable public health benefits.

6. Theological Implication of Catholic Ecology for United States Public Health Policy

Public Health in the United States stands to gain a lot through her interaction with Catholic ecology, beginning with a newer understanding of human being in her relationship with God and the rest of creations. Catholic ecological theology in the framework of the common good serves as a model in the public health to revolutionize the biomedical models that reduce health to individual physiological functioning, instead of envisioning health as relational, communal, and ecological. The healthcare goal should be to serve everyone without favoring a section of people and to respect the dignity of every human person. Healthcare should acknowledge the nature of human being not as an isolated being, but as a being in participation in the wholeness of creation. This understanding should be able to shape public health policy to

not only focus on human being as the central point of care, but to also care for the environment as a way of promoting the holistic healing of the human person.

6.1. Integrating Catholic Ecological Theology into Public Health Education

Catholic ecological theology has a lot of benefits to offer to public health. Among such benefits is by helping to nurture a sense of vocation among public health workers who are usually on profession-transit as opposed to other clinical professions where workers are more likely to remain in the same field for a long time. Catholic Church has always dominated the healing profession longer than the relatively new field of public health and is at a better position to guide people who chose a career in public health to cultivate a vocation towards their profession. Catholic theology therefore has a special role to play in the field of public health by offering public health professionals the language and concept needed to take up their deep and unique calling (Stackhouse, 2007). Creighton University, which is a Catholic University has already begun to take the lead through the Sustainable Creighton Initiative (SCI), which "seeks to meet the seven goals of the Vatican's *Laudato Si'* Action Platform: response to the cry of the earth, response to the cry of the poor, ecological economics, adoption of sustainable lifestyles, ecological education, ecological spirituality, and community resilience and empowerment" (Creighton University, 2022). Georgetown University on their own part has designed similar program that focuses on policy, humanities, and science with the aim of nurturing constructive and critical perspectives on evolving environmental concerns (Georgetown University, 2023). They are testaments of how Catholic ecological theology can be integrated into public health, with a goal of achieving positive changes in its thought pattern and behavior. Catholic ecological theology rejects the modern utilitarian mindset that fuels individualism, competition, consumerism, unlimited progress, and the unregulated market, therefore it will enrich public health with a type of education that will root out every form of selfishness which could be an obstacle to common good (Francis, 2015: 204). Catholic ecological theology will lead a human formation that will model future medical practitioners to approach healthcare as a vocation that embraces both compassion and care for human being as well as for the environment.

6.2. Overcoming Technocratic Paradigm

Catholic ecological theology stands against the tendency to reduce health to technical efficiency and market value. This mindset has remained an enabler to human carelessness in the healthcare. Pope Francis warns, "never has humanity had such power over itself, yet nothing ensures that it will be used wisely" (Francis, 2015: 104). He further argues that "we stand naked and exposed in the face of our ever-increasing power, lacking the wherewithal to control it. We have certain superficial mechanisms, but we cannot claim to have a sound ethics, a culture and spirituality genuinely capable of setting limits and teaching clear-minded self-restraint" (Francis, 2015: 105). Technology is a human invention and subject to be abused, which makes it more difficult to strike a balance between technological development and human responsibility, conscience, and values. We are constantly confronted by a "dominant technocratic paradigm," that is a specific set of cultural values and meanings that alters our

relationships with each other as fellow humans and the relationship with the entirety of God's creation by making us to conceive the world in terms of enormous mechanism that can be manipulated at will by human beings (Francis, 2015: 101). The technocratic paradigm has the tendency to defy boundaries of its limits, abuse freedom, and threaten the whole of existence, including the existence of human being who created it. It exalts "the concept of a subject who, using logical and rational procedures, progressively approaches and gains control over an external object" (Francis, 2015: 106). It is an attitude of individualistic possession and self-exaltation that gives human being a sense of power without responsibility (Anelli, 2016: 4). It is an ego driven logic that blurs our reasoning and decisions, while impelling us to commit injustice against our environment in the bid to satisfy our quest for human possession and dominance. It places human being at a focal point where everything that does not serve to satisfy his immediate interests is stripped of its value. Catholic ecological theology will bring to public health the idea that human being is not only physical and biological being, but also spiritual, and all the natures of human being are connected to each other and almost inseparable without dire consequences. When our inner disorder spills over into outer disorder in a bid to satisfy our disordered desires, we do that at the expense of harming our environment and, even harming ourselves (Bellocq, 2022: 2). The health to human being who is composite of different natures cannot be reduced to mere technical efficiency and market value, Catholic ecological theology therefore propagates the moral and relational dimensions of healthcare, that recognizes the inseparability of the healing of the earth with that of the body. It also proposes a situation where technology only helps to solve human needs in the healthcare, without making human being to be at its mercy.

6.3. Ecological Conversion and Institutional Reform

Ecological Conversion is a response to the abuse of God's creation by human being who is supposed to be a steward of creation but chose to dominate the earth; an action which is considered as a revolt against God who is the source and mystery of everything created (Quinn, 1994). Conversion therefore demands a change of heart – a true *metanoia* – and a humble resolve not to repeat the same ill-action (Kureethadam, 2014). It entails a change in our beliefs, that is, a change in those ideas on which we build our reasoning, make our decisions, or evaluate the consequences of an action (Bellocq, 2022). It is expected to begin on a personal level by acknowledging our selfishness, errors, failures and all our trespasses, with a firm resolve never to go back to those sins. It is an invitation for us to examine our lives in retrospect and acknowledge the immensity of damages we have inflicted on God's creation as a result of our poor choices and our inability to act in defense of God's creation (Australian Catholic Bishop's Conference, 2002). Human being in his selfishness has not only abused other creatures created by God but has also abused his fellow human being by promoting inequality. Hence, the inequality of health outcomes due to environmental influence calls for environmental justice, and rightful treatment of people despite their race, national origin, color, or income (Peluso *et al.*, 2024). Beyond fixing the social determinants of health, we need to also advocate for healthcare policies that reduce disparities and ensure equitable access, especially for the marginalized in the society. We also need an honest

implementation and administration of environmental laws, policies and regulations in a way that impact people positively. Ecological conversion in the context of healthcare will therefore imply a transformation of values within healthcare institutions. There is a need to revolutionize how things are done in the health sector in the United States, beginning with integrating ecological ethics into medical education and public health outreach. There is also a need for a heightened sense of ecological stewardship which should become a form of moral discipleship, where healthcare is expected to champion the awareness of the interconnection between creation and human flourishing. This awareness should promote a genuine collaboration between theologians, bioethicists, and policymakers in advancing holistic health by promoting policies that prioritize prevention over treatment.

7. Conclusion

The Catholic ecological theology has indeed demonstrated its ability to reimage healthcare by aligning creation and humanity as a compelling framework for addressing public health challenges in the United States. It has opened a new horizon by incorporating the ecological, social, and theological concerns as integral to health, while also challenging the limitations of fragmented biomedical models of health. Catholic ecological theology has offered to public health a system that is holistic, equitable, and sustainable. It has highlighted the value of preventive care and how the environment can contribute to the health of people that exist within it. By introducing the integral ecology into public health, catholic ecological theology has succeeded in unifying creation and humanity, while also advocating for policymakers, healthcare leaders, and theologians to work collaboratively in shaping a healthcare system that heals both creation and the human body. It proposed that in the name of ecological justice, public health policy can address environmental determinants of health, and communities can reframe healthcare as a common good. Catholic ecological theology has proposed how the issue of health disparities which are markers of social injustice can be addressed by following the principles of human dignity, solidarity, and the common good as grounds for effective healthcare. It also proposed that healthcare institutions can model ecological stewardship by choosing to be responsible towards their environment, instead of being agents of ecological crisis. It saw the need for Catholic institutions to lead a movement that would revolutionize the modern image of public health to centered around creation as a gratuitous gift from God which deserves to be handled with care. Catholic health care institutions with the inspiration from the *Laudato Si'* and the Church's social teaching, are already taking the lead, and inviting others to embody the vision of targeting holistic healing in the healthcare. Although public health efforts in the United States fall primarily under the jurisdiction of the state, and most modern governments tend to avoid institutional alignment with religious organization, yet the fact remains that the government should be humble enough to be open to the guidance of a religious body who has existed for over 2000 years and has verified records of positive impacts in healthcare. We cannot agree less that the future of public health obviously depends on its ability to embrace ecological conversion and ecological justice rooted in a renewed sense of humanity's vocation to care for creation and for one another.

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