



ENCYCLICAL-*Laudato Si'* WHAT DO THE LAITY KNOW ABOUT BIODIVERSITY CONSERVATION AND THE CARE OF THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT IN JOS, NIGERIA?

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ABSTRACT

An assessment of the level of awareness of Catholic laity on the Catholic Social Teaching (CST) based on the Laudato si (Francis 2015), and their perceptions on the care for nature and the environment, was conducted to test their understanding of the biblical instruction in Genesis 1:28 (KJV) to 'have dominion' over nature. The aim was to determine whether or not the laity knew about the pope's declaration and how practical it was among them. Stratified Random and Purposive Sampling methods were employed in data collection, analyzed using descriptive statistics. Overall, 82(68.33%) had heard a sermon on nature/environment, while 33 (27.5%) had not. Additionally, perception of 'dominion' was predominantly authoritarian. Furthermore, 37(30.8%) knew the existence of the Laudato si, while 60 (50%) were unaware. In conclusion, there is need for more exposure to the Laudato si and more frequent teachings on nature and conservation in homilies.

Keywords: Religion, Conservation, Catholic, Biodiversity, Nature, Knowledge, Perception. Laudato si

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INTRODUCTION

Religion and conservation, is there a link? More people are beginning to see the importance of the two working together to attain success, in the bid to protect and conserve what remains of the earth's biodiversity. As Macleod and Palmer (2015), and Awoyemi *et al* (2012) rightly observed, the religious groups and organizations hold potentials for driving forward the care and protection of biodiversity and the natural environment. Indeed, one such organization. A rocha International, has been actively involved with biodiversity conservation and advocacy for close to 40 years, the first Christian Conservation Organization, with a global presence in about 20 countries, in six continents. The success of their activities and projects is evidence of the importance of religion in conservation (www.arocha.org). In addition, Murray and Agyare (2018) reported from their

findings in Ghana, West Africa that the success of many community-based Conservation Projects was dependent in part, on the religious perceptions of the people, a view re-echoed in the earlier works of Waylen *et al*, (2010).

The connection between religion, nature and conservation has become a prominent topic among scholars and conservation practitioners (Messias, 2024). For instance, Sharma (2022) writes on why eco-spirituality is important in the face of the numerous global environmental crises. Hall *et al* (2009) published an article in *Nature* to the effect that religious bodies have a duty to promote values of conservation. An example of how religious bodies are waking up to the crisis is the writings of the Rev. Dave Bookless (2008) of A rocha International, in his book *Planet Wise*. In it, he calls on Christians to view nature and its care as a divine

mandate and to go beyond the purely anthropocentric reasons for such care, to the deeper values and reasons of respect for all life forms on earth.

The seventh theme: *Care for God's Creation* of the Roman Catholic Social Teaching (CST) warns against a reductionist perspective of nature. Pope John Paul II, in his encyclical *Laorem Exercens*, stated the limitations of nature. He wrote about '...the growing realization that the heritage of nature is limited and that it is being intolerably polluted...' (1981; n.353). He also tries to correct the misunderstanding of the scriptural text in Genesis 1: 28(KJV) where humanity is granted 'dominion' over the earth, highlighting that dominion does not justify total domination of other creatures, as some understand it and claim, but calls for mutual responsibility. He emphasizes that the Bible has no place for a tyrannical anthropocentrism; that correct interpretation of dominion is responsible stewardship (See Mukaria 2021). It is in the light of the Catholic Church's conservation teachings that this research aimed at assessing the Catholic laity's knowledge and perception on the Catholic Social Teaching (CST) with emphasis on the seventh theme "Care for God's Creation".

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study Area

The study was in Jos-North Local Government Area, of Plateau State, in the middle belt geopolitical zone of Nigeria. The state is an important Christian Center, at least partially due to its central location and its favorable climate. It is the headquarters of many denominations, especially of the two predominant evangelical denominations in the state; the Church of Christ in Nations (COCIN) and Evangelical Church Winning All (ECWA). It has a number of globally recognized theological institutions such as the Jos Evangelical Theological Seminary (JETS), and the Theological College of Northern Nigeria (TCNN). The state has currently become an archbishopric for both the Anglican and Roman Catholic churches (Wikipedia 2020).

Three urban parishes namely, Good Shepherd Catholic Chaplaincy of the University of Jos, St Theresa's parish, located in the city center, and St Gabriel's parish located in Rikkos all in Jos-North LGA, were selected for this research. The sample size of three parishes was due to the uniformity of the Catholic Church; globally, the Catholic parishes operate in much the same way, holding the same teachings every time, everywhere. Sites were purposively selected based on the criteria that the researchers already had rapport with the parishes, considering the limited time duration for the research, and the advantage of saving time with new parishes establishing new rapport.

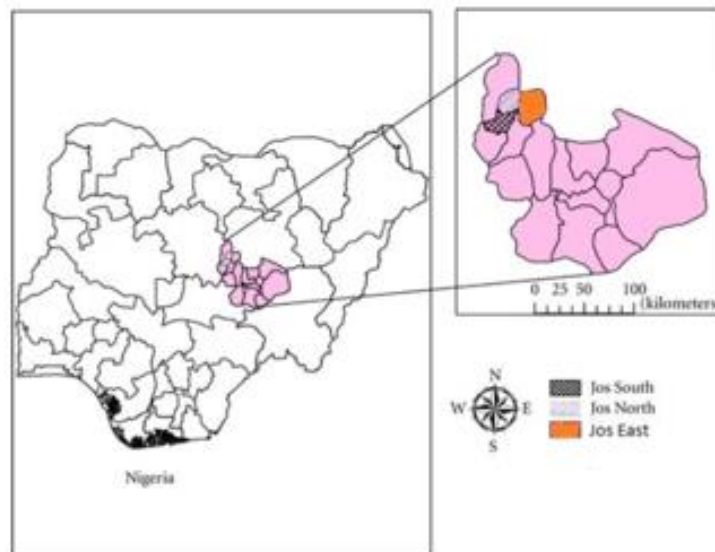


Fig 1: Map of Plateau State, Nigeria. Showing Jos North, South and East Local Government Area

Respondent selection was purposive, and random, based on an individual’s willingness to participate in the research. We were careful to include both males and females from 15 years and above for fair representation of both genders. The research protocol involved presenting participants with consent forms before interviewing them. The interviews lasted approximately 15-20 minutes with each respondent. Survey was carried out using nominal interview from a questionnaire composed of open ended and closed ended questions. Open-ended questions were used so as to encourage participants to share their own personal opinions. Variables considered for this study included; educational level, age, and gender. The questionnaire consisted of two sections: respondents’ socio-demographic characteristics, and a section on knowledge and perception of respondents on conservation/care of the environment. There were in total twenty-eight questions (see Appendix)

RESULTS

Demographic Distribution of Respondents

Forty people from each of the three sites, (total 120 respondents) were sampled. Sixty-one (50%) were males, 59 (49.2%) were females. Furthermore 62

(51.7%) were within the age group 15-24 years old, 41 (34.2%) were 25-34 years old, 15 (12.5%) belonged to the age group 35-44 years old; and finally 2(1.7%) were of the age group 45 years and above (Table 1). Educational level of respondents revealed that most respondents 98 (81.7%) had education up to tertiary level. In addition, 91 (75.8%) of the respondents were unmarried, while 73(60.8%) of the respondents were students. Seventeen ethnic groups were represented in the study; with people from the Igbo ethnicity 30 (25.0%), being the predominant ethnic group, while the remaining 70% belonged in the remaining 16 different ethnic groups in smaller proportions. Each respondent belonged to a mother diocese or archdiocese; 70 (58.3%) were from Jos Archdiocese, 10 (8.3%) from Oturkpo diocese, 2 (1.7%) from Issele-uku diocese, 5 (4.2%) from Makurdi diocese, 7 (5.8%) from Abuja Archdiocese, 4 (3.3%) were from Abakaliki diocese, 7 (5.8%) were from Lafia diocese, 5 (4.2%) belonged in Bauchi diocese. In addition, 4 (3.33%) were from Shendam diocese and finally 4 (3.33%) belonged in Minna diocese. These were parishioners who attended one of the three study parishes, but reported belonging primarily to the above mentioned Diocesan Church.

Table 1: Demographic Distribution of Respondents

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	61	50.8
	Female	59	49.2
Age (years)	15-24	62	51.7
	25-34	41	34.2
	35-44	15	12.4
	45 and above	2	1.7
Education	No formal	3	2.6
	Primary	2	1.7
	Secondary	17	14.0
	Tertiary	98	81.7
Marital status	Married	29	24.2
	Unmarried	91	75.8
Occupation	Student	79	65.8
	Teacher	13	10.8
	Entrepreneur	23	19.2
	Unemployed	5	4.2

Respondents’ Knowledge of the Catholic Social Teaching on Nature/Environment

Overall, 37(30.8%) respondents had knowledge of the existence of the *Laudato si*, 60 (50%) respondents were unaware of it, while 23(19.1%) respondents were unsure/indifferent. When respondents were asked if they had heard teachings on conservation/environment in church, overall, 82(68.33%) reported having heard such sermons, 33 (27.5%) had never heard any sermons on nature and the environment, while 5 (4.16%) were unsure.

Fig. 2 provides the breakdown of these responses by parish. Further, when respondents were asked to estimate the frequency of such nature/environment teachings in their respective parishes, overall, 48.50% reported it to be very often, 33.30% reported that they had such teachings in their parish often, 11.60% reported that it was rarely taught; while 6.60% reported declined estimating the frequency of occurrence of such teachings.

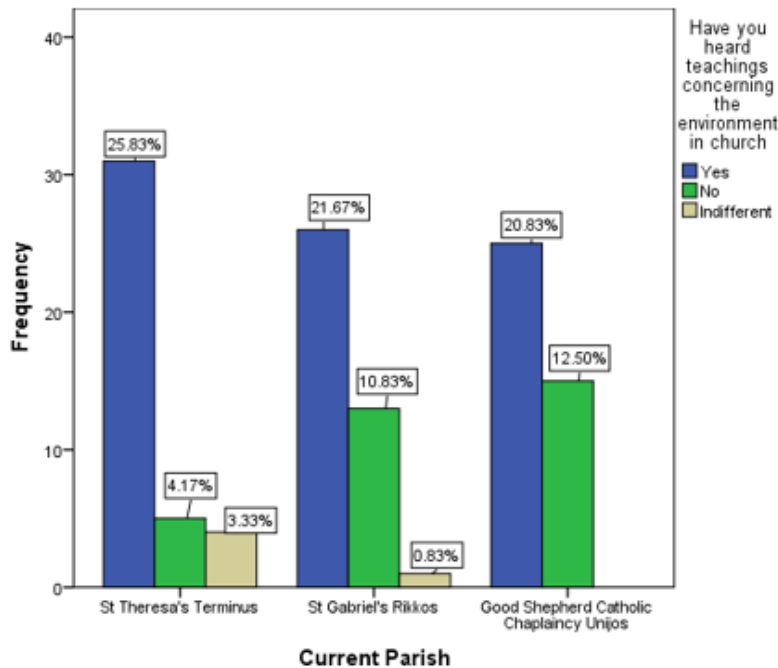


Fig 2: Respondents knowledge of Nature and Conservation from Church.

When respondents were asked to interpret their understanding of Genesis 1:28, the predominant perception and understanding of the verse’s injunction was to dominate (in a negative anthropocentric/utilitarian sense; 46.75%), across all three study sites. This was followed by

respondents who interpreted it to mean ‘be in charge of nature (to tend or care; 20.65%), and finally those that interpreted it as ‘fill the earth’ (to replenish earth; 5.44%). Fig 3 below provides the breakdown of responses by each parish.

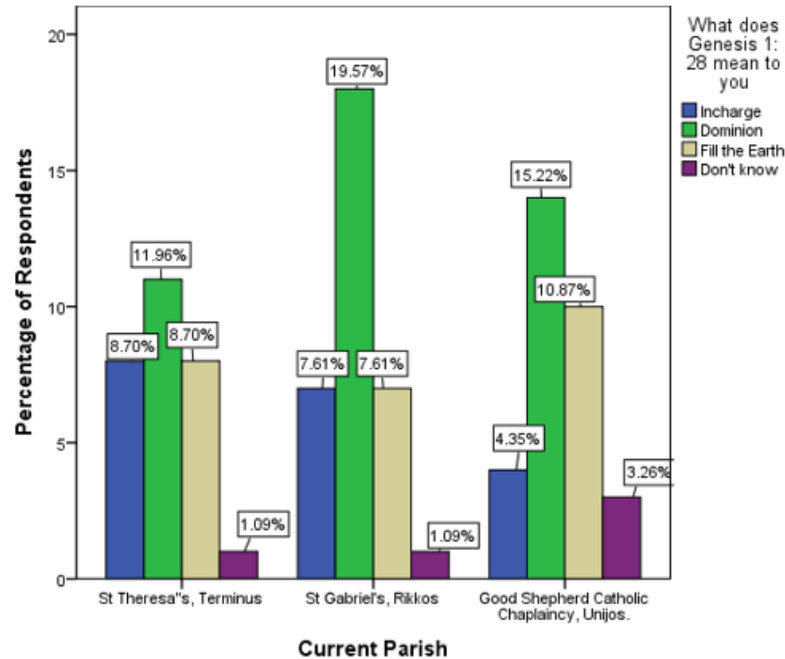


Fig 3: Respondents Understanding of Genesis 1:28 Regardless of Gender

DISCUSSION

The role of religion in conservation has been acknowledged as crucial, as seen by the United Nation’s Environment Program’s (UNEP) acknowledgement of the role religion or faith plays in biodiversity conservation (www.unep.org/perspectives). Christianity in particular, has many scriptural backings (as many as a hundred texts) that encourages humans to care for nature. Van Houtan (2020) has observed that the roots of contemporary environmental care are embedded in religious traditions, and that it is therefore appropriate that science and religion partner in conservation. Pope Francis’ *encyclical, Laudato si*, is therefore, a timely call to reflection and action. Although there have been criticisms as to its strength in agreeing with the scientific community on important aspects of the nature/environment discourse, it at least is a starting, strong voice for those of the Catholic faith to reassess their relationship to nature and the environment in the light of their faith and humanity.

The findings of this research have revealed that not many of the catholic laity in our study area are aware, and knowledgeable of the pope’s instructions in the *Laudato si*. In a study of the perceptions and drivers of attitudes towards nature in the study area, Pam et al (2021) identified key

drivers of people’s nature perceptions and attitudes to include an ignorance of the knowledge and roles that biodiversity plays in the ecology of ecosystems. Although their study participants were children, they argued that children were mirroring the perceptions and attitudes of adults. Nigeria is a highly religious society, with the majority of people belonging to the two Abrahamic faiths (Christianity and Islam). Therefore, the role that religion can play in bringing about positive perceptions and attitudes toward nature cannot be overemphasized, it behooves practioners, scientists and all interested stakeholders in the preservation and sustainability of the earth, to join forces, including with religious bodies in driving and demanding for this change in human perception and attitudes towards the natural world (Negi, 2005). Anderson (2012) and others have claimed that, the Genesis chapter one instruction to ‘dominate and rule nature’ has been shown to cause destruction to nature because of different perceptions of the word ‘dominion’ especially as it varies in meaning and perception in cultures across the globe. Findings from this work corroborates this, although some others hold the view that religion and conservation could work together to achieve a more sustainable world. (Radhika *et al*, 2022; McLeod and Palmer 2015; Awoyemi, S.M,

et al 2012; Boyd 1984; Negi, 2005; Bhagwat and Ormsby 2011).

In a society with minimum enforcement of the many nature conservation laws and with a large percentage of uninformed or ignorant citizens as it relates to nature/biodiversity conservation, the place of religion in conservation should not be overlooked, mainly because of the influence that religion and religious leaders have on the society. If the Catholic Church, for example, with its large followership and loyal membership, highlights and emphasizes the stance of the Catholic Church as contained in the encyclical *Laudato Si*, there is great potential and likelihood that a large proportion of the Nigerian society might become more interested and practically involved in nature conservation. Also, because different Christians interpret and view the Genesis 1:28 instruction in different ways, it adds to the challenge of people upholding nature in a healthy way. For example, the human 'dominion-superiority' perspective would see nothing wrong with overpopulation and overconsumption as long as man, the superior, dominant being is satisfying his demands. Anything perceived as limiting human growth and advancement is further considered an opposition (Van Houtan 2020).

The apocalyptic worldview (Preston and Baimel 2021) is another perception affecting attitudes of some Christians toward nature. These groups argue that since everything in the world will ultimately be destroyed, of what good is conserving nature (Bookless 2008). One major goal in carrying out this research was to be able to draw the attention of the leadership of the Catholic Church in our study area State, and nationally, to an opportunity that could be so easily missed, if people are not taught and made aware of the document and its important contents.

The world is experiencing a climate, environmental and biodiversity crisis, it is necessary that all hands be on deck to halt these crises (Borde *et al*, 2022) including the mass extinctions due to habitat loss and degradation, climate change and many other anthropogenic factors such as overpopulation and consumption issues. Christians believe in the

divine mandate to care for the environment, the *Laudato Si*, should serve as one additional important document, in addition to the Bible in prompting and encouraging active participation among Catholic faithful. Partnerships between the church and faith-based nature conservation organizations could help in achieving this goal (Bhagwat *et al*, 2011) through deliberate highlighting of the stewardship responsibility of catholic faithful and indeed all Christians toward the maintenance of the integrity and protection of the natural world (Ives and Kidwell, 2019; Preston and Baimel, 2021).

CONCLUSION

This study has highlighted the deficit in knowledge about the *Laudato Si* and the natural environment among catholic faithful in our study population. It has also highlighted the need for the Catholic Church in Nigeria to explore that opportunity to create more awareness about the natural environment, biodiversity, and the church's mandate to care for earth. Religion can indeed play a great role in changing attitudes, and bringing about an improved awareness and interest in participation of individuals in the care and protection of our corporate world. It is a huge platform waiting to be optimized for the general good of our planet, and the biodiversity in it.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

We declare no conflict of interest.

CONTRIBUTIONS

This research was part of the undergraduate research work of Bagoro, I. who carried out fieldwork, experimental design, and draft manuscript preparation.

The idea, conceptualization, and supervision was by G. Pam, who offered guidance in the writing, design, analysis and final manuscript preparation and edits.

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APPENDIX

SECTION A: RESPONDENT SOCIAL DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS

- 1.Date
- 2.Respondent name
- 3. Age range (a) 15-24 (b) 25-30 (c) 35- 44 (d) 45 above
- 4.Gender Male () Female ()
- 5.Educational level
None
Primary
Secondary
Tertiary
- 6.Marital status Single () Married ()
- 7.Occupation
- 8.Ethnicity
- 9.Name of your community
- 10.What is the name of your mother parish
- 11.Your mother parish belongs to which dioceses.....
- 12.What is the name of the current parish you attend.....
- 13.How long have you been worshipping in your mother parish.....
- 14.Do you belong to any society in your current parish Yes () No ()
If yes, what is the name of the society

SECTION B: KNOWLEDGE AND PERCEPTION

- 1.What do you understand by the term “Care for Creation”
- 2.When was the first time and where did you hear the term “Care for Creation”.....
- 3.What does Genesis 1:28 (“have many children, so that your descendants will live all over the earth and bring it under their control. I am putting you in charge of the fish, the bird and all the wild animals” TEV) means to you
- 4.The catholic church is named after saints; do you know any saint that showed great concern for creation
Yes() No()
If yes, name them;
- 5.What can you say about the saints lifestyle you mentioned above.....

.....
....
6.What comes to your mind when you hear the word
“environment’
.....
7.Have you heard teachings concerning the environment in the church ...
.....
8.How often are you taught about the environment in
church
9.The catholic church has social teachings Yes () NO ()
IF Yes, state
them;
.....
10.The environment is under threat Yes () No ()
Reason for your
answer
.....
11.Name the animals you
like
.....
12.Name the animals you
dislike
.....
13.What do you think man’s role is in the
environment
.....
14.List any environmental project you were ever involved
in
.....