

BROTHERS OF THE CHRISTIAN SCHOOLS

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ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION  
IN THE EXISTENTIAL  
PERIPHERIES

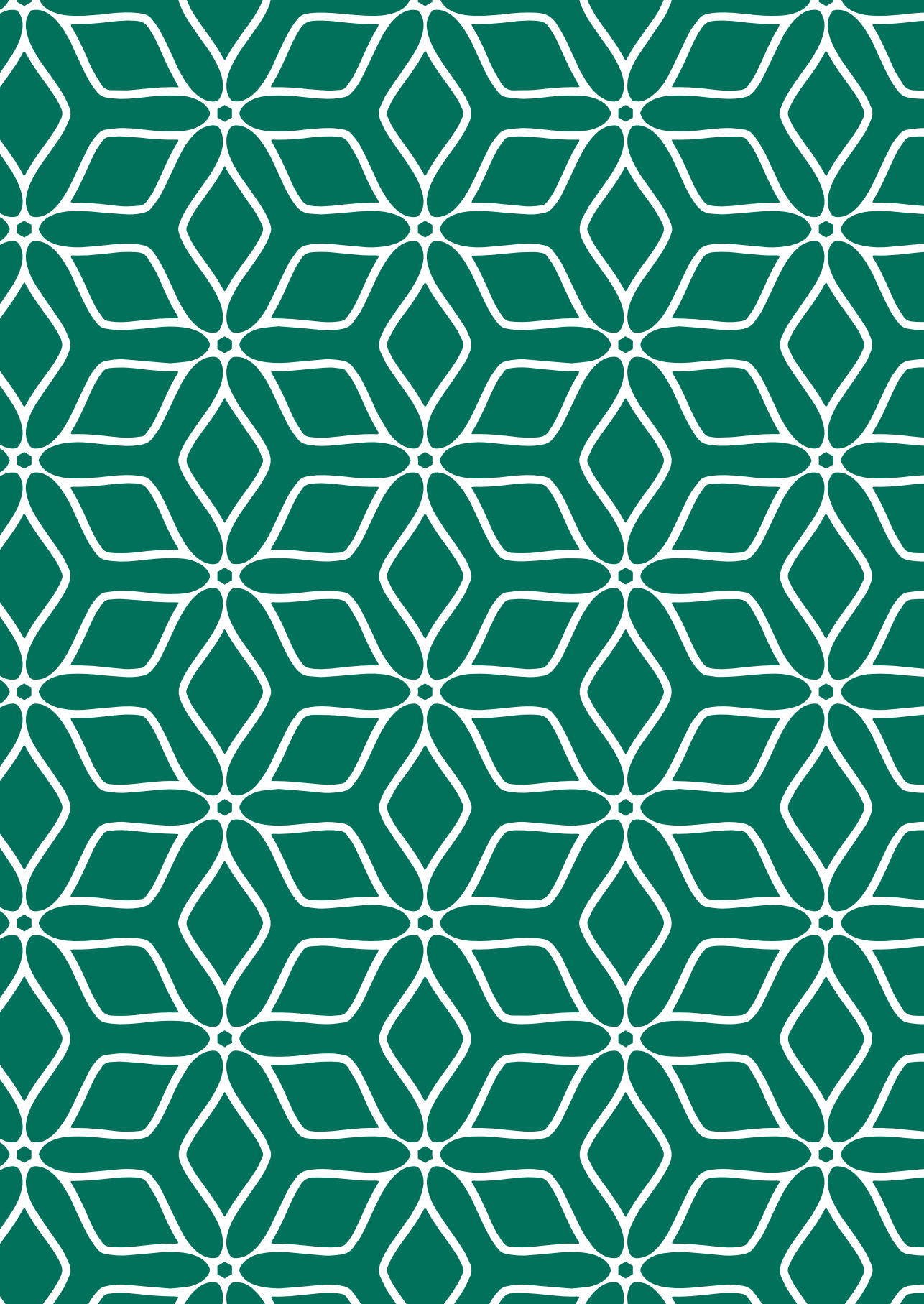
AUTHOR

JUAN CARLOS STAUBERA



MEL BULLETIN

67



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the Christian  
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Environmental education in the existential peripheries

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# PRESENTATION

The seven Pathways of Transformation proposed by the latest General Chapter are at the heart of the main concern we wish to highlight this year: “All is connected”. We need to provide an evangelising education that lives up to this truth and a way of life that bears witness to it. Therefore:

- To build a fraternal world through education, evangelisation and the promotion of justice,
- To be radically open to God’s will,
- To create renewed structures for the future,
- To embrace an integral ecology,
- To live out our mission in association, with audacity and prophetically,
- And to place financial resources and people at the service of the international mission to ensure its sustainability...

These are not seven separate but interrelated things. Environmental evangelising education is a concrete path that can bring about the transformation we wish to propose through service on the peripheries. This is the approach clearly presented to us by Juan Carlos Stauber. A path rooted in our *Declaration on the Lasallian Educational Mission*.

Juan Carlos is, above all, a friend. I have had the grace to share much time and many projects with him since we were Theology students. He has taught at one of our schools, assisted in the formation of novices in the Argentina-Paraguay District, and worked with our La Salle Foundation in Argentina at the ‘*Laudato si*’ Centre for Research in Integral Ecology. I have been blessed to watch him grow and mature personally and professionally over more than forty years. I have met his family, and Marcela, his wife, has also assisted with the formation of our novices.

This text he offers us summarises many of his searches and findings. I am deeply grateful to him for this text, written at a time that included heart surgery for his son, Marcos, and I hope it may be of help to you all. It is an area where we need to take profound, decisive and urgent steps in many parts of our Lasallian landscape. I pray for all this, dear reader.

**Brother Santiago Rodríguez Mancini**

*Director of the Office of Lasallian Heritage and Research*



## The Author



### Juan Carlos Stauber

Born in Entre Ríos, Argentina, in 1965. His mother, a teacher, and his father, a railway worker, instilled in him a strong understanding of workers' social rights. From a young age, he has been an environmental activist, committed to popular culture, food sovereignty and community-based land policies. He served as a religious missionary for eight years. He earned a PhD in Philosophy with a thesis on Paul

Ricoeur and his phenomenology of active and passive corporeality. He has taught at secondary, tertiary and university levels. He has taught Applied Ethics, Bioethics, History of Culture and Environmental Epistemology. He currently runs an environmentally-oriented school, based on the Earth Charter. He also runs a community library in his village. He is also a founding member of the *Laudato si'* Bioethics Centre, part of the La Salle Argentina-Paraguay Foundation. He has worked and studied in Argentina, Ireland, Ghana, Bolivia, Nicaragua and Costa Rica. He is an advocate for social dialogue based on non-violence and cultural, ideological and religious biodiversity. He promotes a mature and liberating Christianity through a popular interpretation of the holy Scripture.

# INTRODUCTION

The environmental issue has become one of the most pressing challenges of the contemporary world. However, this problem cannot be understood in isolation, as it is deeply linked to social, economic and cultural realities, especially in contexts characterised by exclusion and vulnerability. In this sense, the so-called “existential peripheries” constitute spaces where environmental degradation and social injustice manifest themselves together.

For a decade now, we have been repeating that if the education of the future is not environmental, there will be no future. And more specifically, Br. José Martín Montoya Durà, FSC said in October 2012:

*“Today, the specific aim facing education and training in tackling the problem of the aggressive behaviour of people towards the social and natural environment, is the socialisation and assimilation of new cultural criteria: solidarity between the nations of the North and South hemispheres, ethical exploitation of resources, good environmental practices in everyday life, the demand for real environmental policies, clean technology, etc. This worldview of sustainable development (meeting the needs of the present generations without compromising the possibility of future generations to respond to their own needs), enables individuals to be more aware, more responsible, and to be, in practical terms, more prepared. This is seen as a way to face the challenge of preserving the quality of the environment and of life”.<sup>1</sup>*

This involves much more than teaching people to recycle or care for environment. It is about recognising that in areas marked by poverty, exclusion and a lack of resources, environmental degradation and social injustice go hand in hand.

In these contexts, access to clean water, a healthy environment or green spaces is not guaranteed, and that is why environmental education must be rooted in people’s everyday reality. It cannot be abstract,

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1 José Martín Montoya Durà, FSC (2012) Environmental education plan for sustainable development. *MEL Bulletin* No. 46, p. 5.

but must help people understand how caring for the environment is directly linked to human dignity and quality of life.

Furthermore, as Brother Martín argues, it is crucial to recognise that humans behave aggressively towards their living environment – what we used to call the ‘environment’. Today we no longer speak in those terms, as we recognise that it is not merely a ‘means’ to our ends; we ARE part of the environment we inhabit, we are nature (in the words of Katia Hueso<sup>2</sup>) and the integrity and health of our environment is an essential part of our own health and social integrity. Therefore, by being aggressive towards our environment, we are being aggressive towards ourselves.

That is why we like to say that we inhabit our environments, just as we inhabit our bodies, in line with what Martín Montoya suggests regarding cultural norms and the organisation of daily life.

Furthermore, it is essential to understand that this is not an individual problem (where each person simply becomes aware...) and that education needs to promote community participation. It is not merely a matter of imparting knowledge to the self-centred consciousness of isolated individuals, but of fostering critical awareness and a commitment to otherness, so that communities themselves can take the lead in defending their environment. This entails a strong reaffirmation or construction of the community identity of those involved.

In this sense, educating in the **existential peripheries** means educating within a renewed yet ancestral scale of values: solidarity, care for others and shared responsibility. For there is no true care for the environment without social justice, nor social justice without a decent environment for all. But at the same time, it means giving

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2 Katia Hueso Kortekaas is a Spanish doctor of Biology, a lecturer at ICAI/ Pontifical University of Comillas, and a specialist and consultant on issues relating to the protection of landscapes and natural and rural areas. She holds a Master’s degree in Environmental Engineering and Management and is a Basic Technician in Occupational Risk Prevention from the School of Industrial Organisation.

ourselves an opportunity to grow in a shared sense of identity, beyond traditional categories such as social class, political or religious ideology, or socio-economic status. The environment (no longer the 'natural' environment) is a category of infrastructural analysis, which allows for the material communion of many diverse principles, and therefore the confluence of conceptual diversities that draw upon the material supports of mortal existence.

And from a Christian perspective, this is central: 'The Word' did not become an idea, a theory, a body or an institution... it became FLESH, with its own intelligence, dynamics and perceptual limits, yet common to all and everything. That is why Pope Francis, in *Laudato si'* (LS 2), begins by recognising our material communion in the very constituent elements of the universe. Let us now consider some dimensions of this approach: the spiritual, the pedagogical and the pastoral. We shall briefly outline the thesis we propose, in a summary that will then be expanded upon in subsequent chapters. But if any postmodern reader is "in a hurry", the following sections will provide the central idea of our approach. They can then decide whether to continue reading or not. Let us begin with this first dimension, which is essential to our ecclesial identity.

## 1. Spiritual dimension

We will explain later why it is important to begin with the 'spiritual'. But for now, allow me to propose a fundamental statement: **creation**, from a Christian perspective, **has value in itself**, not merely as a resource. It is first and foremost a divine creature that has been evolving for millions of years; secondly, it is a gift from God. It was not created *for* us, but rather we are part of its generous and multi-diverse evolution. In this sense, the concept of '**integral ecology**' (defined in Chapter 4 of *Laudato si'*) offers us something that had already been explored since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century through the most advanced physical and biological theories: everything is connected – the environmental, the social and the human. Life is connection, relationship, diversity. But it is also a concept that was already known and served as a pattern of organisation and hermeneutical criterion

among many ancient peoples, such as in the Inca Empire and among the Amautas of the central Andes, embodied in the symbolism of the Whipala (flag of the southern Inca Empire).

From this perspective, the existential peripheries are places where there is also **a search for meaning, suffering and hope**. And, therefore, care for the environment needs to be understood as **an ethical and spiritual act**, not merely a technical one. The spirituality of ‘care’: caring for the earth, for others and for oneself. A proposal that concludes the aforementioned encyclical, but also a concept put forward by the Brazilian theologian Leonardo Boff from his earliest writings.

Environmental education in these contexts also means **fostering a deep awareness of the value of life** and human responsibility. Failure to recognise this entails the risk of losing freedom, which is the foundation of education for maturity. To this end, Byung-Chul Han suggests returning to the etymological root of the word ‘freedom’: “(...) the word ‘free’ (in German, *frei*) means *to be among friends* (*unter Freunden sein*). Both ‘freedom’ (Freiheit) and ‘friend’ (Freund) trace back to the Indo-European root *fri*, which means *to love*. *Freedom is friendliness*”.<sup>3</sup>

## 2. Pedagogical dimension

So, as we teachers often ask when faced with a new pedagogical challenge: “what do I do?”, “how do I teach” in these contexts and with these principles.

We start from the basis of situated education: taking the **students’ concrete reality** as our starting point (vulnerable neighbourhoods, local environmental problems, families just focused on their own desires and disconnected from socio-environmental impacts, etc.).

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3 Byung-Chul Han (2025). *Vida contemplativa*. Taurus: Buenos Aires, p. 113.

But immediately, we must move towards meaningful learning: linking content to real-world problems (consumerism, energy dependency, ecological debts, rubbish dumps, water, pollution).

And we must do so through participatory pedagogy: community projects, service-learning, collaborative group work, etc. Social constructivism can provide us with highly effective approaches (such as the 5E method from *Science-Bits*, for example<sup>4</sup>).

This will enable us to advance in a process of developing **critical thinking**: not merely ‘caring for the environment’, but understanding causes (greed, individualism, consumption, lack of coherent public policies and controls) and consequences (inequality, injustices, suffering, exclusion, neglect, etc.).

In this regard, it is worth clarifying that we understand the role of the educator not as a mere transmitter, but as **a companion**, with a clear commitment to the common origin and destiny of the environment, its resources and its functional structures. The educator’s “point of departure” becomes all too evident when they merely adopt an “environmental” approach forced by institutional imperatives, yet their life philosophy is in solidarity with the very consumerist, indolent and aggressive practices mentioned in the text by Brother Martín.

Environmental education in the peripheries cannot be neutral; it must be **critical and transformative**. That is why the pedagogical dimension is consistent with the spiritual dimension. And in this sense, we return to Byung-Chul Han:

*“(...) nature is not that, lifeless, but a living ‘you’. One reaches it only through invocations. (...) Everything becomes a ‘you’ when we invoke it. (...) The human spirit is invisible nature. Its language, however, consists of hieroglyphs that remain incomprehensible to those who have turned away from it. But to those who approach it with love and imagination, it does reveal its mysteries”.<sup>5</sup>*

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4 Further information can be found on its website <https://science-bits.com/site/es/>

5 *Ibid.* note 3.

### 3. Pastoral dimension

This is where the Church or faith communities come into play. It is not the same to theorise, draw conclusions or reach conclusions about environmental issues from the comfort of pristine spaces, artificially ‘decontaminated’ of social tensions, as it is to do so from a presence on the peripheries: to accompany, from the more well-off sectors, those living in situations of exclusion, and to allow oneself to be accompanied by those who directly suffer the consequences of structural or functional inequalities, for a comprehensive ecological conversion. Only in this way can we build communities of solidarity and sisterly-brotherly love, characterised by genuine ecclesial synodality.

This is why we can conceive of human promotion where pastoral ministry is not only spiritual, but also **social and environmental**. Where community spaces (parishes, movements) become places for raising awareness, organising concrete actions, strengthening bonds, and so on.

In this sense, as a manifestation of faith – whether through communion in the God of the Christians or even through the anthropological reconnection with the fabric of life – the educational value (*e-ducere*: an invitation to move in a certain direction) lies in witness: the existential coherence between faith and action. That is to say, care for the environment as part of the Christian life of those who lead and accompany others.

For this reason, it is worth revisiting the inspirational stories of figures such as Blessed Wenceslao Pedernera, a layman, farmer and Argentinian martyr, shot dead at his front door in the early hours of 25 July 1976 in Sañogasta (La Rioja). He was renowned for a faith lived out in daily life and committed to reality. His three daughters and wife are still alive and are a testament to how a conviction of faith – rooted in the experience of encountering the divine as expressed in nature, in the earth, in work, in cooperation, and in the celebration of the communal fraternity of those who recognise the Spirit of Jesus in the dynamism that moves existence and history – can have



an impact. These are not merely ideas, problems, lessons... it is an existential commitment upheld with humility and tenacity, awaiting a sun of righteousness (Mal 3: 20) that will enlighten all and bring forth the seed of the witness of many who preceded us in this very commitment, at times, against the winds of history that scattered efforts and relationships, silenced and defiled popular or communal memories, and seemed to rage against the unbreakable steadfastness of the little ones.

Just like Wenceslao Pedernera, we could mention the environmentalist and indigenous martyrs of Guatemala (Rigoberto Lima Choc-2015, Diana Hernandez-2019, to name just two teachers), or global icons such as Berta Cáceres from Honduras (2016) or Chico Mendes (1988) and Sister Dorothy Stang (2005) from Brazil, or Ken Saro-Wiwa from Nigeria (1995), and so many others, including some who are still alive, whether or not they are members of the Church.<sup>6</sup> What matters is to reclaim the testimonial nature and existential narratives that break with the dystopian genre that seems to characterise an era in which many have ceased to believe in and to create a 'better world'. An environmental education rooted in the existential peripheries that fails to address this dimension runs the risk of becoming complacent in a barren consciousness, and of succumbing to a defeatist pessimism that retains nothing of the missionary Spirit which opens the doors and windows of Pentecost.

Environmental pastoral ministry is a concrete way of **making the Gospel visible in daily life**. But it is also a form of intra-ecclesial soteriology: "Woe *to me* if I do not preach the Gospel!" (1 Cor 9: 16). For the sin against the Holy Spirit is the only one that cannot be forgiven (Mt 12 :31-32). And this blasphemy is not simply insulting with words; it is denying its transformative power, it is severing oneself from its saving dynamism, it is stifling its force to go out and proclaim, to go out to meet those who are seeking and awaiting good news (*eu-angelion*). That is why the sin against the Holy Spirit is to refuse the mission, and to deny his action in the lives of so

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6 For further testimonials, see [www.ecodisciple.com/blog/remembering-environmental-martyrs/](http://www.ecodisciple.com/blog/remembering-environmental-martyrs/)

many brothers and sisters who are giving their lives for the sake of a more loving environment. This is no rhetoric: between 2012 and 2023, more than 2,100 activists were murdered worldwide. In Latin America, Colombia, Brazil, Mexico and Honduras account for the majority of cases. Mining, agribusiness and illegal logging are the main causes of violence against defenders, and almost 50% of the deaths involve indigenous or Afro-descendant populations.<sup>7</sup>

#### 4. Connections between the three dimensions

To take our reflection further, the most important factor for more effective planning in this regard would be to interweave:

- **The Spiritual + Pedagogical:** Understanding that education involves not only content (facts), but also values and meaning → forming conscious and committed individuals.
- **The Pedagogical + Pastoral:** Recognising that education can extend beyond the classroom and become community action → concrete projects in the neighbourhood.
- **The Spiritual + Pastoral:** Understanding that faith translates into real commitments → caring for the environment as an expression of love for one's neighbour.
- **All three dimensions together:** Practising a holistic environmental education in and from the peripheries, forming people who understand their reality, find meaning in what they do, and act accordingly to transform it.

Environmental education in the existential peripheries is only truly transformative when it integrates the spiritual, pedagogical and pastoral dimensions, promoting an integral ecology that unites care for the environment with human dignity. It allows the wisdom and struggles of marginalised sectors to serve as a critical opening, a creative ferment, and a foundation for the truth-based value of pedagogical practices in sectors that do not suffer the crucial circumstances of the most impoverished, refugees or the exploited. On the margins of socio-environmental violence lies the counter-factual truth of

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7 Source: [www.archivosagenda.org/es/martires-latinoamericanos-de-la-ecologia](http://www.archivosagenda.org/es/martires-latinoamericanos-de-la-ecologia)

that aggressive hegemonic paradigm, announcing through its very persistence that another world is possible, necessary and urgent.

Environmental education, in these contexts, takes on particular significance, as it involves not only the transmission of knowledge about caring for the environment, but also the formation of critical, conscious individuals committed to transforming their own reality. From this perspective, it becomes necessary to approach such education from a holistic perspective that encompasses not only pedagogical dimensions, but also spiritual and pastoral ones.

In the light of Pope Francis's thinking, particularly in the encyclical *Laudato si'*, a vision of 'integral ecology' is proposed that links care for the environment with the dignity of the human person and social justice. This approach allows us to rethink environmental education as a transformative practice which, in the existential peripheries, becomes a key tool for building more just, supportive and sustainable communities.

If, dear reader, this has been sufficient for your reading, you may stop here, or you may skip to the conclusions. But if you wish to explore the arguments outlined in greater depth, what follows will provide thought-provoking material for your reflection. The path you take is in your hands.

Below, we aim to establish a conceptual framework to facilitate reflection on this challenge (Chapter 1), before moving on to explore each of the three dimensions outlined above in greater depth (Chapters 2 to 4), examining key pedagogical approaches to integrating these dimensions (Chapter 5), and opening up a series of projections, rather than conclusions (Chapter 6), that allow us to continue thinking about the topic in relation to other core issues.

# CHAPTER 1

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

## 1.1. The “existential peripheries”

The concept of “existential peripheries”, developed and promoted by Pope Francis, refers to those spaces – not only geographical, but also human and social — where various forms of exclusion, vulnerability and suffering are evident.<sup>8</sup> These peripheries are not limited to impoverished urban or rural margins, but also include situations of loneliness, a lack of meaning, invisibility and loss of dignity. They are not merely physical places (such as poor neighbourhoods or factories), but extreme situations of human life.

From this perspective, the existential peripheries are areas in which people experience multiple deprivations: material, educational, emotional and spiritual. In these, structural inequalities become more evident and profound, creating conditions that hinder full human development. Pope Francis invites us to “go out to the peripheries”, not merely as a physical movement, but as an attitude of openness, listening and commitment to those living in these realities. Francis seeks a “Church on the move”, preferring a “wounded Church” for going out to the peripheries rather than a “sick Church” due to self-referentiality.

Within this framework, addressing the environmental issue in the existential peripheries involves recognising that environmental degradation is not an isolated phenomenon, but is closely linked to people’s living conditions. And that we analyse the factors that shape the interests and desires that constitute these conditions. Pollution,

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8 On this subject, see the Address prior to the Conclave, 9 March 2013 (who would be elected Supreme Pontiff), and Pope Francis’ Message to the Meeting for Friendship among Peoples (Rome, 24 August 2014). Also, the video message, 18 March 2022; the interview published by Scholas Occurrentes on Instagram on 3 December 2025; the video sent by Francis to the Archdiocese of Los Angeles’ Religious Education Congress (<https://youtu.be/rsNMn6uONmw?si=o4O8wWSbMjVRyvqS>), among many other addresses in which the Pope emphasises the need to go out to the “existential peripheries”. We also recommend “*El maestro. El humanismo del Papa Francisco*” (The Teacher. The Humanism of Pope Francis), available at <https://storage.dtelab.com.ar/uploads/2025/08/El-maestro.-El-humanismo-del-Papa-Francisco-.pdf>

lack of access to basic services or the degradation of the environment affect the most vulnerable sectors most severely, exacerbating situations of exclusion.

Likewise, the post-Marxist phenomenon of self-exploitation brings with it a strange phenomenon of consumerist and self-consumerist euphoria, where “exploiters and exploited” are no longer necessary: each of us is responsible for internally policing a dynamic of boundless self-exploitation, where we lose not only rest, but also celebration, the sacred, and the very sense of why we settle for this new form of existential marginalisation.<sup>9</sup>

This situation of existential peripheries, which recognise no centres (the places where the lives of the poor are decided) and where utopias and emancipatory projects are not brought to the debate, creates a challenging situation for environmental educators, given that the sense of a system is lost, and, consequently, it is not possible to visualise the complex causal relationship between the structural factors underpinning these power relations.

## 1.2. Concept of environmental education

In a context such as that described above, environmental education can be defined as an educational process aimed at generating experiences, connections, awareness, knowledge, the questioning of values and the critique of attitudes that enable communities to understand the complexity of environmental configurations and to act responsibly in response to them. We understand the idea of ‘responsibility’ from the perspective of Hans Jonas,<sup>10</sup> with his new ethical imperative and his four types of responsibility. We will not dwell on this here, but it is worth exploring.

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9 Byung-Chul Han (2024) *La Sociedad del cansancio* (The Society of Fatigue). Barcelona: Herder.

10 Han Jonas (1995) *El principio de responsabilidad* (The Principle of Responsibility). Barcelona: Herder.

In its early days, environmental education focused mainly on nature conservation and the transmission of ecological content. However, over time it has evolved towards a broader and more comprehensive approach, incorporating social, economic, cultural and ethical dimensions. In this sense, it is no longer simply a matter of “looking after the environment”, but of understanding the relationships between human beings, society and nature.

In contexts of exclusion, environmental education takes on particular characteristics. It cannot be an abstract proposal or one disconnected from reality, but must be based on the concrete experiences of communities. This involves recognising prior knowledge, everyday practices and the specific issues affecting each context.

Furthermore, environmental education in these settings must promote the development of critical thinking, enabling individuals to identify the root causes of environmental problems, which are often linked to models of production, consumption and the unequal distribution of resources. In this way, it serves as a tool that is not only educational, but also social and transformative.

Finally, it is worth noting that our brain does not distinguish between the inside and the outside. Any signal of threat or protection, of danger or trust, coming from our environment, manifests itself in the body long before the rational system can identify, verbalise and represent it. Thus, the idea of the environment as something external is diluted by the realisation that our bodies possess pre-rational, not always accurate, interpretations of what is affecting us. This implies that environmental education must also address issues inherent to the neuroceptive system, and the ways in which our bodily awareness contributes to the notion of a healthy or pathological, sustainable or destructive environment. In this sense, the alienation of our bodily awareness is also part of the environmental problem, as stated in the Introduction: we inhabit the environment just as we accustom our bodies to it, and *vice versa*.

### **1.3. Environmental issues in contexts of exclusion**

From the above, we can understand how, from the body itself to humanly-modified environments, environmental issues do not affect all sectors of society in the same way. In contexts of exclusion, these issues tend to arise with greater intensity and severity, constituting what some authors refer to as ‘environmental injustice’.<sup>11</sup>

Among the main issues are the lack of access to drinking water, the accumulation of waste in unsuitable areas, air and soil pollution, substandard housing, deforestation and monoculture farming, the privatisation of the genetic heritage of food species, the lack of green spaces, and the absence of community (and even State) controls over the environmental practices and abuses of concentrated economic power groups. These problematic situations not only damage the environment but also have a direct impact on people’s health, quality of life and development opportunities, as well as on the very existence of communities, cultural identities, heritage, biomes and natural systems.

Furthermore, in these contexts, communities often have less influence on decision-making and resource management, which exacerbates their situation. Environmental vulnerability is thus intertwined with social vulnerability, creating a vicious circle that is difficult to break.

In the face of this reality, environmental education emerges as a fundamental tool for raising awareness of these issues, strengthening community organisation and promoting collective action aimed at improving the environment. However, for this to be possible, such education must be contextualised and committed to people’s realities. This is why Pope Francis proposed the idea of an ‘integral ecology’, distinct from reductionist or simplistic approaches. Let us examine this.

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11 You may wish to explore the works of Robert Bullard, Joan Martínez Alier, Gabriela Merlinsky, Clare EB Cannon, or Pastor-Alfonso, Espeso-Molinero and Pilquiman-Vera, amongst others.



## 1.4. Introduction to integral ecology

The concept of “integral ecology”, developed by Pope Francis in the encyclical *Laudato si'*, proposes a vision that goes beyond fragmented approaches to environmental issues. According to this perspective, it is not possible to address ecological problems without simultaneously considering their human and social dimensions, thus uniting biological and political data, the factual with the axiological... in short, bringing to fruition Rensselaer Van Potter's proposal in his seminal work *Bioethics: A Bridge to the Future* (1971).

In Pope Francis's own words: “We are faced not with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather with one complex crisis which is both social and environmental” (*Laudato si'*, 139). This statement highlights the need to understand the interconnection between the various aspects of reality, summarised in the expression “everything is connected” (*Laudato si'*, 91).

Integral ecology involves recognising that the environment is a common good, the protection of which is everyone's responsibility. At the same time, it invites us to rethink lifestyles, models of development and ways of relating to nature and to one another. In this sense, it is not merely a matter of adopting ecological practices, but of promoting a profound transformation in the way we inhabit the world.

Applied to the field of education, integral ecology proposes an education that integrates knowledge, values and attitudes geared towards caring for our “common home”, understood as the space shared by all humanity. In the existential peripheries, this approach takes on particular relevance, as it highlights the close relationship between environmental degradation and social injustice, promoting responses that aim at human dignity and the common good.

However, in non-Christian contexts or in necessarily diverse classrooms, it is essential to ground environmental education choices in institutions that are more pluralistic in their religious orientation.

For this reason, an option compatible with *Laudato si'* and Christian environmental thought is the *Earth Charter*.

## 1.5. Environmental education in the light of the Earth Charter

*The Earth Charter*<sup>12</sup> is an international reference document that proposes fundamental ethical principles for the construction of a just, sustainable and peaceful society. In this sense, it offers a valuable framework for grounding an environmental pedagogy that is not limited to the transmission of content, but rather promotes a profound transformation in the relationship between human beings, nature and society, as set out in the integral ecology of the encyclical *Laudato si'*.

One of the central contributions of the *Earth Charter* is its holistic understanding of reality, summarised in the statement that “we are one human family and one global community with a common destiny”. This vision aligns with the approach of integral ecology, recognising the interdependence between natural and social systems, and the need to address environmental issues from a broad and relational perspective.

On an educational level, the *Earth Charter* proposes an education geared towards fostering responsible values, attitudes and behaviours. It is not merely a matter of informing, but of **shaping individuals committed to the care of life**, capable of acting with responsibility and solidarity. This approach aligns with critical pedagogy, in that it promotes active participation, reflective thinking and transformative action.

Likewise, the *Charter* emphasises the importance of social justice as a prerequisite for sustainability. This is particularly relevant in the

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12 You may wish to visit the website [www.earthcharter.org](http://www.earthcharter.org) and explore all the teaching resources provided by the ECI Secretariat, based at the University for Peace in San José, Costa Rica.

context of the ‘existential peripheries’, where environmental issues are closely linked to situations of poverty, exclusion and inequality. From this perspective, environmental education must integrate the defence of human rights with care for the environment, promoting an ethic of the common good.

Another fundamental aspect is the ethical dimension of care. The *Earth Charter* proposes principles such as respect for the community of life, ecological integrity, social and economic justice, and participatory democracy. These principles can be translated into concrete educational practices that foster respect, cooperation, responsibility and commitment to the community.

In this sense, environmental education inspired by the *Earth Charter* is not limited to the school setting, but extends into community life, promoting learning processes that integrate knowledge, values and action. This aligns with the approach of educating from the existential peripheries, where education is built through dialogue with reality and oriented towards the transformation of the environment.

Finally, the *Earth Charter* offers a sense of hope by inviting us to build a future based on respect, justice and peace. This perspective is particularly significant in vulnerable contexts where education can become a tool for strengthening dignity, participation and the ability to envisage a different future.

*The Earth Charter* offers an ethical and pedagogical framework that strengthens environmental education from a holistic perspective, by linking care for the environment with social justice, participation and shared responsibility. In the context of existential peripheries, these principles take on particular relevance, guiding educational processes that seek not only to understand reality, but to transform it in favour of human dignity and care for our common home. However, it is also worth broadening the question of the periphery, linking the multiple situations of unwanted loneliness, consumerist meaninglessness, or the abandonment of social or cultural reference points and institutions that support many young people from diverse social and economic backgrounds. In this regard, *the Earth Charter* proposes a framework

for analysis capable of offering alternatives for understanding and validation that transcend the classism and xenophobic chauvinism so characteristic of today's contexts.

In this vein, allow us to contribute a final theoretical element, drawn from the field of biology: the legacy of Dr Humberto Maturana.

## **1.6. The Biology of Love, to deepen critical environmental education**

The notion of *autopoiesis* was proposed by the biologist Humberto Maturana, but it should be used with precision so that it does not remain an empty metaphor. In Maturana's work, *autopoiesis* describes living, interconnected, cooperative, dynamic and interdependent systems that produce and sustain themselves through a network of relationships. We highlight these two aspects of the concept: producing themselves (in the plural) and a network of relationships. This is vital to understanding the idea, as it involves deepening our analysis of humanity and its process of growth by understanding its capacity for shared autonomy, and for networks of support, cooperation and meaning. Applied to the educational and socio-environmental fields, it does not mean educating for 'isolated self-sufficiency', but rather the capacity of a community to recreate its life and its bonds through mutual interaction with the environment.<sup>13</sup>

From this perspective, Maturana rethinks the idea of *love*, not as a romantic sentiment between isolated couples in a fit of infatuation, but as a fundamental emotion rooted in the most evolved biology of the human species, enabling coexistence and the acceptance of the other in their full otherness – that is, as a legitimate other. It reminds us of Erich Fromm (in *The Art of Loving*), where he develops the

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13 On H. Maturana, we recommend: "Origin of Humanness in the Biology of Love" (2008, Charlottesville: Imprint Academic), *Emociones y lenguaje en educación y política* (2001, Mallorca: Dolmen) or *Amor y juego: fundamentos olvidados de lo humano* (1993, Santiago: Instituto de Terapia Cognitiva).

idea of love as a response to human separateness.<sup>14</sup> Here, Maturana explains this capacity of our species to connect, empathise, accept one another, cooperate and live together harmoniously, even amidst asymmetries, tensions and challenges. That is why we say that this is not a romantic matter (without disparaging romanticism), but rather a development that allows us to evolve as higher mammals towards a stage that transcends primitive violent instinct and channels aggression to enable coexistence based on emotional stability and well-being. It is therefore the foundation of our full hominization, and the path that makes possible the revelation of the divine in the human. We shall return to this later.

### **1.6.1. Autopoiesis and education from the peripheries**

Thinking about education for sustainability from the perspective of *autopoiesis* involves recognising educational communities as:

- a. Living systems capable of generating their own responses, not merely recipients of external solutions.
- b. Entities that construct knowledge from their own experience, in harmony with their culture and territory.

This reinforces the idea of educating from the peripheries, not ‘for’ them. We must therefore consider that existential peripheries, in line with the need to “look towards the margins” to resolve the anomalies of hegemonic science (in T. Kuhn’s *Theory of Paradigms*, 1962), are a salvific sphere for the centralism of dominant paradigms. And for this reason, educating “from” the peripheries implies that we learn together, from the problems of the peripheries, from the strategies of the peripheries, in the times and with the aesthetics of the peripheries. Something that is undoubtedly inspiring for those who do not share this idiosyncrasy.

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14 A neologism from this psychological school of thought that refers to the human awareness of ‘being separate’, of our existence as individuals, of not belonging and feeling isolated in the world.

### 1.6.2. Cooperation through diversity

For Maturana, the social emerges from the coordination of actions between different parties. In other words, the aim is not to homogenise, but to bring differences together. Cultural, social and territorial diversity is therefore not an obstacle, but a condition of possibility. Partnerships between schools, with third sector organisations, or with state and private institutions are key to fostering perspectives, encounters, resources and experiences, with a view to raising awareness of anthropogenic impacts on nature and on the most vulnerable and marginalised social groups. This allows for the systematisation of shared experiences, where the needs of some can drive others' search for comprehensive solutions and systemic responses.

A few years ago, a very interesting but reductionist phrase was often used: *"If someone asks you for a fish, don't give them the fish, but teach them to fish"*. But what if there are no fish left, or if the river is polluted, or if the fishing rods are monopolised by the very company that teaches people to fish... Things become more complex. This calls for richer, more diverse, complex, paradoxical and dilemmatic approaches. They cannot be resolved with simple or reductionist answers.

Environmental education will therefore seek to create spaces where different voices interact and build common sense, diverse agendas and agreements on shared responsibility. But environmental education also requires a progression of complexities, where the key players involved in each approach can gradually visualise the scope and limits of each problem, its solutions and its continuity. To this end, there are educational games that prepare students epistemically in this regard.<sup>15</sup>

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15 By way of example, I suggest creative games such as "Coopolis" (a board game designed by Factorial to teach about the solidarity economy, the antithesis of Monopoly, which promotes the concentration of privatisable wealth) or "Convergentes" (a series of dystopian games published by Ed. Edelvives, in book format, which presents procedural scenarios to be resolved collaboratively, always based on dilemmas to be resolved with options that teach players to anticipate consequences and costs).

### 1.6.3. Systemic synergy

As mentioned, an autopoietic system does not function through isolated parts, but through relationships. This relates both to integral ecology (*everything is connected*) and to the need to integrate the environmental, social, spiritual and pedagogical dimensions. Cinema has produced valuable works that allow these realities to be addressed with a striking aesthetic.<sup>16</sup>

In practical terms, we are talking about community projects where different actors (young people, families, institutions) interact; but also, where learning connects local and scientific knowledge. We can recall here Otto Maduro's epistemic notion in *"Mapas para la Fiesta"*, where the key is not to add up actions, but to generate relationships that empower.

### 1.6.4. Unstable equilibrium and creative tension

Following Maturana's concept of *autopoiesis*, we recognise that living systems are not in a fixed equilibrium, but in constant flux. This is highly relevant for management teams, given that educational or intervention projects are often conceived with the belief –however modest – that they have taken a definitive step towards structural change. And that there will be no turning back. A dear friend, Brother Santiago Rodríguez Mancini, often reminds us: *"things can always get worse"*. For this reason, it is more than appropriate that these processes should be not only collective and systemic, but also methodical and systematic, heuristic and holistic. Let us consider this.

This is particularly relevant in poor or emerging countries. There are real tensions: development versus environmental care, urgency versus sustainability. Education cannot afford to deny these tensions, but must engage with them critically, recognising the need for a

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16 For example, *HOME*, a documentary by Yann Arthus-Bertrand (2009); *TERRA* (by the same director, 2015) or *OCEANS*, by Jacques Perrin (2009); not to mention others in the fiction genre.

permanent eco-logical conversion. The concept of the ‘common home’ implies a constant review of the consequences of our actions, a permanent, critical perspective ‘from the standpoint’ of those affected (directly and indirectly), and creative criticism (not demonising condemnation).

Instability is not a failure; it is a condition for change. And for this reason, the systematisation of experiences, an awareness of the limits of any project or approach, the reinforcement of remembrance, and the celebration and cultivation of gratitude for the steps taken by those who came before us (a sense of gratitude and the gratuitousness of existence) are key aspects of an environmental spirituality.

Hence, the encyclical *Laudato si’* invited us to consider an ‘ecological conversion’, in the same vein as Fr Bernard Lonergan<sup>17</sup> proposed various levels of conversion. Ecological conversion is one that involves a holistic acceptance of the vulnerability and instability of systems, as conditions for a constant re-evaluation of agreements, perspectives and processes, and the celebration of daily acts of faithfulness, as a source of strength for the journey, in a spirit of continual openness to the new. Celebrating, in the knowledge that steps have been taken and achievements made, however small, is a way of reclaiming the Feast, of appreciating what has been done, and of strengthening the desire and willingness to move on. An education that forgets to celebrate runs the risk of assuming that what has been learnt will not be unlearned, or that environmental knowledge is simply cumulative (as in mathematics). But the reality is far more complex. The human brain seeks to conserve energy in order to survive longer and better. And that means that shortcuts are often taken to solve environmental problems, resulting in unintended consequences. Throwing all rubbish into the same bin is always easier than sorting it and disposing of it in different places. Killing a spider or a snake is always more practical and economical than saving it and relocating it to safe areas, for both humans and the animals themselves.

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17 B. Lonergan (1957) “Insight: A Study of Human Understanding”. Toronto: Longman and Todd. We also recommend the 13 titles on this subject from the *Cruz del Sur* collection, published by Ed. Stella, Buenos Aires, 2021.



Similarly, a class where there are only students who are brilliant in a narrow academic sense will always be more suited to poor teaching approaches than a class where there are a wide variety of intelligences and very diverse ways of learning.

### **1.6.5. Concrete pedagogical implications**

From this perspective, environmental education for sustainability, from the existential peripheries, proposes several lines of action:

- Encouraging community self-organisation;
- Promoting open, non-rigid processes;
- Working with real-world problems, without oversimplifying them;
- Recognising mistakes and conflicts as part of the learning process.

Rather than ‘controlling’ in order to guarantee certain success, it is a matter of accompanying living, finite, dynamic and fragile processes. It is therefore important to recognise an academic limit that requires thoroughness: Maturana did not conceive his theory as a pedagogical or political programme. The notion of *autopoiesis* does not apply literally to the field of education, but rather as an analogical category that allows us to understand communities as dynamic systems, capable of generating their own processes of learning and transformation.

Humberto Maturana’s notion of *autopoiesis* allows us to conceive of education for sustainability as an emergent and relational process, in which communities – particularly in peripheral contexts – are not passive recipients, but living systems capable of self-organisation, learning and transformation through interaction with their environment. Within this framework, diversity, cooperation and the tension inherent in unstable contexts are not obstacles, but key conditions for the construction of an integral ecology.

## CHAPTER 2

# THE SPIRITUAL DIMENSION OF ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION

**B**uilding on the conceptual framework outlined above, we now wish to explore in greater depth the key dimension of the environmental approach. Given that we have stated that *relationship* is a central concept in environmental thought, the '*re-linking*' (re-ligio) aspect emerges as an anthropological – not merely theological – perspective that is fundamental to this analysis. Whilst we will draw upon concepts central to our Christian perspective, we recognise that these open us up to an ecumenical and pluralistic pedagogical solidarity.

## **2.1. Creation as a gift and a responsibility**

The spiritual dimension of environmental education invites us to move beyond a merely utilitarian view of nature, to recognise it as a gift that possesses value in itself. From a Christian perspective, creation is not simply a set of resources available for human use, but a reality that expresses a deeper meaning and is entrusted to human responsibility.

Within this framework, our relationship with the environment is understood in terms of care and stewardship, rather than domination and exploitation. Pope Francis takes up this idea by noting that human beings are called to 'till and care for' the earth, which implies a balanced and respectful relationship with the natural environment. This conception entails a paradigm shift, in which care for the environment becomes a constitutive dimension of ethical and spiritual life.

Thus, environmental education, from a spiritual perspective, seeks not only to impart knowledge but also to foster an attitude of gratitude, respect and responsibility towards creation. This attitude translates into concrete practices that reflect a more harmonious relationship with nature. In this sense, conscious, respectful yet consistent and lucid work on this dimension allows us to adopt an existential attitude distinct from mere curiosity or the desire for domination, control and utility, typical of classical modern Western science.

## **2.2. The relationship between human beings, nature and transcendence**

The spiritual dimension enables us to understand that the relationship between human beings and nature is not merely material or functional, but also symbolic and transcendent. The environment becomes a space for encounter, not only with others, but also with oneself and with God.

In this sense, nature can be perceived as a place that invites contemplation, silence and reflection. This experience fosters the development of a deeper awareness of the place humans occupy in the world and of their responsibility towards other living beings.

In the existential peripheries, this dimension takes on particular significance. Despite precarious conditions, many communities maintain meaningful ways of relating to nature, where knowledge, practices and beliefs are articulated that strengthen identity and community life. By integrating this dimension, environmental education can help to redefine these experiences and strengthen the link between culture, territory and spirituality.

## **2.3. Spirituality as a vital and relational drive**

The spiritual dimension should not be understood as an abstract reality or one disconnected from concrete life, but rather as a vital dynamism that permeates the whole person. In this sense, spirituality manifests itself in the capacity for communication – as openness to others – in breathing as a sign of shared life, in the energy that drives action, and in the constant movement that characterises all living things. Many languages around the world (there are around 5,000) trace the spiritual dimension, the word '*spirit*', or related words such as '*life*', back to roots that define other concepts such as '*nose*', '*air*', '*breath*', '*exhalation*', '*blow*', '*mouth*', '*word*', '*voice*', *etc.* This means that the original experience of the 'spiritual', in many cultures, has had as its common thread the sense of what life and its meaningful connections communicate and manifest.

This understanding allows us to move beyond static views of the spiritual, recognising it as a relational force that connects human beings with themselves, with others and with the environment. Spirituality, understood in this way, is not limited to individual practices or specific moments, but is expressed in everyday life, in relationships and in the way we inhabit the world.

From this perspective, care for the environment is not merely an ethical obligation, but an expression of a life that recognises itself as interdependent and in constant inter-retro-action.<sup>18</sup> This view is deeply in dialogue with the approach of integral ecology, emphasising that all forms of life are sustained by dynamic and open relationships.

## 2.4. Spirituality of care

One of the central contributions of the spiritual approach to environmental education is the notion of the ‘spirituality of care’.<sup>19</sup> This implies a way of life that recognises the interdependence of all beings and promotes an attitude of attention, respect and commitment towards life in all its forms. In the cited work by L. Boff (2002: 171-172), reference is made to the etymology of “care”. In this sense, caring is closely related to healing and to knowing: one cares for that which is connected through loving knowledge, a friendly bond, with a spirit of refinement, delicacy, attention and respect.

Consequently, environmental care is not limited to the natural environment, but also encompasses the care of people, especially those in situations of greater vulnerability. In this way, a close link is established between care for the environment and social justice.

In the words of Pope Francis, “everything is connected” (*Laudato si*’, 91), which implies that it is not possible to care for nature without at the same time caring for human beings. This holistic vision invites us

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18 See in this regard Edgar Morin (1999) *Los siete saberes necesarios para la educación del futuro*. Paris: Unesco.

19 Leonardo Boff (2002) *El cuidado esencial*. Madrid: Trotta.

to overcome fragmentation and to develop an ethic based on shared responsibility.

From this perspective, environmental education must promote habits and values that reflect this spirituality of care, such as solidarity, moderation, respect for diversity and responsible use of resources.

## **2.5. Ethical awareness and personal transformation**

The spiritual dimension of environmental education also entails a profound personal transformation. It is not merely a matter of acquiring knowledge or modifying external behaviours, but of re-examining one's own values, attitudes and lifestyles.

Pope Francis notes that “there can be no renewal of our relationship with nature without a renewal of humanity itself” (*Laudato si'*, 118), highlighting the need for an inner change to accompany social transformations. This change entails the development of an ethical conscience that enables one to recognise the consequences of one's own actions and to take on an active commitment to caring for the environment.

In this process, education plays a central role, as it can create spaces for reflection, dialogue and discernment that foster personal and communal growth. In the existential peripheries, where living conditions often limit choices, this dimension takes on even greater significance, by offering tools to reinterpret reality and envisage alternatives for change.<sup>20</sup>

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20 On this topic, and the subsequent point, we recommend the experiential work by the Jesuit Federico Carrasquilla (1996) *Escuchemos a los pobres. Apuntes para una antropología del pobre*. Medellín: Centro de Investigaciones Sociales.

## **2.6. Environmental degradation and its impact on human dignity and interiority**

Environmental degradation not only produces material or visible consequences, but also profoundly affects people's dignity and inner life, especially in contexts of exclusion. The lack of access to a healthy environment – characterised by pollution, accumulation of waste, scarcity of basic resources or environmental degradation – has a direct impact on people's perception of themselves and their value as individuals.

Living in degraded environmental conditions can generate feelings of abandonment, invisibility and marginalisation, reinforcing the idea that certain lives are 'worth less' or do not deserve the same conditions as others. In this way, environmental injustice also becomes a form of symbolic injustice, which wounds human dignity and limits the possibilities for integral development.

At the same time, the environment influences people's interiority. The absence of healthy spaces, constant exposure to conditions of deterioration, and the constant worry over basic needs can hinder the development of a balanced inner world, affecting the ability to plan, reflect and find meaning. In this sense, the environment is not merely an external setting, but also a factor that influences emotional, spiritual and relational life.

From the perspective of integral ecology, this reality highlights that care for the environment is closely linked to care for the whole person. As Pope Francis points out, "the human environment and the natural environment deteriorate together" (*Laudato si'*, 48), demonstrating that it is not possible to separate the quality of the environment from the quality of human life.

For this reason, environmental education, especially in the existential peripheries, must also take on a dimension of restoring dignity. It is not merely a matter of improving the material conditions of the environment, but of helping people to recognise themselves as valuable, capable and protagonists of their own reality. In this process,

the strengthening of inner life – through reflection, participation and the construction of meaning – is fundamental to promoting an authentic and lasting transformation.



## CHAPTER 3

# PEDAGOGICAL DIMENSION

**F**or environmental education situated in vulnerable contexts, learning must be meaningful and critical. This requires participatory methodologies (service-learning, community projects), but also a role for the educator as an agent of social transformation. Let us take it step by step.

### **3.1. Education in contexts of vulnerability**

Environmental education, within the framework of existential peripheries, needs to be understood as a situated practice; that is, one that is deeply linked to the context in which it takes place. This implies recognising that educational processes are neither neutral nor universal, but are shaped by the social, cultural and economic realities of the individuals involved.

This approach allows us to move beyond decontextualised educational models, promoting more meaningful and relevant teaching. At the same time, it helps to strengthen the identity of the individuals involved, by recognising their experiences as a valid starting point for learning.

That is why we speak of contexts of “vulnerabilisation”, and not simply “vulnerable”. Because these contexts do not possess an anthropological characteristic of fallibility, or logical vulnerability inherent to the human species. These are stories of people who have suffered neglect, alienation and exploitation through overlapping and interconnected processes, for years, and through both local and international structures. These narratives have required different roles and coordinated responses, which have shaped subjective and collective identities of vulnerability, fragility and instability, and in many cases, have been founded on fear and repression. This makes the situation far more complex, as it involves survival strategies that in many cases have enabled people to exist or resist, even without generating alternatives. That is why it is so difficult to break down certain structures of understanding and cultural integration whose roots run deep into centuries of unequal struggles marked by high levels of violence. Yet it also involves acknowledging the various

responsibilities and their consequences, in order to enable alternative courses of action.

In contexts of such vulnerability undertaken, environmental issues are part of everyday life: the accumulation of waste, lack of access to basic services, pollution or precarious housing are not abstract concepts, but concrete experiences. For this reason, environmental education must start from these realities, valuing the prior knowledge of communities and promoting a critical reading of the environment, whilst analysing events over longer historical timeframes. This allows us to reach diverse traditions and utopian visions, that enable us to see different pasts and futures, rather than the mere short-term pragmatism of victors and vanquished over brief periods. Let us remember that, in the context of the planet's existence, the human species has been but a fleeting moment, and even more so if we compare the duration of humanity's existence with the estimated time of the universe's evolution. It is always a challenge to work with Carl Sagan's famous 'cosmic calendar' to experience the vertigo of our temporal finitude.

### **3.2. Meaningful learning and critical thinking**

One of the central objectives of environmental education is to promote meaningful learning, that is, learning that successfully links content to students' reality and experience. In this sense, it is not merely a matter of conveying information about the environment, but of adopting processes of deep understanding that enable students to interpret and question reality.

The development of critical thinking is vital to this process. In contexts of exclusion, where environmental issues are often linked to structural inequalities, it is necessary for individuals to be able to identify the causes of these situations, analyse their consequences and reflect on possible alternatives for change.

As Pope Francis points out, environmental education must include a critique of certain dominant cultural models, promoting a perspective

that questions consumerism, indifference and the lack of collective responsibility (*Laudato si'*, 210). In this way, education becomes a tool for emancipation and social transformation.

### **3.3. Participatory and community-based methodologies**

In the existential peripheries, environmental education finds fertile ground for the development of participatory methodologies that promote the active involvement of individuals and the collective construction of knowledge. These methodologies are based on the idea that learning is not an individual process, but a social one, in which dialogue, collaboration and shared action play a central role.

Among the most relevant strategies are project-based learning, service-learning and community experiences. These approaches enable the integration of theory and practice, addressing real-world environmental issues and generating concrete interventions that improve the community's quality of life.

Furthermore, this type of methodology cultivates the development of social skills, a sense of belonging and collective responsibility. Education ceases to be a purely school-based process and becomes an experience that involves the whole community.

In this regard, the work of Fr. Martín Baró, the founder of Liberation Psychology, and lines of research that have built upon his work, demonstrate the scope of these strategies of resistance and their value for the psychosocial well-being of these communities. In some cases, many adults living in more stable and secure contexts would quickly find themselves in a severe crisis of meaning if they were systematically subjected to the attacks on human dignity endured by marginalised populations. And yet, in many of these communities, the desire to celebrate, to resist, to cling to some transcendent meaning, and to project opportunities for hope – where others would see only chaos, pain and death – persists in a thousand ways. This is why Baró's work challenges a certain fatalism as the cognitive

identity of marginalised individuals, and the de-ideologizing role that psychology for liberation must play. Something similar was proposed in the Southern Cone by Alfredo Moffatt.<sup>21</sup>

### **3.4. The role of the educator as a companion and agent of transformation**

In this pedagogical approach, the role of the educator takes on fundamental importance. Far from being a mere transmitter of content, the educator acts as a facilitator of processes, capable of guiding, motivating and creating meaningful learning spaces.

This implies an attitude of listening, openness and respect towards students' knowledge and experiences, as well as a commitment to the reality in which educational practice is embedded. The educator does not only teach about the environment, but also promotes values, attitudes and practices that contribute to the care of our 'common home'.

At the same time, the educator is an agent of social transformation, insofar as they can drive initiatives that extend beyond the classroom and have an impact on the community. In this sense, their role is closely linked to the ethical and political dimensions of education.

### **3.5. Environmental education as a transformative practice**

The integration of the above elements allows us to understand environmental education as a transformative practice, aimed not only at the acquisition of knowledge, but also at bringing about concrete changes in reality.

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21 Mary Watkins and Helene Schulman (2008) *Toward Psychologies of Liberation*. Hampshire: Macmillan. And Alfredo Moffatt (1997) *Psicoterapia para sectores marginados*. Buenos Aires, Lumen.

In existential peripheries, this dimension takes on particular significance, as education can become a tool for improving living conditions, strengthening community organisation and promoting the active participation of individuals in shaping their environment.

From this perspective, environmental education involves shaping committed citizens, capable of recognising the interdependence between social and environmental issues, and of acting accordingly. It is an education that does not end in the classroom, but extends into everyday life, contributing to the construction of a fairer, more caring and more sustainable society.

This perspective links the environmental approach to the work of Latin American pedagogy known as ‘pedagogies of’ or ‘for liberation’. This approach, expressed as a practice of freedom and an exercise in social transformation, requires a methodological framework that is embedded right from the planning stage of educational initiatives. It is not mere chaotic spontaneity. It involves firm frameworks that weave together proposals for action and theoretical systematisation, the results of which are reflected in achievements that systematically improve the living conditions of the protagonists. These are not actions that stem from capricious or misguided freedom. It is “freedom from” centre-hegemonic colonisation and “freedom for” the emancipation of the existential peripheries. It is freedom to conceive of better realities, to restore hope and utopias (in an age rife with dystopias and resignation). That is why it implies a genuine ecological paradigm shift.

### **3.6. Educating from the existential peripheries: a shift of the pedagogical paradigm**

It is necessary to distinguish between “educating the poor” and “educating from the existential peripheries”, as both expressions reflect profoundly different approaches in pedagogical, ethical and social terms.

The idea of “educating the poor” is often associated with a top-down, welfare-based approach, in which knowledge is transmitted unilaterally from those who “know” to those who “lack”. In this model, individuals living in vulnerable circumstances are viewed primarily through the lens of their deficiencies, which can lead to educational practices that, whilst well-intentioned, perpetuate relationships of inequality and dependency.

On the contrary, “educating from the existential peripheries” implies a shift in perspective: it is not a matter of intervening in the lives of others viewed as passive, but rather of recognising people and communities as **active agents of knowledge**, bearers of wisdom, experiences and skills. In this approach, the periphery is not just a place of deprivation, but also a space of cultural richness, resilience and collective construction.

From this perception, education is built on dialogue, listening and mutual recognition. The starting point is not deficiencies, but the potential of individuals and their relationship with the territory. This enables the development of more meaningful educational processes, in which content is linked to everyday life and the real issues of the local environment.

Within the framework of environmental education, this distinction is particularly relevant. Educating ‘from’ the peripheries implies that environmental issues are not addressed as external content, but as lived experiences that directly engage communities. In turn, it allows for the appreciation of local care practices, which are often overlooked, and promotes collectively developed solutions.

This approach is linked to critical pedagogy, which proposes moving beyond ‘banking’ education – based on the passive transmission of content – to make way for a dialogical and transformative education. From this perspective, teaching and learning are inseparable processes, in which all individuals actively participate in the construction of knowledge.

Furthermore, educating from the existential peripheries entails taking an ethical stance: it involves recognising the dignity of every person and their capacity to be the protagonist of their own story. In this sense, education ceases to be an instrument of social reproduction and becomes a tool for emancipation and transformation.

In short, the difference is not merely terminological, but profoundly conceptual. Whilst educating ‘the poor’ may reinforce relations of inequality, educating ‘from the existential peripheries’ opens up the possibility of building fairer, more participatory and more contextualised educational processes, in which knowledge is generated in dialogue with reality and in the service of life.

This approach makes it possible to move beyond decontextualised educational models, favouring more meaningful and relevant teaching. At the same time, it helps to strengthen the identity of learners by recognising their experiences as a valid starting point for learning. For this reason, allow me to return to the Latin American pedagogical approach, particularly as embodied by Paulo Freire.

### **3.7. Environmental education from the perspective of Paulo Freire’s pedagogical eroticism**

Education from the existential peripheries finds a solid pedagogical foundation in the thought of Paulo Freire, particularly in his proposal for critical, dialogical and liberating education. Although Freire does not use the term ‘socio-constructivism’ in the strict sense, his approach shares with this school of thought the idea that knowledge is socially constructed, through interaction with others and in relation to reality.

In this sense, education is not understood as the transmission of finished content, but as a process of collective knowledge construction. Freire challenges what he calls “banking education”, in which the educator deposits knowledge into subjects considered passive, and proposes instead an education based on dialogue, problematisation and the active participation of learners.



This perspective is particularly relevant for thinking about education from the existential peripheries. In these contexts, individuals are not mere recipients of aid or instruction, but protagonists of educational processes that stem from their own reality. Everyday experience, local issues and popular knowledge become legitimate starting points for the construction of knowledge.

Similarly, Freirean pedagogy introduces the concept of **consientisation**, understood as the process through which people develop a critical awareness of their reality and the structures that shape it. This process is key to environmental education in contexts of exclusion, as it enables an understanding that ecological issues are not isolated, but are linked to broader social, economic and political dynamics.

From this perspective, educating from the existential peripheries involves creating spaces for dialogue in which individuals can name their world, interpret their reality and plan transformative actions. Within this framework, the educator does not occupy a position of superiority, but rather acts as a facilitator of learning, in a process in which they too learn.

Likewise, the idea of educating from a marginalised identity, and the affirmation of the goodness of the marginalised person's life, of their community bonds and of their everyday aesthetics (as a theory of sensibility, not merely of beauty), will enable the recovery of the values of sensibility within the communities and individuals inhabiting the existential peripheries, as an enabler of the goodness of life that deserves and requires the celebration of the joy of living, of the dignity of being together and recognising one another as valuable, beautiful and good. That is why Freirean pedagogy is an erotic pedagogy, which recovers the life-affirming force and the pleasure that emanates from mutual recognition and the strengthening of everyday networks of meaning within the environments of survival and reproduction of existence. This idea was developed by Miguel Escobar Guerrero,<sup>22</sup>

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22 M. Escobar Guerrero (2013) *Pedagogía erótica.. Paulo Freire y el EZLN*. Available at <https://guao.org/sites/default/files/biblioteca/Pedagog%C3%ADa%20Er%C3%B3tica.pdf>

who defines it as part of the pedagogy “of emancipation”. It seeks to conceptually unite love, the desire for life, and the utopia of transforming the reality of exclusion and violence. It draws on the educational model initiated by the Zapatista communities of the Sierra Lacandona, stemming from the EZLN’s cultural revolution. It is therefore an invitation to foster not only individual but also communal autonomy, placing eroticism at the service of life and a loving education.

Furthermore, the community dimension of learning – central to both social constructivism and Freirean pedagogy – is expressed in the collective construction of solutions to specific problems. In the case of environmental education, this can take the form of community projects addressing issues such as waste management, access to water or environmental care, integrating technical expertise and local knowledge.

Ultimately, education from the existential peripheries finds in Paulo Freire’s pedagogy a fundamental key to its development, by proposing an educational model that recognises the dignity of individuals, values their knowledge and promotes their active participation in the transformation of reality. In this way, it takes shape as an educational practice consistent with the principles of integral ecology, by linking learning with social commitment and the care of life in all its dimensions.

## CHAPTER 4

# PASTORAL DIMENSION

**H**aving reached this stage in our reflection, we wish to return to the pastoral dimension, drawing on Pope Francis's guidelines regarding a Church on the move, and the 'smell of the sheep' – which the Church's presence on the peripheries must embody as it takes the lead in processes of eco-logical education (based on the logic of our common home, a home for everything and everyone). Here, social pastoral care and environmental action come together. Consequently, the community comes to be seen as an educational space, where Christian witness and commitment manifest themselves as the driving force behind a change in lifestyle, through an ecological conversion, towards a utopia of a creation-wide banquet at which we sit down to enjoy ourselves alongside all of creation and its creatures.

#### **4.1. The Church on the move to the existential peripheries**

The pastoral dimension of environmental education is part of the Church's call to be a "Church on the move", committed to the concrete realities of people, especially those living on the existential peripheries. This approach, strongly promoted by Pope Francis and echoed in the teachings of Leo XIV, invites us to move beyond a pastoral ministry focused exclusively on the sacramental or institutional, to open ourselves to an active presence in the most vulnerable areas.

In this sense, pastoral ministry is not limited to transmitting religious content, but seeks to accompany people holistically, attending to their material, social, cultural and spiritual needs. The environmental issue, as a constitutive dimension of human life, thus becomes a legitimate and necessary domain of pastoral action. Environmental education from a pastoral perspective therefore implies making a concrete commitment to the care of our 'common home', especially where its deterioration affects the most vulnerable sectors most severely.

## 4.2. Social pastoral ministry and care for our common home

Environmental pastoral ministry is closely linked to social pastoral ministry, insofar as both share a concern for human dignity and justice. In the existential peripheries, environmental degradation cannot be separated from conditions of poverty, exclusion and inequality, which demands a comprehensive response from the Church.

In line with *Laudato si'*, Pope Leo XIV has emphasised the need to promote a culture of care that integrates the ecological and social dimensions. This perspective recognises that the environment is a common good and that its protection forms part of the Christian commitment to one's neighbour, especially the most vulnerable.

It must be underlined that, until *Laudato si'* and subsequently the exhortation *Querida Amazonia*, the Church had not had a magisterium that specifically and deeply addressed a doctrine concerning ecology and the environmental challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It is only with Francis that the Church has placed the idea of the common care of the planet, alongside that of the poor, at the centre of its concerns. We already had a long tradition of caring for the poor, and even a theology of liberation, with an emphasis on criticising the mechanisms of marginalisation, exploitation and impoverishment. But linking this cause to that of environmental care, calling it 'care for our common home', is something original whose full epistemic revolution we have yet to fully appreciate. For it means we are adding a commandment – one about honouring life and the living planet of which we are a part – and ceasing to regard ourselves as a rarity, given that we are merely 'passing through' this Earth. As if intelligent life were the exclusive heritage of humans, arising from some strange extra-terrestrial phenomenon. This notion of human exceptionalism has been debunked,<sup>23</sup> yet Francis is the first to uphold it as a pastoral key for the universal Church. This represents a full-blown paradigm shift that will bring profound consequences once the Church has fully embraced it in all its breadth.

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23 Jean-Marie Schaeffer (2007) *La fin de l'exception humaine*. Paris, Ed. Gallimard.

From this perspective, environmental education in the context of pastoral ministry is not reduced to the transmission of content, but is geared towards generating community-based processes of awareness and action. It is about promoting concrete practices that improve living conditions, whilst strengthening community bonds and a sense of shared responsibility. That pastoral ministry involves looking after native forests, reforesting environments that have been altered by human activity and unchecked extra-activism, and safeguarding biodiversity in every sense – biological, geological, ideological, cultural and political – are some of the alternative and transformative challenges of this Franciscan doctrine.

### **4.3. The community as a space for education and evangelisation**

Church communities – parishes, chapels, congregations, movements and grassroots organisations – constitute privileged spaces for the development of environmental education in the existential peripheries. Within them, education takes place not only through formal settings, but also through shared life, witness and participation in concrete actions.

Teaching how-to live-in community is part of this environmental education, not only as a concept that democratises roles and functions, but as an exercise in taking a leading role towards the Kingdom of Heaven, where the will of the Creator is deliberately sought and celebrated in every act of justice, of non-violent respect for all forms of life, of a solidarity-based economy and technology at the service of the most vulnerable, of present and future generations. Let us recall the Brundtland Report's definition of sustainability: a way of life that does not jeopardise that of future generations. Therefore, an environmentally connected community will be one that considers not only its present relationships, but also its relationships with its ancestors, its cultural and ecological heritage, as well as its future relationships – the legacy it will leave to its descendants and to those who, many years from now, will bear the burden of its current decisions, for better or for worse.

That is why we say that a community is shaped as a space for holistic learning, where the present, past and future, faith, life and social commitment, the physical and the spiritual, and individuals and communities are brought together. Environmental education will seek to take this perspective into account so that the analysis of the challenges to be faced can be considered in the light of a history of actions – both positive and negative – of our predecessors, and in a spirit of shared responsibility with future generations who will inherit the identity of the present. Through initiatives such as workshops, awareness campaigns, community projects or solidarity actions, experiences will be created that link environmental education with everyday life, enriched by the legacy of the past and driven by the hope of its survival in the legacy left to future generations.

For this very reason, the community dimension fosters the development of a collective identity and a sense of belonging, fundamental elements for sustaining long-term processes of transformation. In this context, environmental education also becomes an experience of communion, in which we learn to care for our common home together.

#### **4.4. Witness, consistency and Christian commitment**

One of the central aspects of the pastoral dimension is the value of witness. The credibility of the educational and evangelising proposal depends, to a large extent, on the coherence between the message and concrete practices. In this sense, care for the environment cannot be merely a discourse, but must be reflected in lifestyles, community decisions and everyday actions.

The teachings of Pope Leo XIII have emphasised the importance of this consistency, highlighting that ecological commitment forms part of a faith lived authentically. Care for creation is thus presented as a concrete expression of love for one's neighbour and of responsibility towards the future.

In the existential peripheries, this witness takes on particular significance, as it unfolds in contexts where conditions are most adverse. Yet it is precisely in these places that the lived experience of faith can acquire greater transformative power, as it translates into concrete actions that improve people's lives.

In previous paragraphs we highlighted the example of a martyr of the peasant labour movement in the Argentine Republic, the Blessed layman Wenceslao Pedernera. Let us return briefly to his example. As we mark the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his brutal murder, the memory of Wenceslao brings to mind that of so many good, humble, helpful men, whose stories were neither extraordinary nor exceptional. The son of peasants, politically committed to the welfare of rural labourers, Wenceslao left his parents' farm (in the province of San Luis) to move to Mendoza. His life there was that of a hard-working family man, who, according to the testimony of his wife, Coca Cornejo, grew up working in the vineyards of Bodegas Gargantini. He was a trade union representative at this winery, and soon, after joining Catholic Action, he became a leading figure in the rural peasant movement. He was trained in courses that taught him to read the Bible through the lens of everyday life's problems and the commitment of a Church in transition. The Second Vatican Council was underway. Wenceslao decided to move with his entire family to deepen his commitment, and he went to the diocese of La Rioja, where the bishop and later martyr, Blessed Enrique Angelelli, was implementing the conciliar changes fearlessly and with vigour. There, Wenceslao worked to promote sustainable agriculture, food sovereignty, and a social and cooperative economic system. Every week he sought to gather his people to reflect on the Gospel and, from there, to guide the cooperative's decisions.

In a context of landowners linked to mining and vineyards, accustomed to keeping labourers and their families in ignorance and misery, obedient and submissive, Wenceslao's approach, like that of the entire diocese of La Rioja, was regarded as an ideological threat, akin to atheistic communism. He was machine-gunned in the early hours of 25 July 1976 and died asking his daughters not to let their



hearts be filled with hatred, but to learn to forgive their executioners during the siesta that same day, at almost the same hour as Jesus.

Nothing about his life was spectacular or grandiose. Yet his witness continued to resonate among the peasants, and today he is regarded as the patron of Argentina's peasant movement. A small light, joined by many others, and that of Pope Francis himself, which encourages us to turn our gaze to the land, rugged in those foothills of the Andes, from where her work of faith and service bore rich fruit for the hunger of many.

These testimonies, like the one I have just shared with you, must be revealed, systematised and shared, because every land, every community has its own history and its own foundations. Words convince, but testimonies move, inspire, enthuse and guide. From this comes the transformation of lives and organisations.

#### **4.5. Towards a holistic and transformative pastoral ministry of education**

The integration of the environmental dimension into pastoral action enables progress towards a more holistic educational approach, in which formation, spirituality and social commitment are interwoven. This perspective responds to the challenge of forming people capable of living their faith in an incarnate way, committed to reality and oriented towards the common good.

Environmental education from a perspective of pastoral ministry therefore involves promoting an ecological awareness that is not limited to the care of nature, but which includes the defence of human dignity and the building of more just and supportive communities. In this process, the Church is called to be a sign of hope, accompanying people in their quests and strengthening their capacity for transformation.

In this way, the pastoral dimension of environmental education in the existential peripheries emerges as a privileged space for making visible a faith that is translated into action, a spirituality that is embodied in daily life, and an education that contributes to the building of a more humane and sustainable world.

## CHAPTER 5

# INTEGRATION OF THE DIMENSIONS

To conclude our work, we wish to bring together the spiritual, pedagogical and pastoral dimensions, proposing that environmental education be a transformative practice with an impact on our real communities, upholding the idea that there is no soteriology of the individual detached from the community, and that an eco-logical perspective necessarily implies a universal, systemic and process-oriented approach. In our case, we shall seek to apply this to the concrete practice of education through the spirit of partnership between Christian schools, such as the Lasallian organisation.

### **5.1. Towards a holistic approach to environmental education**

The journey undertaken throughout the previous chapters leads us to affirm that environmental education in the existential peripheries can only be fully understood from a holistic perspective. The spiritual, pedagogical and pastoral dimensions are not isolated domains, but are deeply interrelated and mutually enriching.

The spiritual dimension provides a profound sense of care, recognising the value of creation and the dignity of every person. The pedagogical dimension offers the tools to build meaningful, critical and contextualised educational processes. For its part, the pastoral dimension links these elements to a concrete practice of accompaniment, commitment and community transformation.

This integration is part of the framework of integral ecology, which proposes moving beyond fragmented views of reality to make way for a broader and more complex understanding, where “everything is connected” (*Laudato si'*, 91). In this sense, environmental education emerges as a privileged space for articulating knowledge, values and actions aimed at caring for life in all its dimensions.

## 5.2. The integration of spirituality, pedagogy and pastoral ministry

The integration of these dimensions is manifested in concrete practices that combine reflection, learning and action. From this perspective, we can make these simple, interconnected statements:

- **Spirituality** is not reduced to an individual experience, but is expressed in a commitment to caring for others and the environment.
- **Pedagogy** ceases to be a merely technical process and becomes a transformative experience, shaping critical and participatory individuals.
- **Pastoral** ministry is established as an active presence in reality, capable of accompanying community processes and promoting the common good.

In the existential peripheries, this integration takes on particular significance, as it enables a holistic response to complex issues that cannot be addressed from a single perspective. Environmental education, within this framework, becomes a bridge between reflection and action, between faith and life, between knowledge and commitment.

When the Church's tradition recovers its ancient educational heritage – from art in the service of the people, such as the frescoes, altars, scents, colours and music with which celebrations were held – within a cultural framework that today seems almost incomprehensible to us, we nevertheless regain the perspective that a holistic pastoral ministry cannot today set aside those artistic expressions, endowing them with the theological meaning of the challenges we face today. For this reason, this pastoral, pedagogical and spiritual integration must also be expressed through musical, theatrical, literary, visual and even kinaesthetic (dance and choreography) forms that capture the dynamism of youth in proposals which, before words, to stir the aesthetic perception of reconciling, kind and respectful senses of the wonder with which our planet gifts us with colours, shapes and flavours. Criticism of the medieval Church, and almost exclusively of

the European tradition, has led us to throw out the bathwater with the baby inside! It is fulfilling and inspiring to see the marches in defence of the native forest, or the gatherings of women guardians of seeds, or of indigenous groups defending their ecosystems, or the protests for the preservation of glaciers or hills, and how they express their deepest convictions through music, dance and a wealth of visual art. A Christian school seeking to provide a transformative environmental education cannot ignore the pedagogical power of art for a holistic pastoral approach.

### **5.3. Education from the peripheries: a transformative proposal**

Educating from the existential peripheries implies accepting that the paradigm shift cuts across all the dimensions analysed. It is not merely a matter of bringing content to vulnerable contexts, but of building educational processes from reality, with the individuals involved and in dialogue with their experiences.

This approach recognises communities as protagonists, values their knowledge and promotes their active participation in the transformation of their environment. At the same time, it makes socio-environmental injustices visible and generates collective responses aimed at caring for our common home. This follows the long-standing focus proposed by Leonardo Boff in the 1980s, who stated that the Church must be reborn through small grassroots communities.<sup>24</sup> Today, the meaning of community life represents a challenge which, far from being confined to Christian values, has been appropriated by liberal market advertising to promote communities based on consumerist affiliations. Meanwhile, the Church seems to fear the revival of the testimony of community life.

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24 Leonardo Boff (1984) *Eclesiogénesis. Las comunidades de base reinventan la Iglesia*. Santander, Sal Terrae. Also (1982) *Iglesia: carisma y poder*. Santander, Sal Terrae.

In this sense, environmental education emerges as a tool for social transformation, capable of contributing to the building of fairer, more supportive and sustainable communities – youth communities, cultural communities, communities of women or migrants, of readers or musicians, of all kinds. But it is essential to reclaim the sense of community in the face of a market that reduces the person to a customer or consumer, and the sense of community to a network driven by personalised desires and tastes taken to extremes. This challenging transformation of a sense of community will involve educating for tolerance, respect and recognition; educating for critical thinking, care and mutual support. It is not merely seductive cosmetics; it is not an external modification, but a profoundly inner one, insofar as it involves a change in the ways we think, relate to one another and inhabit the world.

It is interesting to note what neurobiology has contributed since the 1990s with theories such as Dr Steven Porges' Polyvagal Theory. This highlights how certain specialised, albeit ancient, parts of our autonomic nervous system have evolved to detect safety cues in the environment, long before the neocortex can even think about it or form ideas on the matter. Our nervous system detects openness, safety, kindness and pro-sociality through our limbic and reptilian systems, without rational conceptualisation even coming into play. This shows us how much we must prioritise the creation of safe communities in our schools, which offer sincere protection and genuine welcome to children -girls and boys- and adolescents who expect kind treatment as a form of recognition, prior to any scientific or technological theory. These welcoming communities are the catalyst for conceiving the environment as a space for affirming belonging, and a matrix of care that grows exponentially from peers towards the surrounding otherness.

We do not need to 'do' anything to learn to love. We are kind to the extent that we allow ourselves to be loved. But the market for selling security needs to create consumers of fear, so that they will buy technological security or prostheses of dignity. In such a context, environmental education will begin by learning to breathe

calmly, to look kindly and to listen attentively to the voice of our brothers and sisters.

## 5.4. Challenges for rethinking education

Based on the above, it is possible to identify some key challenges in rethinking education from this perspective. For example:

- **Moving beyond traditional, top-down models** by promoting participatory, dialogical and context-sensitive education.
- **Integrating knowledge:** bringing together scientific knowledge, traditional wisdom and spiritual dimensions.
- **Training committed educators**, capable of supporting complex processes and working in vulnerable contexts.
- **Strengthening the community dimension** by promoting networks of collaboration and active participation.
- **Adopting an ethic of care** that permeates all educational and social practices.

These challenges involve not only methodological changes, but also a profound transformation in the very conception of education, understood as a process oriented towards the holistic development of the individual and the common good.

## 5.5. Projection and meaning

In a global context such as that described above, marked by socio-environmental crisis, fear of difference, heightened hatred, the arms race, media coprophagy and the daringness of certain sterile judicial and political systems, education from the existential peripheries presents itself as a proposal with great transformative potential. By integrating the spiritual, pedagogical and pastoral dimensions, it offers a complex and committed response to current challenges.

This perspective invites us to rethink the meaning of education, not merely as the transmission of knowledge, but as a process of



holistic formation that enables people to understand their reality, find meaning in it, and act to transform it.

Ultimately, educating in this spirit means committing to a more conscious, more caring and more responsible humanity, capable of caring for our common home and building a fairer future for all.

## **5.6. Complexity, autopoiesis and sustainability: towards a dynamic and holistic approach**

To deepen our understanding of environmental education in terms of integration and complexity, it is fruitful to revisit the notion of *autopoiesis* developed by Maturana. Although this concept belongs to the field of the biology of knowledge, its analogous application to the educational field enriches our reflection on processes of learning and transformation in contexts of existential peripheries. From this perspective, education for planetary sustainability cannot be conceived as a linear or external process, but rather as an emergent dynamic that is built from within communities, in dialogue with their environment. This reinforces the idea of educating *from* the existential peripheries, recognising in them not only deficiencies, but also potential, knowledge and capacities for self-organisation.

Furthermore, this approach offers a systemic understanding of reality, in which the various elements cannot be analysed in isolation. Environmental education, in line with integral ecology, requires the creation of *synergies* between diverse dimensions –spiritual, pedagogical, social and pastoral – fostering processes in which the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

One particularly relevant aspect that we wish to emphasise is the recognition of unstable equilibrium as a defining characteristic of living systems. In contexts of poverty or in emerging countries, tensions between development, social justice and environmental care are inevitable. Far from being denied, these tensions must be embraced as part of the educational process, fostering a critical perspective that enables them to be managed creatively and responsibly. From

a pedagogical perspective, this implies moving away from rigid and prescriptive models to make way for open, flexible and participatory approaches that accompany real processes of transformation. Education is thus conceived as a living process, constantly evolving, where error, conflict and uncertainty are part of learning.

In essence, incorporating the notion of autopoiesis helps to strengthen an understanding of environmental education as a complex, relational and dynamic practice. In conjunction with the spiritual, pedagogical and pastoral dimensions, this approach helps to consolidate an educational approach capable of responding to the challenges of sustainability from the existential peripheries, fostering communities that are more aware, resilient and committed to caring for life in all its forms.

## **5.7. Relationship to Lasallian pedagogy**

Based on the above reflections, and despite my limited knowledge of the pedagogical work carried out over the years within Lasallian communities, I would like to highlight some interrelationships between what I believe has been characteristic of the spirituality of Saint John Baptist de La Salle and environmental education as I have presented it.

### **5.7.1. Option for the poor and the peripheries**

When De La Salle founded his educational work, he has in mind the poor and marginalised children, at a time when education was a privilege enjoyed by few. He did not educate ‘to integrate into the system’, but to dignify and transform the lives of the most vulnerable. This connects directly with the idea of educating from the peripheries, not as charity but as a recognition of dignity. This allows us to identify a key convergence: education from this cultural standpoint is an act of justice, not of charity.

### **5.7.2. Education rooted in reality**

Likewise, Lasallian pedagogy is not abstract. It uses the mother tongue (not Latin), draws on content useful for life, and pays clear attention to the concrete reality of the students. This is linked with the situated education we discussed earlier: starting from real life, not from decontextualised content

### **5.7.3. Educational community**

De La Salle did not view education as an individual task, but as a communal one: from the very beginning, teamwork among educators was encouraged. But care was also taken to build community within the school (of parents, former students, benefactors, associations of lay people, etc.). And at all times, the necessary pursuit of genuine, holistic accompaniment, close to the students and their families, was emphasised. This links us to the pastoral aspect of communities as spaces of life. And to the pedagogical aspect relating to the social learning that everyone undergoes when exposed to the existential peripheries and their creative resilience in marginality.

### **5.7.4. The centrality of the person**

In the Lasallian tradition, each student is seen as a dignified individual, not as a number, seeking their integral development (not merely intellectual). This dialogues directly with integral ecology, as proposed in Pope Francis' socio-ecological thought, and with the critique of 'educating the poor' in a welfare-oriented manner. Paul Ricoeur proposed considering the definition of the person as an attitude, and the Andean communities of the Inca Empire defined the person as the integrated duality of man and woman. This leads us to reflect on how far we still have to go in seeking to transcend the idea of the 'person' as a solipsistic, singular and unchanging unit,

like a cog in a machine that adds parts to parts, as Merleau-Ponty criticised when speaking of the body itself. Our common home needs a community that is not merely the sum of individuals, but also of persons with a dynamism and dignity that recovers their unique gift and the strength of their originality in the service of the whole.

#### **5.7.5. Spirituality incarnated in education**

For De La Salle, education is also a spiritual mission. Faith is lived out in daily life. For this reason, the classroom is a space for encountering science and technology, but also for encountering God, oneself and others. In this sense, the educator is a witness, and not merely an instructor. This is closely linked to the previously discussed spiritual and pastoral dimension, where education is presented as an experience of meaning, not merely of academic knowledge.

#### **5.7.6. The role of the educator**

This is a key aspect of our reflection. The Lasallian educator accompanies, guides and cares. They are committed to the lives of the students and their communities. That is why they educate from a position of closeness. They maintain a deep affinity with the ideas of Paulo Freire (the educator as companion), his ethos of being rooted in life, its beauty and its dignity, even in circumstances where others see only deprivation, denial and disability. That is why education is a transformative experience committed to the common destiny of creation.

#### **5.7.7. Limits and challenges**

However, we must acknowledge that not everything aligns fully between environmental education and the Lasallian pedagogical tradition. For example, De La Salle does not develop an explicit structural critique as Freire does or as proposed in *Laudato si'*. His approach is more formative and moral than political. But this is not

a problem, but an opportunity; we can propose a complementarity between the Lasallian tradition and environmental education from a critical pedagogical perspective, given that the pedagogical approach of Saint John Baptist de La Salle shares significant common ground with education from the existential peripheries, particularly in its commitment to the most vulnerable sectors, its community-based approach, and its holistic understanding of the person. His embodied pedagogy, centred on dignity and accompaniment, offers valuable insights for conceiving an environmental education with spiritual, pedagogical and pastoral meaning.

## Projections

The educator Ivan Illich (1926-2002) was an Austrian Catholic priest, known for his radical critique of modern institutions (education, healthcare, transport). He was educated at the Pontifical Gregorian University and worked primarily as a diocesan priest in New York. He distrusted institutions when they became self-referential or incapable of touching people's lived experience. If schooling remains abstract or merely prescriptive, it is unlikely to inspire action. Therefore, rather than seeking to 'convince', we must foster processes where young people find meaning, genuine participation and the capacity to make a difference. In *La convivencialidad* (1973), he advocated tools that enhance personal autonomy rather than subjugating it, and was a pioneer in ecological criticism of industrial development and energy consumption. That is why we find it an interesting testimony with which to conclude our reflection.

At a time when the most notorious pandemic – that of COVID-19 – has laid bare other, more insidious pandemics that have been eroding our traditional structures, acknowledging that Illich warned us of genuine challenges means realising that the crisis in schools, families, the justice system, politics, and even the very international institutions that guarantee peace and equity among nations did not begin with a virus swimming in the soup in Wuhan. We said at the outset that if the education of the future is not environmental, there will be no future. And we conclude by recalling this, having

explained that education encompasses everything from the neuro-perceived environment<sup>25</sup> by the autonomic nervous system, through the ways in which we accustom our bodies and inhabit our spaces, to the structure of thought and the community, local and international functions and inter-retro-actions.

The pandemic of the disenchantment of the world, the pandemic of the desecration of nature, reduced to a mere resource, the pandemic of a utilitarian and opportunistic epistemology, the pandemic of exponential acceleration and the consumerist way of life (some critics, such as Rensselaer Van Potter or Robert Lustig, call it *the American way of life*'), and other such pandemics, have rendered the lives of large sections of the population so vulnerable that today, eight people in the financial world accumulate more wealth than the poorest half of humanity (over 3.5 billion people). Additionally, these individuals are the owners of the major technological and communications conglomerates that generate and trade in data and the sale of information sensitive to the reality of millions of people.

If we add to this reality the fact that a vast proportion of humanity forms its ideas about others and about the cosmos based on images and concepts derived from these concentrated systems of information and communication, it is beyond doubt that our representations of the world will be heavily influenced by what is said or suggested there. Never have reality and truth been so far apart.

In such a context, environmental education must be the finest form of prophecy in its dual sense: as both a denunciation and a proclamation. For environmental education in the existential peripheries to mobilise young people, it is not enough to simply convey content; rather, it is necessary to create meaningful, participatory and purposeful experiences, where young people recognise themselves as protagonists in real processes of personal and community transformation. That is

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25 Neuroception is a neologism coined by S. Porges to describe the ability of the autonomic nervous system to capture sensory information from the environment, without that information having been rationalised or represented in concepts or ideas.

why I propose to conclude with a list of practical points, consistent with the overall approach proposed, which will spark a willingness to act and critical responses, with a view to moving from reflection back to everyday teaching. These are merely suggestions, but I hope they will spark new and better concrete proposals.

A. Moving from content to experiences. Young people are not motivated by speeches, but by experiences that engage them: concrete projects in the neighbourhood (vegetable gardens, recycling, reclaiming spaces); trips out into the local area (not just the classroom); direct contact with real-world issues; so that they can say *"this has to do with me"*.

B. Let them have a real (not symbolic) leading role. If young people merely carry out adult-centred ideas, they lose interest. We need spaces for decision-making (assemblies, project design); concrete leadership roles; active listening to their proposals, or as Freire would put it: not educating them 'for', but educating *with them*.

C. Connecting with meaning (spiritual dimension). Illich insisted that human beings seek meaning and autonomy, but must do so in harmony with their patterns of consumption and use of resources. If a spiritual dimension does not emerge to connect us with the environment we inhabit, there will be no deep commitment. That is why environmental education poses existential questions: what kind of world do we want? it fosters spaces for reflection and celebration (it is not merely activism); and it links ecology with dignity, justice and the future, not in a moralising sense, but by opening up to questions that challenge us.

D. Work from the community perspective. Motivation grows when there is a sense of belonging. That is why we propose group projects with a visible impact; working with local organisations; celebrating collective achievements, etc. The sense of community sustains commitment over time.

E. Demonstrate concrete impact. If they do not see results, frustration or apathy sets in. We must therefore set small, visible goals; measurable

changes (even if modest), as well as establishing a robust system for recording and communicating achievements: “*We did this and it made a difference*” is more powerful than any theory.

F. Integrate youth language and culture (art, styles and meanings). If the language doesn’t connect, the message doesn’t get through. That is why it is important to use social media, art, music and audio-visuals; relatable narratives and testimonials (real stories, personal accounts); and creative spaces. Adapt not only the content, but also the form

G. Educate through conflict (do not avoid it). Socio-environmental issues involve real tensions. To this end, we have various strategies for addressing and discussing them, such as debates on consumption, inequality and power; critical analysis of reality; and safe spaces for dissent. This fosters critical thinking and genuine commitment.

H. Institutional coherence. If an institution says one thing and does another, it loses credibility. It is essential to generate concrete practices that lead to tangible improvements within the community itself (waste reduction, responsible use of resources), to promote the testimonies of educators; to make aligned institutional decisions. Without coherence, there is no moral authority.

Nowadays, young people have more dystopias in their heads and on their mobile devices than exciting utopias. However, when young people lack the desire to transform the world, it is inevitable that they will prefer the explosion of a final chaos that allows them to believe once more that everything will end, so that something else may begin. Erich Fromm said as much many years ago in his forgotten work “*Can Man Survive?*” (a text analysing Cold War politics and the prevailing collective psychology in post-war Europe). Change is necessary, but if it is not gradual, coordinated and planned, it becomes chaotic, disruptive and violent. And the triumph of hyper-liberal capitalism has made it clear that, in the words of a certain deified autocrat: freedom and democracy do not go hand in hand. Of course, from that perspective, if people want to be free, they must abolish democracy (who will then govern the world’s destiny?), and if they accept living in a democracy, they must relinquish their



freedom (does this perhaps mean we will inexorably confuse freedom with anarchy?). Meanwhile, amidst such demobilising and extremist confusion, scenes of the end of the world, of the final battle, of the extermination of those who are different, continue to mount. Young people know far more about what they DO NOT want, what will NOT happen, what must NOT continue... than what they DO desire, want or need.

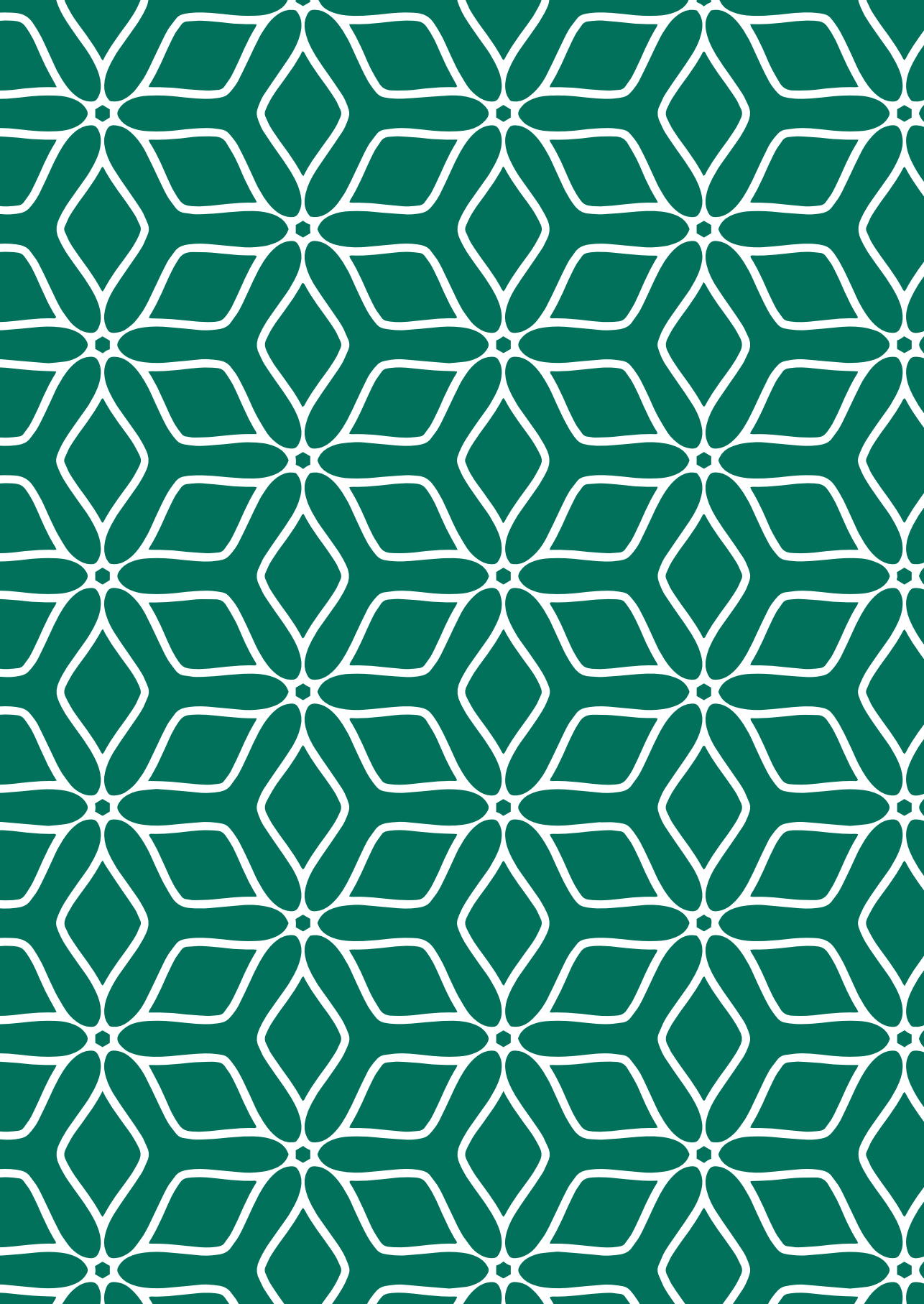
Environmental education must regenerate scenarios where utopias are once again possible, where we once again desire a better world, where the existential witness of so many communities and individuals mobilise wills, and where creation and human beings are once again filled with God, once again seeing glimpses of the divine in others (the root of the word ‘enthusiasm’).

Let us put it in the very words of the first environmental encyclical in the history of the Church, *Laudato si'*: “We are faced not with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather with one complex crisis which is both social and environmental” (no. 139), because “everything is connected” (*Laudato si'*, 91). Hence, “environmental education has broadened its goals... it tends now to include a critique of the ‘myths’ of modernity” (*Laudato si'*, 210). And undoubtedly, “there can be no renewal of our relationship with nature without a renewal of humanity itself” (*Laudato si'*, 118).

***“It is too late to be pessimistic”***

(Yann Arthus-Bertrand. Documentary *Home*, 2005)







# Brothers of the Christian Schools



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