

## **Critical Ecospirituality and Ecclesial Subsidiarity A Reflection on Sean McDonagh's Environmental Theology for Agrarian Justice in Sekadau, West Kalimantan**

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### **Abstract**

This study seeks to develop a theological understanding of Rimba Kobar's critical ecospirituality as a contextual faith praxis that promotes agrarian justice in Sekadau, West Kalimantan, in the light of Sean McDonagh's environmental theology. Employing a qualitative-reflective theological approach, the research explores the ecological spirituality of local communities and connects it with the principle of subsidiarity in Catholic Canon Law. The findings indicate that Rimba Kobar's ecospirituality represents not only an ecological expression but also a form of moral resistance against agrarian structural injustice, resonating with the spirit of subsidiarity affirming the autonomy and dignity of grassroots communities in caring for creation. The integration of critical ecospirituality and subsidiarity paves the way for a contextual and participatory reconstruction of Catholic environmental theology, one that stands in solidarity with local communities. Thus, this study highlights the necessity of synergy between ecological theology, local spirituality, and Church law in realizing socio-ecological justice within Indonesia's agrarian landscape.

**Keywords:** Agrarian Justice; Critical Ecospirituality; Ecclesiastical Subsidiarity; Environmental Theology Sean McDonagh; Rimba Kobar

### **Introduction**

West Kalimantan, particularly Sekadau Regency, is currently facing profound ecological challenges resulting from the extensive expansion of non-extractive plantation industries. This expansion has caused severe environmental degradation, including deforestation, biodiversity loss, and ecosystem disruption, while simultaneously provoking agrarian conflicts that generate social injustice and threaten the sustainability of local livelihoods (Prakosa et al., 2023). These socio-ecological consequences underscore the urgent need for a holistic approach to address such multidimensional issues.

Within this context, environmental theology emerges as an essential instrument for the Church to respond contextually to ecological and social crises, fostering ecological awareness, promoting social justice, and supporting sustainable resource management within local communities. The central dilemma in Sekadau Regency lies in the tension between the economic necessities of local communities and the ecological impacts of industrial agricultural practices, particularly those associated with non-extractive plantations. While such activities provide income and employment for certain segments of the population, they simultaneously pose significant threats to environmental sustainability through biodiversity loss and land-use conflicts.

Meanwhile, the Church, as a social and moral institution, encounters challenges in applying the ecclesial principle of subsidiarity, especially in agrarian disputes involving multiple stakeholders with divergent interests. This situation demands a balanced framework integrating ecological sustainability, social justice, and the empowerment of local communities. The agrarian conflict in Rimba Kobar, Nanga Pemubuh Village, exemplifies the complex interaction between economic necessity and environmental conservation. A portion of the local population, organized under the Palm Oil Farmers' Union (Serikat Petani Kelapa Sawit, SPKS), had previously converted sections of their customary forest into oil palm plantations to improve household income (Fera et al., 2024; Lorensius, 2025).

However, this initiative led to adverse ecological consequences, including water quality deterioration and habitat degradation. Responding to these challenges, the community together with the village government, Kaoem Telapak, and SPKS declared 268 hectares as the Rimba Kobar Customary Forest in March 2025, marking a collective commitment to preserve the environment and protect indigenous resources (Herkulanus, 2025). Despite the declaration of the Rimba Kobar Customary Forest as a conservation effort, agrarian challenges in the area remain unresolved.

Many oil palm farmers continue to face obstacles in accessing markets and obtaining fair commodity prices, while tensions persist between conservation advocates and those whose livelihoods depend on oil palm cultivation. This situation highlights the necessity of adopting an inclusive and sustainable approach to natural resource management one that harmoniously integrates ecological, economic, and social dimensions within the local context. Such integration is vital for achieving a balanced coexistence between community welfare and long-term environmental preservation. This study focuses on the application of Sean McDonagh's principle of critical ecospirituality within environmental theology, particularly in advancing agrarian justice in Sekadau Regency.

It aims to explore the Church's role as an agent of socio-ecological transformation capable of nurturing ecological consciousness and promoting social justice at the community level. The research investigates how theological values can be translated into practical actions, such as sustainable natural resource management and community empowerment. This focus underscores the interconnection between spiritual, ethical, and socio-ecological dimensions in addressing contemporary agrarian challenges within a contextually grounded theological framework.

A qualitative case study approach is employed to analyze the implementation of critical ecospirituality and ecclesial subsidiarity within the framework of agrarian justice in Sekadau. Data were gathered through in-depth interviews with religious leaders, community representatives, and agrarian actors, complemented by participatory field observations for comprehensive contextual understanding. The data were analyzed phenomenologically to interpret meanings embedded in local practices and perceptions regarding ecological and agrarian issues. This methodological design enables an in-depth exploration of the interaction between theological values, social dynamics, and ecological experiences, generating a holistic and contextually nuanced understanding of the issues examined.

The urgency of this research lies in the critical need to integrate environmental theological perspectives into pastoral practices so that the Church may function not only as a spiritual institution but also as an active agent of socio-ecological transformation. Through this integration, the Church can play a pivotal role in addressing ecological crises and agrarian conflicts faced by local communities. By promoting sustainable natural resource management and enhancing ecological and social awareness, this study

emphasizes the importance of aligning theological values with practical implementation to foster community-based, contextually relevant, and sustainable socio-ecological transformation.

## Method

This study employs a reflective-theological qualitative approach that integrates theological hermeneutics and contextual analysis to connect faith reflection with the lived experiences of local communities. The research began with an extensive review of Sean McDonagh's key works, *To Care for the Earth* (1986) and *Passion for the Earth* (1994), to establish the foundational principles of Catholic environmental theology. Subsequently, contextual analysis was applied to the Rimba Kobar case through document studies, limited interviews, and pastoral reflections focusing on the ecological spirituality of the Dayak communities in Sekadau. Complementarily, normative-canonical analysis was undertaken by examining the principle of subsidiarity within Catholic Church law particularly in the Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church (arts. 185-191) and *Gaudium et Spes* 26 to assess their relevance for ecological empowerment. The final phase consisted of theological synthesis integrating McDonagh's environmental theology, local ecospirituality, and the subsidiarity principle to construct a contextual theology of critical ecospirituality, affirming that praxis-based theological reflection legitimizes local experience as an epistemologically valid source of theological knowledge.

## Results and Discussion

This section presents the results and discussion, highlighting the dynamics of critical ecospirituality as a contextual praxis of faith in responding to ecological crises. The analysis begins with a theological and social understanding of the Rimba Kobar ecospirituality, which affirms the sacred relationship between humans and nature and proposes ecological spirituality as a critique of extractive capitalism. Subsequently, the principle of subsidiarity in Catholic Church law and its relevance to Sean McDonagh's environmental theology are examined. Through the dialectic between critical ecospirituality and ecclesial subsidiarity, this section emphasizes the theological contribution toward the formation of a participatory, liberative, and sustainable theology of ecospirituality.

### 1. Critical Ecospirituality as a Praxis of Contextual Faith

Ecospirituality should not be understood merely as a passive religious expression toward the cosmos; rather, it constitutes a contextual praxis of faith emerging from the concrete experiences of communities confronting environmental degradation and agrarian inequalities. In local communities such as Rimba Kobar in Sekadau, West Kalimantan, this ecological spirituality arises as a faith-based response to the exploitation of land and forest resources, which threatens the socio-cultural and economic survival of indigenous peoples.

This understanding aligns with ecospirituality discourse, which emphasizes that the human-nature-God relationship is interactive and transformative, rather than merely symbolic or aesthetic (Bock, 2024). In the experience of the Rimba Kobar community, critical ecospirituality entails that the community not only engages in religious rituals or reflections that honor creation, but also acts collectively to defend their rights to land, forests, and livelihoods. This process requires an awareness that Christian faith, within the local Catholic context, should position itself as a force for ecological liberation, accompanying agrarian struggles and questioning power structures that dictate access to

land and the use of resources. Studies in Indonesia indicate that local spirituality, when linked to indigenous wisdom, serves as a foundational basis for sustainable practices and resistance against external domination (Yulisinta et al., 2024).

Critical ecospirituality in Rimba Kobar reflects a dialectical dynamic of faith, on one hand, it values and celebrates the sacred interconnectedness between humans and nature; on the other, it incorporates a critical stance toward extractive economic and agrarian systems that undermine local communities. Contemporary environmental theology emphasizes that religious praxis must extend beyond the internal transformation of individuals to include structural socio-ecological change (Messias, 2024). Consequently, the Rimba Kobar community formulates a spirituality that actively confronts injustice, rather than merely adapting to environmental degradation.

From a methodological perspective, critical ecospirituality requires an approach that integrates local experiences, contextual theology, and structural analysis of agrarian issues. In this regard, the experiences of the Rimba Kobar community can be interpreted as a source of theology (“theology from below”), demonstrating how faith develops through direct relationships with threatened land and forests. This approach is supported by studies indicating that indigenous communities can utilize ecological spirituality as a basis for resisting agrarian marginalization (Alkadafi and Mundung, 2025). This spirituality also challenges the traditional separation between “sacred space” and “secular space” in environmental theology. For the Dayak Kerabat and Benawas communities, Rimba Kobar is not merely land or forest as an economic or ecological object, but constitutes an existential and spiritual dimension intimately connected to community identity, ancestral memory, and the future of generations. This aligns with findings that indigenous communities’ spiritual-ecological approaches in Indonesia facilitate culturally grounded, participatory pro-environmental behaviors (Yulisinta et al., 2024).

The critical aspect of this ecospirituality lies in the transformative demands it entails: the community does not merely engage in passive environmental conservation, but actively addresses agrarian conflicts, demands equitable access to and control over land, and advocates for governance reforms that have historically neglected local communities. This framework positions ecospirituality as both theological and political, in the sense that faith mobilizes collective moral commitment toward socio-ecological justice. As observed in the Tesso Nilo case in Indonesia, conservation interventions that disregard agrarian justice can result in the marginalization of local farmers (Alkadafi and Mundung, 2025).

Critical ecospirituality as a contextual praxis of faith implies that the local Church, social institutions, and communities must collaborate to build community capacity in managing their natural resources and to strengthen faith-based ecological awareness. In the context of Rimba Kobar, this means that Catholic faith is expressed not only through liturgy or social ministry, but also through collective action and local policies that uphold agrarian justice and environmental sustainability. Theological studies indicate that “ecospiritual praxis” can serve as a bridge between ecological awareness and concrete action toward social transformation (Bock, 2024).

## **2. The Theological and Social Dimensions of Rimba Kobar Ecospirituality**

This section addresses the theological and social dimensions of the Rimba Kobar ecospirituality, revealing the profound sacred relationship between humans and nature as an expression of faith integrated with creation. Furthermore, it highlights how ecological spirituality functions as a prophetic critique of extractive capitalism that disrupts the order of life, while also emphasizing the necessity of a liberating and ecologically just awareness of faith.

### **a. The Sacred Relationship Between Humans-Nature**

Local communities, such as the Dayak Kerabat and Benawas residing around Rimba Kobar, perceive nature not merely as a passive object or substrate to be exploited without limits, but as a creation endowed with sacred dignity, serving as a space for relationality, communal life, and the divine presence immanent in every ecological element (Enkin, 2024; Danur, 2025). Such an understanding affirms that the human nature relationship is dialogical and coexistent rather than dominative. From a contemporary theological perspective, as developed within Catholic eco-theology discourse, all creation is intrinsically interconnected: “nothing can be considered in isolation” (Purwanto and Silalahi, 2024).

The local context of Rimba Kobar in Sekadau, West Kalimantan, illustrates how indigenous communities construct a spiritual narrative in which forests, land, rivers, and other living beings are not merely economic or ecological resources, but integral components of communal identity, ancestral heritage, and a faith-based call to safeguard life collectively (Widen, 2023; Lova, 2025). The transformation of the human nature relationship into a theologikum underscores that this critical ecospirituality embodies an ethos of respect rooted in the intrinsic dignity of creation. Consequently, it generates a collective commitment to maintaining ecological balance as a moral and religious responsibility.

Within the framework of Catholic theology, the concept of creation and integral ecology, as articulated by Pope Francis, emphasizes that “all things are inter-related” and that human relationships with nature must be grounded in the awareness that creation constitutes a shared “common home” (Garcia et al., 2016). Conceptually, this understanding reinforces the notion that the human nature relationship is not one of monopolizing power, but of reciprocal responsibility. This perspective aligns with the practices of the Rimba Kobar community, which locally affirms that interconnectedness with nature represents a tangible expression of living faith.

The sacred human nature relationship as manifested in Rimba Kobar exhibits a characteristic of reciprocal mutuality: humans receive various benefits from nature, such as sustenance, spiritual enrichment, and identity, while simultaneously bearing the responsibility to care for and respond to the needs of creation as God’s gift (Kwirinus and Saeng, 2023). This relationship is grounded in the recognition that nature is not merely the backdrop of human activity but a relational subject worthy of respect. Eco-theological studies in Indonesia suggest that such a mindset viewing nature as “sacred” and humans as integral parts of the web of life promotes more sustainable ecological behaviors (Wardhani et al., 2024).

Nevertheless, the recognition of a sacred human-nature relationship also necessitates a critique of the prevailing paradigms of domination and exploitation, which assume that humans possess absolute rights over nature. In Catholic doctrinal texts, domination designed for the subjugation of creation is considered a violation of the harmonious relationship intended within creation (Massaro, 2023). The practices of the Rimba Kobar community, which maintain their socio-cultural structures in managing forests and land, constitute a concrete implementation of this dialogical relationship: it is not unilateral control, but rather a balance of responsibilities and shared stewardship.

The development of a sacred human nature relationship within the framework of critical ecospirituality opens theological avenues for constructing pastoral and regulatory approaches that are more sensitive to local agrarian and ecological contexts. Awareness of nature as a dignified creation obliges faith communities and Church institutions to accompany local initiatives rather than assume control over them. Thus, the sacred human nature relationship serves as a foundation for renewing social, ecological, and agrarian

theology, guiding efforts toward ecological justice and the holistic restoration of humanity's relationship with creation.

### **b. Ecological Spirituality as a Critique of Extractive Capitalism**

Ecological spirituality movements, such as those practiced by the Dayak Kerabat and Benawas communities in Rimba Kobar, can be understood as a form of resistance theology against the logic of extractive capitalist economies that marginalize indigenous communities. Extractive systems treat land, forests, and natural resources primarily as commodities for production and accumulation, often disregarding social justice and ecological sustainability (Liodakis, 2018). Recent studies indicate that such economic extractivism not only causes environmental degradation but also reinforces structural-cultural dimensions of domination, dispossession, and the marginalization of local communities (Rafiqi, 2025).

In this context, the ecological spirituality developed by the Dayak Kerabat and Benawas communities in Rimba Kobar exhibits a critical character that rejects mere passivity or adaptation to hegemonic economic systems. Rather than treating nature simply as a backdrop for human activity, these communities understand environmental stewardship as a theological and ethical arena in which the faithful take an active stance against agrarian injustices. This aligns with the notion that religion can function simultaneously as a mode of legitimization, dispossession, and resistance within extractive zones (Andreucci et al., 2023).

Theology of ecological liberation, which emphasizes that faith and spirituality cannot be separated from the realities of structural oppression, provides the foundation for critical ecological spirituality. In the context of Rimba Kobar, indigenous communities reject the logic of domination over nature, which parallels domination over human beings: when local communities' rights to land and resources are ignored, their ecological spirituality demands structural reforms in agrarian governance and environmental management.

Contemporary literature highlights that extractive systems are rooted in capitalist paradigms treating nature as a "zone of extractability," thereby necessitating a theological stance of resistance that upholds alternative, communal ways of life (Enkin, 2024). Ecological spirituality as a critique of extractive capitalism also signifies the restoration of community relations with their land and livelihoods. By framing resource management as a moral obligation, communities assert that ecological sustainability cannot be separated from agrarian justice and local community sovereignty (Sudarsana and Santha, 2024). Recent studies indicate that indigenous communities embracing ecological-spiritual values demonstrate greater resilience against extractive economic pressures and are able to practice more sustainable models of living (Obeng, 2025).

This critical ecological spirituality opens avenues for theological reconstruction that positions communities as agents of change rather than merely pastoral subjects. Through their spiritual practices, the Dayak Kerabat and Benawas not only conserve the natural environment but also construct a theological discourse demanding agrarian reform, equitable resource redistribution, and recognition of local community rights. Accordingly, this praxis embodies the principle that care for creation is an integral dimension of the Christian social justice mission, while simultaneously challenging the logic of extractive capitalism and fostering a justice-oriented ecospirituality.

## **3. The Principle of Subsidiarity in Catholic Church Law**

This section examines the principle of subsidiarity in Catholic Church law as an ethical and theological foundation for community involvement in the stewardship of creation. The discussion begins by elucidating the theological significance of subsidiarity,

emphasizing the importance of autonomy and moral responsibility at every level of social life. It then explores the application of ecological subsidiarity as a strategy for empowering local communities to confront environmental crises, operationalized through active participation, solidarity, and a commitment to sustainable ecological justice.

#### **a. The Theological Meaning of Subsidiarity**

The principle of subsidiarity in the Catholic Church's social teaching asserts that every basic social community such as individuals, families, and inter-local community organizations possesses inherent dignity and specific responsibilities in promoting the common good. Consequently, higher authorities must not assume functions that can be effectively carried out by lower-level communities. As stated in normative Church documents, "a higher community must not intervene in the life of a lower community, usurping its functions, but should support it when necessary" (John, 2005).

This principle is not merely institutional or political in nature; it is fundamentally theological, grounded in the recognition that human beings and their communities are created in social relations and possess dignity as active agents rather than passive objects of structural intervention. Theologically, subsidiarity is grounded in the recognition that human dignity, as *imago Dei*, necessitates spaces of freedom and initiative for active participation in social and ecological development. Accordingly, higher authorities are called to assist and empower, rather than replace, local communities in their responsibilities toward creation and their neighbors.

Recent studies indicate that, within the context of global economic complexity, subsidiarity can enhance the capacity of local communities to participate in decision-making processes concerning their environment and natural resources (Sele et al., 2024). This understanding gives rise to a social-theological paradigm that regulates not only human relationships with one another but also the relationship between humans, nature, and creation. In the agrarian and ecological domain, the theological meaning of subsidiarity emphasizes that decisions regarding the management of land, forests, and natural resources should ideally emerge "from below," from the communities most proximate to and affected by the use and stewardship of these resources.

Recent studies indicate that the application of subsidiarity in resource management helps safeguard the autonomy of local communities, prevent marginalization, and promote both ecological and social justice (Peppard, 2016; Caesar, 2023). Thus, subsidiarity serves as a bridge between faith and the concrete actions of local communities in the context of equitable ecological development. The activation of subsidiarity within the social theology of the Church provides a framework for pastoral and structural action that respects grassroots community initiatives as agents of change.

From this perspective, the local Church functions not merely as a regulator or overseer but as a companion that fosters the growth of community capacity and responsibility in managing their environment. This perspective is reinforced by official Vatican statements emphasizing subsidiarity and participation as two pillars of social inclusion and integral development (Lisa, 2024). Consequently, the principle of subsidiarity is not merely an administrative theory but serves as a theologically grounded foundation for community empowerment in ecological and agrarian contexts.

Another theological dimension is that subsidiarity embodies the understanding that not everything must be directed or managed by central authorities or large institutions; rather, local communities possess the capacity and responsibility to contribute actively to the care of the earth and their fellow beings. Within the Catholic tradition, this aligns with the teaching that creation constitutes a "common home" requiring the participation of all in its stewardship. Consequently, subsidiarity is closely linked to ecological responsibility as a concrete manifestation of a living faith. This

principle challenges cultures of domination that marginalize both local communities and nature as subjects of relational engagement. Nonetheless, the implementation of subsidiarity also requires theological and pastoral prudence: higher authorities retain a subsidiary function to assist when local communities are overburdened or face challenges beyond their capacity.

In other words, subsidiarity does not imply mere “hands-off” governance but entails providing appropriate support so that communities can act with freedom and responsibility. Church documents emphasize that such assistance must be offered without undermining the initiative of lower-level communities. When applied to the agrarian context, this framework implies that agrarian and environmental policies should strengthen the participation of indigenous communities and local farmers in decision-making, rather than being solely managed by central authorities or external corporations (Satria et al., 2024).

The theological significance of subsidiarity in the ecological and agrarian context carries concrete practical implications: it empowers local communities as primary actors in natural resource management, enhances their capacity to make decisions relevant to their specific conditions, and fosters cooperative models that mutually support interactions between community levels and higher institutions. Contemporary studies emphasize that subsidiarity, as a foundational principle in economic and political governance, can generate greater respect for both human beings and the environment than centralized approaches. Thus, subsidiarity underscores that agrarian and ecological justice is not merely a structural responsibility but also a theological one, where Christian faith motivates participation and the empowerment of local communities in addressing contemporary challenges.

### **b. Subsidiarity in Catholic Church Law**

The principle of subsidiarity constitutes one of the fundamental tenets in the social organization of the Catholic Church, carrying profound implications for both the structure and the application of canon law. Conceptually, subsidiarity derives from the Church’s social teaching, particularly as articulated in the encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno* Pius (1931), which asserts that “it is wrong to assign to a higher authority what can be adequately handled by a lower authority.” This principle implies that each level of community within the Church possesses autonomy and responsibilities proportional to its functions, and should not be subject to intervention by higher authorities except for the common good or to address genuine deficiencies of the lower authority.

In the context of Catholic Church law, subsidiarity functions as a guiding principle for structuring the relationship among universal, particular, and local authorities. The 1983 *Codex Iuris Canonici* (CIC) affirms the hierarchical structure of the Church, which is simultaneously universal and particular, as reflected in Canon 368, which states that a particular Church (such as a diocese) “is a portion of the People of God entrusted to a Bishop with the cooperation of the priests.” Accordingly, the principle of subsidiarity requires that dioceses be granted the space to regulate their pastoral and administrative life in accordance with universal law, without undue dependence on central authority.

The principle of subsidiarity also possesses a theological dimension rooted in the Church’s ecclesiology as *communio*. As emphasized in Canon 208, all the faithful share equal dignity by virtue of baptism and therefore participate actively in the mission of the Church. Within this framework, subsidiarity ensures that the participation of the faithful is neither suppressed nor overridden by ecclesiastical authority, but rather facilitated in accordance with their functions and roles within the Church’s structure. Consequently, the principle of subsidiarity is not merely administrative; it is grounded in a theological understanding of the Church as the mystical body of Christ. The implementation of the

principle of subsidiarity within Catholic Church law is manifest in the allocation of authority between apostolic and local governance. For instance, Canon 381 §1 grants the diocesan bishop “ordinary, proper, and immediate” power within the diocese entrusted to him, albeit within the limits of universal law and the authority of the Pope.

This provision indicates that Church law normatively supports pastoral decentralization, provided it remains consistent with the unity of doctrine and the discipline of the universal Church. The principle of subsidiarity is also implemented within the Church’s synodal and collegial structures. Canons 447-459, which regulate Episcopal Conferences, constitute a concrete manifestation of subsidiarity, whereby collegial authority at the national or regional level is afforded the space to formulate pastoral policies appropriate to the local context. Nevertheless, Canon 455 §1 stipulates that the decisions of an episcopal conference acquire legal force only upon receiving *recognitio* from the Holy See, a mechanism that balances local autonomy with the universal unity of the Church.

In the realm of Church administration and governance, subsidiarity is also reflected in the establishment of pastoral and economic councils, as regulated in Canons 536-537. These councils serve to support parish priests in decision-making concerning the local faithful. This mechanism embodies a participatory and dialogical spirit consistent with the principle of subsidiarity, whereby decisions are made as closely as possible to those directly affected by them. Canonically, subsidiarity does not imply absolute autonomy, but rather a balance between local freedom and universal unity.

Canons 333 §§1-3 affirm that the Pope possesses full and supreme power over the entire Church, while Canon 333 §2 also recognizes that bishops “have ordinary authority over the faithful entrusted to them, which must be exercised with due freedom.” Accordingly, the principle of subsidiarity necessitates a harmonious coordination between the exercise of papal authority and episcopal responsibility. From the perspective of the Church’s public law, subsidiarity functions as a balancing principle against excessive centralization.

The application of this principle not only preserves administrative efficiency but also fosters a more contextual and inculcated practice of faith. Through the implementation of subsidiarity, Church law can adapt to cultural and social diversity without compromising its doctrinal identity. This demonstrates that the principle of subsidiarity serves a hermeneutical function in understanding the dynamics between universal norms and particular applications.

In conclusion, subsidiarity within Catholic Church law constitutes both a juridical and theological principle, affirming the Church’s structure as a *communio hierarchica*. It directs each level of ecclesiastical authority to discharge its responsibilities responsibly, without usurping the legitimate role of subordinate authorities. This principle reinforces the balance between unity and diversity within the Church, between universal authority and local responsibility, and between law and pastoral care. Accordingly, the proper application of subsidiarity is essential for achieving Church governance that is just, participatory, and faithful to its fundamental mission of evangelization.

### **c. Ecological Subsidiarity as Community Empowerment**

Within the framework of theological ecology, ecological subsidiarity asserts that local grassroots communities are not merely recipients of aid or passive objects of policy but rather active agents of empowerment and primary stewards of their natural resources. This principle requires higher-level institutions, including the Church and state agencies, to function as supportive facilitators (subsidiaries) aimed at enhancing community capacity, rather than assuming their roles (Dushkova and Ivlieva, 2024). The operationalization of ecological subsidiarity in communities such as Rimba Kobar in

Sekadau necessitates the transformation of local institutions for instance, farmer groups, faith-based grassroots communities, and inter-village ecological networks into autonomous entities capable of managing the environment sustainably.

Community empowerment through ecological subsidiarity entails strengthening the internal capacity of communities to design, make decisions, and implement environmental management programs that are contextually appropriate. Contemporary international studies indicate that local-resource-based empowerment models, which position communities as principal actors, yield more sustainable outcomes compared to purely top-down approaches. For instance, Kurniasih and Colleagues (2023) found that empowerment grounded in human, natural, and social capital enhances food security in Indonesia's border communities (Wardhani et al., 2024).

Such mechanisms align with the principles of ecological subsidiarity by creating space for communities to assume responsibility and initiative. Ecological subsidiarity necessitates the existence of authentic, contextually grounded local institutions, rather than organizational structures imported from external sources. These institutions emerge organically from community experience, local wisdom, and spiritual relationships with the environment. In the case of Rimba Kobar, such institutional work may take the form of customary farmer groups, faith-based communities rooted in forest spirituality, or inter-village networks coordinating community forest management.

Recent research in environmental conservation indicates that community-based conservation (CBC) approaches, which emphasize local participation, significantly enhance both the effectiveness and sustainability of ecological initiatives. Ecological subsidiarity concerns not only institutional structures but also decision-making processes. This principle emphasizes that ecological and agrarian decisions should originate from the communities most affected and most knowledgeable about the local context, with minimal support from higher-level authorities when necessary. Such participatory processes strengthen community autonomy and prevent external domination.

One study highlights that the co-creation of transdisciplinary and intergenerational knowledge within biosphere reserve settings enhances participatory governance and enables local communities to act as transformative actors (Carfore, 2021). In the implementation of ecological subsidiarity, the Church functions not as a controller or authority over local communities, but as a pastoral and moral companion that encourages community initiatives to assume responsibility for creation. In this role, the Church helps to establish collaborative frameworks, provides resources, capacity-building, and theological guidance, but does not replace the community's role in actual environmental management.

This reflects the understanding that Catholic faith calls local communities to be active partners in the Church's ecological mission, rather than passive objects. The implementation of ecological subsidiarity in agrarian contexts such as community forest management, land tenure by indigenous communities, or sustainable agricultural practices requires inter-village institutional networks and cross-sectoral support (parishes, environmental agencies, and district governments). This is because local capacities are sometimes limited, and support from higher levels does not imply the takeover of functions but rather facilitation and connectivity. Studies on collaborative governance in community empowerment underscore the importance of facilitators who strengthen local institutions without undermining their autonomy.

Ecological subsidiarity creates space for the recognition of local knowledge and indigenous wisdom in environmental management. Communities such as Rimba Kobar possess extensive knowledge of forests, local ecological cycles, and the spirituality of nature, which can serve as a foundation for sustainable management strategies.

Empowerment approaches that value and integrate this local knowledge have proven more successful than externally standardized models. For instance, research published in *Sustainability* indicates that community empowerment for sustainability transitions and resilience strongly depends on the acknowledgment of local capacities and socio-ecological contexts (Nustad and Swanson, 2022).

Theologically, ecological subsidiarity reflects the principle of faith that humans and communities are created as active subjects entrusted with the care of creation. Accordingly, communities strengthened through ecological subsidiarity affirm the pastoral mission of the Church in local contexts that is, accompanying the faithful in environmental stewardship as a vocation of faith, rather than merely an administrative responsibility. This concept reinforces the synergy between local ecological spirituality and the Church's teaching on responsible dominion over the earth.

Challenges in implementing ecological subsidiarity include ensuring that local communities genuinely possess the capacity, access to resources, and equitable participatory space. Without appropriate facilitation mechanisms, subsidiarity risks becoming mere rhetoric without practical effect, or even exacerbating inequalities if communities remain dependent on external authorities (Ren et al., 2021). Therefore, joint evaluation, transparency, and accountability are essential in community empowerment processes. Studies on local-resource-based empowerment models emphasize that social capital such as networks and trust is crucial for the sustainability of such initiatives.

For the Dayak Kerabat and Benawas communities surrounding Rimba Kobar, the implementation of ecological subsidiarity entails that the local Church, faith fellowships, farmer groups, and civil society organizations collaboratively develop management systems that allow for local initiative, strengthen community capacities, and ensure that agrarian and environmental decisions originate from the grassroots. Thus, ecological subsidiarity is not merely a normative framework but also a contextually grounded practice that enables communities to act as agents of change in pursuit of agrarian and ecological justice.

In the long term, ecological subsidiarity as a form of community empowerment can generate structural changes: the recognition of community land rights, increased community sovereignty over natural resources, and the development of agricultural and forest management models that are both sustainable and community-oriented. This aligns with the vision of the Catholic Church in its social doctrine, which posits that integral development encompasses environmental, social, and spiritual dimensions. Accordingly, communities strengthened through ecological subsidiarity constitute a tangible manifestation of the Church "in the midst" of the struggle for agrarian and ecological justice.

#### **4. Sean McDonagh's Environmental Theology and Its Relevance**

This section discusses Sean McDonagh's environmental theology and its relevance to the agrarian context of Indonesia. The discussion begins with an exposition of McDonagh's ecological theology paradigm, which emphasizes the integral relationship between faith, social justice, and the stewardship of the earth as a common home. It then examines the relevance of McDonagh's thought within the Indonesian agrarian context, particularly as an inspiration for ecological advocacy that upholds human dignity, land sovereignty, and the sustainability of local community livelihoods.

##### **a. McDonagh and the Paradigm of Ecological Theology**

McDonagh's contribution lies in developing an ecological theology paradigm that emphasizes the need to reinterpret the theology of creation. According to McDonagh, the ecological crises confronting humanity today result from an incomplete anthropocentric

theology, in which humans are regarded as the center of all creation (McDonagh, 1999). He therefore advocates a re-reading of the theology of creation that perceives the earth as a sacrament of God's presence. This perspective opens space for dialogue between Catholic faith and local ecological wisdom, such as that embodied in the indigenous communities of Rimba Kobar.

Within the framework of ecological theology, McDonagh emphasizes the importance of viewing the earth as a sacred space that reflects the presence of God. He critiques perspectives that regard the earth as an object for unlimited exploitation and calls for a paradigm shift in understanding the relationship between humans and nature (McDonagh, 2016). By conceiving the earth as a sacrament, believers are encouraged to respect and care for the environment as an integral aspect of their faith responsibility. This perspective aligns with the teachings of Pope Francis in the encyclical *Laudato Si'*, which calls on Catholics to care for our common home, the earth (Garcia et al., 2016).

In the encyclical, Pope Francis cites McDonagh's views, emphasizing the importance of protecting and nurturing the earth as a moral and spiritual responsibility of humanity (Garcia et al., 2016). This underscores the relevance of McDonagh's thought within the context of contemporary Catholic teaching. McDonagh also encourages believers to be open to local wisdom found in various cultures, including indigenous communities. He recognizes that local knowledge contains ecological values that can enrich the understanding of ecological theology (McDonagh, 1994).

For instance, among the Dayak Kerabat and Benawas communities surrounding Rimba Kobar, there are ecological practices rooted in their traditions and spiritual beliefs regarding nature. Dialogue between Catholic theology and local wisdom can yield a more holistic and inclusive understanding of ecological issues. In the study of ecological theology, it is essential to consider local and cultural contexts when formulating Church teachings and practices. Approaches that are sensitive to local cultures can strengthen ecological messages and encourage active participation of the faithful in environmental stewardship. Therefore, integrating Catholic theology with local wisdom constitutes a strategic step in fostering sustainable ecological awareness.

McDonagh's perspective offers a profound and relevant framework for addressing contemporary ecological challenges. By viewing the earth as a sacrament of God's presence and opening space for dialogue with local wisdom, ecological theology can evolve into a more inclusive and contextual approach (McDonagh, 1986). This aligns with the Church's efforts to act as an agent of change in safeguarding the integrity of creation. Through this approach, believers are expected to develop greater awareness of their responsibilities toward the environment and to actively engage in conservation efforts. Consequently, ecological theology becomes not only a theological discourse but also a practical guide for the daily lives of the faithful.

### **b. The Relevance of McDonagh for the Indonesian Agrarian Context**

The ecological theology developed by McDonagh holds significant relevance in the Indonesian agrarian context, particularly in regions such as Sekadau, West Kalimantan. McDonagh emphasizes that the contemporary ecological crisis stems from an anthropocentric theological perspective that places humans at the center of creation while neglecting the harmonious relationship between humans and nature. He advocates a re-reading of the theology of creation that regards the earth as a sacrament of God's presence, thereby calling on believers to assume moral responsibility for environmental stewardship (Leo, 2019). In the Indonesian agrarian context, particularly in Sekadau a region characterized by agrarian communities McDonagh's perspective offers significant relevance. The Sekadau community, largely dependent on agriculture and plantations, faces ecological challenges such as deforestation, land degradation, and climate change.

McDonagh's ecological theology invites believers to view the earth as an integral part of the Church's mission, wherein care for the environment becomes an extension of the Church's ministry of love (diakonia) (Leo, 2019).

The importance of caring for the earth as part of the Church's diakonia aligns with the teachings of Pope Francis in the encyclical Laudato Si', which calls for ecological conversion and the moral responsibility of believers toward the environment. In the context of Sekadau, the implementation of these teachings can take the form of programs that actively involve the community in environmental stewardship, such as reforestation, sustainable natural resource management, and faith-based environmental education (Satria et al., 2024).

Furthermore, McDonagh's ecological theology provides space for dialogue between Catholic faith and local ecological wisdom. In Sekadau, local knowledge reflects a respect for nature as an integral part of the community's spiritual life. Dialogue between Church teachings and local wisdom can enrich believers' understanding of the importance of environmental stewardship as a component of faith responsibility. For example, traditional agricultural practices that are environmentally friendly and grounded in spiritual values can be integrated into local environmental conservation programs in Sekadau (Kwirinus et al., 2025).

The implementation of McDonagh's ecological theology in Sekadau can also strengthen community food security. By prioritizing sustainability in the management of natural resources, communities can enhance food production in a manner that does not harm the environment. This approach aligns with teachings within the agrarian tradition of God's people, which emphasize the importance of managing land and natural resources for collective well-being (Kwirinus and Yuniarto, 2023). However, the implementation of McDonagh's ecological theology in Sekadau faces challenges, such as limited community understanding of the importance of environmental conservation and constrained resources for conservation programs.

Therefore, a holistic and inclusive approach is required, involving all stakeholders, including the Church, government, and local communities, in environmental preservation efforts. Faith-based environmental education and active community participation in conservation programs can serve as effective strategies to address these challenges. Moreover, it is important to note that the implementation of McDonagh's ecological theology in Sekadau must take into account the local context and cultural practices of the community.

Approaches that are sensitive to local culture can strengthen ecological messaging and encourage active participation of the faithful in environmental conservation efforts. For instance, integrating Church teachings with local wisdom in natural resource management can yield more effective and sustainable solutions. McDonagh's ecological theology offers a relevant and contextual perspective for addressing ecological challenges in Sekadau. By viewing the earth as a sacrament of God's presence and opening space for dialogue with local wisdom, ecological theology can serve as a foundational framework for environmental conservation and sustainable development in agrarian regions such as Sekadau.

Through the application of McDonagh's ecological theology, it is expected that the community in Sekadau can enhance ecological awareness and act as stewards of the earth, in accordance with their faith calling. Thus, ecological theology becomes not only a theological discourse but also a practical guide for the daily lives of believers in Sekadau. In a broader context, the application of McDonagh's ecological theology in Sekadau can serve as a model for other regions in Indonesia facing similar ecological challenges. By integrating Church teachings, local wisdom, and sustainability principles,

these regions can foster stronger environmental and social resilience. McDonagh's ecological theology reminds us that environmental stewardship is not solely a scientific or political responsibility but also a moral and spiritual obligation of the faithful. Accordingly, ecological theology can serve as a transformational force in fostering a more just and sustainable world.

## **5. The Dialectic Between Critical Ecospirituality and Ecclesial Subsidiarity**

This section outlines the dialectic between critical eco-spirituality and ecclesial subsidiarity as an effort to reconcile the dimensions of faith and social structures within the Church's ecological praxis. The discussion begins with an understanding of the transition from spirituality to social structures, emphasizing the importance of embodying faith values in concrete actions. It then examines the role of the Church as a community of ecological subsidiarity, fostering lay participation, cross-sectoral solidarity, and shared responsibility in preserving the integrity of creation.

### **a. From Spirituality to Social Structure**

In the context of critical eco-spirituality, the transformation from the spiritual dimension toward supportive social structures constitutes a fundamental step in achieving sustainable ecological change. Critical eco-spirituality calls upon the Church not only to teach ecological values within the spiritual domain but also to integrate these principles into social and pastoral policies that prioritize local communities (Kadarmanto and Hepi, 2024). The principle of subsidiarity, an integral component of the Church's social teaching, serves as a key element in this transformative process. This principle emphasizes that decisions and actions should be undertaken at the lowest and closest level to the individuals affected, unless there is a legitimate reason to involve higher levels of authority (Irudayaraj, 2023).

Accordingly, the Church is called to support and empower local communities in efforts toward environmental stewardship and social justice, rather than to assume their roles. In practice, the Church's application of the principle of subsidiarity is reflected in various initiatives that empower local communities. For instance, the 2012 Pastoral Message of the Indonesian Bishops' Conference (KWI) on Ecopastoral Care urged the faithful not only to personally safeguard the environment but also to engage in collective efforts to protect nature and natural resources.

The message emphasizes the importance of active community participation in preserving the environment as an integral aspect of their faith-based responsibilities. Furthermore, the Church can play a role in shaping social and pastoral policies that support critical eco-spirituality. Through dialogue with governmental authorities and local communities, the Church can advocate for policies that promote social justice and environmental conservation. For example, the Church may support regulations that prohibit the excessive exploitation of natural resources and encourage the adoption of environmentally friendly renewable energy practices.

In addition, the Church can integrate the principles of critical eco-spirituality into religious education curricula and pastoral programs. This approach equips younger generations with a profound understanding of the relationship between faith and environmental responsibility. Such education can cultivate individuals who are attentive to the sustainability of the Earth and committed to the stewardship of God's creation (Suryana et al., 2023). In a broader context, the Church's implementation of critical eco-spirituality can also contribute to sustainable development. By prioritizing the values of social justice and environmental conservation, the Church can help foster more equitable and prosperous communities. This approach aligns with the goals of sustainable development, which emphasize the importance of balancing social, economic, and

environmental dimensions (Kwirinus, et al., 2025). However, challenges in implementing critical eco-spirituality within social and pastoral structures cannot be overlooked.

Limited resources, resistance to change, and a lack of understanding of the significance of eco-spirituality may pose significant obstacles (Azman et al., 2025). Therefore, a holistic and inclusive approach is required, engaging all stakeholders including the Church, government, and local communities in efforts to promote environmental conservation and social justice. The transformation from ecological spirituality toward supportive social structures represents a crucial step in realizing critical eco-spirituality (Platovnjak, 2019). By applying the principle of subsidiarity, the Church can empower local communities and shape social and pastoral policies that prioritize environmental conservation and social justice. Through collaborative efforts, it is anticipated that a more just, prosperous, and sustainable society can be established.

### **b. The Church as a Community of Ecological Subsidiarity**

In the context of critical eco-spirituality, the local Church in Sekadau has the potential to serve as a model of “ecological subsidiarity,” functioning as a faith community that honors the ecological responsibility of each member while simultaneously fostering networks of solidarity across dioceses and institutions. This approach positions the Church as a living moral ecosystem rather than merely a legalistic institution. The principle of subsidiarity, an integral part of the Church’s social teaching, emphasizes that decisions and actions should be taken at the lowest possible level, closest to the individuals affected, unless there is a legitimate reason to involve higher levels (Montevecchio, 2023).

In the context of Sekadau, applying this principle entails empowering local communities to manage and preserve their environment while maintaining collaboration with higher-level institutions. The Church, as a faith community in Sekadau, can implement ecological subsidiarity through various initiatives. For instance, by organizing faith-based environmental education programs that involve all members of the congregation, including children and adolescents. Such programs can raise ecological awareness and cultivate the character of individuals who are committed to the sustainability of the earth.

Moreover, the Church can promote environmentally friendly agricultural practices rooted in local wisdom. Through training and mentoring, the Church can assist local farmers in adopting sustainable farming methods that do not harm the environment (Encep, Anwar and Febriani, 2022). This approach aligns with the teachings in the agrarian tradition of God’s people, which emphasize the responsible management of land and natural resources for the common welfare. The Church can also play a role in shaping social and pastoral policies that support critical ecospirituality.

Through dialogue with the government and the community, the Church can advocate for policies that promote social justice and environmental conservation (Erna, 2019). For example, the Church can support regulations that prohibit excessive exploitation of natural resources and encourage the use of environmentally friendly renewable energy. In this context, the Church acts as an agent of ecological transformation, not only teaching ecological values within the spiritual realm but also integrating these principles into social and pastoral policies that support local communities. For instance, in the 2012 Pastoral Message of the Indonesian Bishops’ Conference (KWI) on Ecopastoral Care, the Church urged the faithful not only to care for the environment individually but also to engage collectively in efforts to protect nature and natural resources. The message emphasizes the importance of active community participation in environmental stewardship as an integral aspect of their faith responsibility.

Furthermore, the Church can develop networks of solidarity across dioceses and institutions to strengthen environmental conservation efforts. By collaborating with other organizations, the Church can expand the impact of its ecological programs and create synergies in addressing environmental challenges. The local Church in Sekadau has the potential to serve as a model of "ecological subsidiarity" that empowers local communities in environmental conservation efforts (Wahyuni et al., 2025). By applying the principle of subsidiarity, the Church can function as a living moral ecosystem, not only teaching ecological values within the spiritual realm but also integrating these principles into social and pastoral policies that support local communities.

## **6. Theological Contributions: Toward a Participatory Ecospirituality Theology**

In addressing the increasingly urgent ecological crisis, the Catholic Church in Indonesia, particularly in Sekadau, faces the challenge of developing a theology that is not only spiritually relevant but also contextual and participatory. Reflections on the faith experiences of local communities, such as those in Rimba Kobar, indicate that a profound ecological spirituality needs to be integrated with the social and pastoral structures of the Church. This has given rise to a new paradigm that can be termed "Participatory Eco-Spirituality Theology."

This paradigm integrates three main elements: first, critical eco-spirituality rooted in the contextual faith experiences of indigenous communities; second, the principle of ecclesial subsidiarity as an ethical and structural framework; and third, McDonagh's environmental theology as a reflective foundation that broadens the Catholic understanding of the Earth. These three elements are mutually reinforcing and provide a basis for the Church to renew its social role within the agrarian context of Indonesia. The critical eco-spirituality emerging in Rimba Kobar provides insights into how religious practices can be harmonized with environmental conservation.

This form of spirituality underscores the importance of maintaining ecosystem balance as an integral aspect of the moral and spiritual responsibilities of the faithful (Risamasu, 2025). Such contextually grounded faith experiences serve as a source of inspiration for the Church in developing pastoral approaches that are responsive to the ecological and social challenges faced by local communities. The principle of ecclesial subsidiarity emphasizes that decisions and actions should be made at the lowest possible level, closest to the individuals affected, unless there is a legitimate reason to involve higher levels.

In the context of Sekadau, the application of this principle entails that the Church empowers local communities to manage and preserve their environment while maintaining collaboration with higher-level institutions (Diarsa and Haq, 2024). McDonagh's environmental theology posits that the current ecological crisis stems from an incomplete anthropocentric theology. He advocates for a re-reading of the theology of creation that regards the Earth as a "sacrament of God's presence" (McDonagh, 1986). This perspective opens space for dialogue between Catholic faith and local ecological wisdom, while encouraging the Church to broaden the horizon of its understanding of the Earth.

The integration of these three elements forms a Participatory Eco-Spirituality Theology, which encourages the Church not only to accompany the faithful spiritually but also to advocate for ecological justice as an integral dimension of salvation. This paradigm underscores the importance of active participation by the faithful in preserving the environment as a fundamental aspect of their moral and spiritual responsibility. In practice, the implementation of Participatory Eco-Spirituality Theology can be observed through various initiatives that empower local communities.

For instance, in the 2012 Pastoral Message of the Indonesian Bishops' Conference (KWI) on Ecopastoral Care, the Church urged the faithful not only to care for the environment individually but also to engage collectively in efforts to protect nature and its resources. The message emphasizes the importance of active community participation in preserving the environment as an integral aspect of their faith-based responsibility (Diarsa and Haq, 2024). Furthermore, the Church can play a significant role in shaping social and pastoral policies that support critical eco-spirituality. Through dialogue with government authorities and local communities, the Church can advocate for policies that promote social justice and environmental conservation.

For example, the Church may endorse regulations that restrict the overexploitation of natural resources and encourage the adoption of environmentally friendly renewable energy. Participatory Eco-Spirituality Theology offers a novel paradigm for the Church to renew its social role within the agrarian context of Indonesia. By integrating critical eco-spirituality, the principle of ecclesial subsidiarity, and McDonagh's environmental theology, the Church can empower local communities and develop social and pastoral policies that prioritize environmental conservation and social justice. Through these collective efforts, it is anticipated that a more just, prosperous, and sustainable society can be realized.

## Conclusion

The construction of critical eco-spirituality arising from the lived experiences of the Rimba Kobar community affirms that local ecological spirituality constitutes a legitimate locus of theology. Within the context of agrarian struggles, this form of eco-spirituality integrates the community's daily realities with Catholic faith principles, producing a contextual theological reflection grounded in lived praxis. Theology, therefore, emerges not solely from academic discourse but from the dynamic interaction between faith and the local ecosystem. When correlated with the principle of subsidiarity, Rimba Kobar's eco-spirituality reveals that ecological justice cannot be imposed through top-down structures; rather, it must be realized through the empowerment of grassroots communities, recognition of indigenous wisdom, and active participation of the faithful in sustaining ecological harmony. Sean McDonagh's environmental theology further deepens the prophetic and moral dimensions of this praxis, illustrating that Catholic faith embodies transformative potential in advancing socio-ecological justice by perceiving the Earth as a sacrament of God's presence. Accordingly, the synthesis between critical eco-spirituality, ecclesial subsidiarity, and Catholic environmental theology establishes a robust conceptual foundation for developing a contextual socio-ecological theology in Indonesia, positioning the Church as a transformative agent that promotes ecological justice and the holistic well-being of local communities.

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