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SUSTAINABLE BUILT ENVIRONMENTS: A STUDY UNIT ON THE LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT COURSE, PONTIFICAL GREGORIAN UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT:

THIS ARTICLE OFFERS AN OVERVIEW OF A STUDY UNIT ENTITLED SUSTAINABLE BUILT ENVIRONMENTS, OFFERED AS PART OF A LICENTIATE PROGRAM IN LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT AT THE PONTIFICAL GREGORIAN UNIVERSITY. IT FOCUSES ON THE ACADEMIC STRUCTURE OF THE COURSE, INCLUDING A DETAILED BREAKDOWN OF LECTURES AND ASSOCIATED READING LISTS, AND AN EVALUATION BASED ON STUDENT FEEDBACK. THE INCLUSION OF A UNIQUE INTERACTION WITH POPE FRANCIS ADDS AN INSIGHTFUL DIMENSION TO THE STUDY UNIT. IT BLENDS THE THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL ASPECTS OF SUSTAINABILITY WITH SPIRITUAL AND COMMUNITY-FOCUSED VALUES. POPE FRANCIS'S STATEMENT ABOUT LIVING IN A COMMUNITY UNDERSCORES THE THEOLOGICAL AND ETHICAL UNDERPINNINGS OF SUSTAINABLE PRACTICES, OFFERING STUDENTS A BROADER PERSPECTIVE ON LEADERSHIP AND COMMUNITY LIVING. THE ADAPTIVE RE-USE OF ECCLESIASTICAL IMMOVABLE PROPERTY INTRODUCES A PRACTICAL APPLICATION OF SUSTAINABILITY PRINCIPLES, TYING THE COURSE CONTENT TO REAL-WORLD CHALLENGES FACED BY THE CHURCH. THIS ARTICLE BRIDGES THE ACADEMIC, SPIRITUAL, AND PRACTICAL ASPECTS OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT, MAKING IT A COMPELLING INVITATION TO ENGAGE WITH THE SUBJECT.

KEY WORDS: LAUDATO SI', POPE FRANCIS, LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT, WELL-BEING, PONTIFICAL GREGORIAN UNIVERSITY

INTRODUCTION

The General Secretariat of the Pontifical Gregorian University is the administrative-academic headquarters of the Joint Diploma in Integral Ecology, offered through its Faculty of Theology. This course of study aims to promote the message of the encyclical *Laudato Si'* [1]. The Faculty of Social Sciences of the same university offered the study module SL2020, Social Innovation and Sustainability, in the first semester of the Licentiate in Leadership and Management. This article addresses module SO2006, entitled Sustainable Built Environments, offered as an optional study unit in the first semester of this licentiate. This unit was developed by the author to complement module SL2020 and was offered for the first time in the academic year 2023/2024 [2]. Delivered in English, this 3-ECTS-credit course was lecture- and tutorial-based [3]. The method of teaching was developed on the concept of an urban laboratory; each

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lecture session was held at a venue, often ecclesiastical premises in Rome, providing an opportunity for onsite learning experiences. After a brief introduction to the selected building – which included an outline of its historical and social stratigraphic contexts – the cohort was given a tour of the property during which each candidate was encouraged to observe and experience. To share the experience gained from this course, this article is structured into five sections: (i) the outline of the course description, (ii) a concise reproduction of the programme of lectures, (iii) feedback received from the students, (iv) the outcome of a brief meeting with Pope Francis prior to a group photograph at a general audience, and (v) some final comments.

STUDY UNIT DESCRIPTION

In developing the course description, the following two questions were put forward: (i) what are the aims of the module? and (ii) what are the desired learning outcomes? The former related to deepening students' knowledge of the encyclical letter *Laudato Si'* [1] and applying this knowledge to personal and community initiatives for the care of all, and to appreciate the built environment through a dialogue between human and social sciences. Four learning outcomes were determined: (i) an interdisciplinary approach to comprehending *Laudato Si'*, (ii) the ability to address the built environment as a statement on integral human development, (iii) the ability to identify and make a preliminary assessment of sustainable related issues in the built environment, and (iv) the ability to propose and ensure that sustainable human-sensitive solutions are followed in a given development project. The main text/s and supplementary readings of the study unit were written by Pope Francis [1], Christopher Day [4, 5], Stephen R. Kellert [6], Vivienne Brophy and J. Owen Lewis [7], and the World Commission of Environment and Development [8].

The study module was assessed through a written assignment, 8 to 12 pages in length, 1.5 line spacing, with a list of references – duly referred to in the main text – of around 10 to 15 sources. Its learning outcome/s address the built environment as a statement on integral human development, and enable students to identify and make a preliminary assessment of a problem within such a context. Each candidate had to identify one of three building typologies – school, parish centre, or hospital – within their diocese/neighbourhood and (i) critically evaluate the reactions of users to the selected building, and (ii) based on feedback from users, identify, review and propose short- and long-term solutions/mitigations. The following evaluation structure was adopted – research 25%, critical evaluation and review 50%, and proposed solutions/mitigating measures 25%. One-to-one tutorials were held on a weekly basis; these were not compulsory, but candidates were advised and encouraged to attend.

PROGRAMME OF LECTURES

A list of the consecutive lectures – including the themes and reading list – is given in Table 1. It is followed by an outline of each lecture, listed in chronological order.

Ethical issues: The environment – natural, cultural, socio-economic; rights and obligations with respect to the environment; introduction to environmental ethics and media to assess impacts on the environment – environment impact assessments, environmental audits, etc.; fallacies in behavioural architecture as an accountable design process.

Designing for humanity: The nourishing elements of the earth as foundations of sustainable site-sensitive design; introduction to natural, cultural, and socio-economic considerations for a design which supports humanity sustainably.

People and places: The integrity of place as a condition for sustainability; place versus space and the ensouling of buildings and their context.

Lecture	Theme	Reading List
1	Ethical issues	[1; 8: 41–43; 9: 42–63; 10: 35–47; 11]
2	Designing for humanity	[4: 77–108; 12]
3	People and places	[5: 159–184; 13]
4	Health and the built environment	[4: 181–228; 5: 37–70; 14: 1–13]
5	Designing for health	[4: 229–241; 5: 185–217; 6]
6	Socially inclusive design	[4: 151–178; 15]
7	Designing for inclusion	[16; 17]
8	Designing for children	[5: 217–228; 18: 3–9, 81–100, 171–186]
9	Educating and soul nourishing environments	[18: 256–267; 19; 20]
10	Sustainable well-being of society as key to a sustainable future	[21–23]
11	Adaptive re-use of buildings	[24: 211–308; 25]
12	Strategies for sustainable built environs	[26: 2–9; 27]

Table 1. List of lectures, themes and associated reading list

Health and the built environment: Health – planetary, human (physical and spiritual) – with respect to the morphology of urban spaces and their dynamics; towards the design of place-grounded, soul-nourishing spaces.

Designing for health: The built environment as a health-supporting context; designing buildings and urban spaces as a medium to generate and support a healthy environment for all; rendering the secular as sacred; Christopher Day’s notion of healing silence as the architecture of peace.

Socially inclusive design: Designing with, rather than for, people as a process of supporting a healthy socio-economic environment; public consultation/ public participation/ consensus design processes and the ethics of development whereby a given place is either endorsed or destroyed.

Designing for inclusion: Individual personal development needs and design for all; designing buildings, including outdoor spaces, for people with special needs; beyond access for all design.

Designing for children: Children’s perspective of design; addressing the needs of children – security, reassurance, and play; developing an environment that is stimulating for the senses – lighting, colour, and space; outdoor places – a key for the physical, social, and moral development of the child.

Educating and soul nourishing environments: Sustainable school and hospital designs – physical considerations which impact on the physiological and psychological health of the users; reference to prison design.

Sustainable well-being of society as key to a sustainable future: Sustainable design and well-being; human rather than capital-driven economies, from financial to human capital – accounts versus economics; sustainable human values as a datum for a sustainable future.

Adaptive re-use of buildings: The Church as main owner and guardian of built heritage – the sustainability of which is time-proven – after the state; assessment of the fabric of heritage buildings; the Nara Document of Authenticity; rehabilitation through adaptive re-use of ecclesiastical properties – e.g., churches and convents – as security to ensure their sustainability.

Strategies for sustainable built environs: Design solutions which are natural, culturally, and socio-economically sensitive; the well-being of humanity as prime movers of the economic development – energy, water, building materials, etc., as a means to an end; accounts versus

economics; sustainable human values as a datum for a sustainable future; the trap of speculation in the name of development – greed as rape of the well-being of humanity.

Given the logistics and bureaucracy involved in organizing onsite learning experiences, only five premises were visited, all ecclesiastical except for the last: (i) the Convent of the Sisters of Good Help (Suore del Buon Soccorso) at 38 Via degli Artisti, (ii) the Church of Our Lady in Trivio and the interlinked adjacent convent in Piazza dei Crociferi, (iii) Madre di Misericordia Clinic located in St Peter's Square, (iv) Pontifical School Pio IX at 1 Via dei Cavalieri del Santo Sepolcro, and (v) Casal del Marmo juvenile prison. Given that the cohort was comprised of religious members of the Catholic Church all hailing from non-European countries, mainly from the Global South, some students floated the idea of meeting the Pope. Once back in their homelands, they were highly unlikely to travel again to Rome, much less have a chance to meet the Pope, unless they were assigned a significant ecclesiastical role which allowed them to come to the Vatican for an audience with His Holiness. Despite the remote possibility of being able to arrange such an opportunity, on behalf of the students I approached the Prefecture of the Papal Household, initially via email.

EVALUATION OF THE STUDY UNIT

Evaluation helps one to review and improve the quality of a given task. The same applies to study modules; evaluating feedback from the students helps the lecturer improve the pedagogical value of a course and streamline the learning process. The Study-Unit Feedback Form of the University of Malta [28] formed the basis of the evaluation form relayed to students following the course. It has 17 criteria grouped under five headings: (i) study unit description versus actual delivery (1 to 4), (ii) lecturing methodology (5 to 8), (iii) conduct of lecturer (9 to 12), (iv) method of assessment (13 and 14), and (v) resources (15 to 17). Finally, the participants were asked to include any further comments and suggestions about the module. The form was handed to all students at the end of the course of lectures. It was an anonymous exercise, and the data collected was used for quality assessment. Only 70% of the students submitted a filled-out form. Their responses are tabulated in Table 2; A, B, C, D and E correspond to 'strongly agree', 'agree', 'not sure', 'disagree' and 'strongly disagree', respectively.

		A (%)	B (%)	C (%)	D (%)	E (%)
Study-unit description versus actual delivery						
1	The study-unit description was clear	40	40		20	
2	The outline of the study-unit was followed and learning outcomes presented in the description were achieved	30	60	10		
3	Study-unit materials (main texts and suggested readings) were relevant	36	64			
4	The amount of work involved was compatible with the credit value assigned	40	50	10		
Lecturing methodology						
5	The study-unit was well organised	27	64		9	
6	Lectures were intellectually challenging	64	18	18		
7	The delivery of lectures was clear	36	36	10	18	
8	Lectures were delivered through the use of appropriate media	11	56	33		
Conduct of lecturer						
9	Lecturer was well prepared to deliver the study-unit	45	55			
10	Lecturer's attendance was regular and punctual	73	27			
11	Lecturer was available to help with any difficulties or issues	73	18	9		

12	Lecturer encouraged student engagement	82	18			
Method of assessment						
13	The method of assessment enabled me to demonstrate achievement of the intended learning outcomes	43	43	14		
14	The workload involved and time allowed in the assessment were fair	14	72		14	
Resources						
15	Classroom space was suitable	73	27			
16	Library resources were adequate	56	33	11		
17	Available learning spaces were suitable	80	20			

Table 2. Feedback on the study-unit

Overall, the students evaluated the study unit positively. None of the participants strongly disagreed with any of the statements, and 20% or less disagreed, a similar percentage to those who were not sure; the exception was with respect to the lecturing methodology, specifically regarding the delivery of lectures through the use of appropriate media where the score was 33%. Except for this criterion, 80% or over of the students agreed or strongly agreed with all the other criteria.

With respect to the conduct of the lecturer, in every criterion except one, 100% of students either agreed or agreed strongly that it was met. The only exception related to the lecturer's availability to help with difficulties and issues, where 9% said they were not sure because they did not have any problems. Regarding resources for the course, the classroom and other available learning spaces were rated highly, with over 70% agreeing strongly that they were suitable. The exception was library resources, which received a lower score, with just over half strongly agreeing they were adequate and 11% not sure or neutral about their adequacy. The additional comments and/or suggestions related to the content and conduct of the study unit. Most of the participants appreciated the content of the lectures and the site visits as practical examples to illustrate the theory conveyed during the lecturing session. Participants called for the use of Moodle and other multimedia platforms during the lectures. These comments tallied with the slightly lower, strongly agreed, scores relating to the lecturing methodology.

“I WAS ORDAINED A PRIEST TO LIVE IN COMMUNITY”

On 30 November 2023, on behalf of the students, I inquired about the possibility of a private audience with the Holy Father with respect to the subject content of the course. In a note dated 2 December 2023, the Prefecture of the Papal Household informed me that “this Office regrets to inform you that this will not be possible. However, they might like to attend the General Audience on a Wednesday of their choice” [29]. Following this correspondence, a few informal meetings were held by the author with heads of dicasteries of the Roman Curia. The advice from two cardinals heading different dicasteries was to deliver a letter by hand from the Dean of the Faculty of Social Sciences to the residence of His Holiness at the guesthouse Domus Sanctae Marthae. Following a written request by the Dean, Rev. Professor Peter Lah SJ, dated 20 December 2023, the Prefecture of the Papal Household informed Fr Lah, via a note dated 22 January 2024, that “the students participating in the course ‘Sustainable built environments’ will be able to attend the General Audience of Wednesday, January 24 next at 9.00 am, with the assurance of a group photograph with His Holiness” [30]. Over 55 students registered to turn up for the event. Before the group photograph with the Pope [31], and through the support of Rev. Samuel Foka, the author had the opportunity to ask His Holiness some questions relating to the subject matter of the module. Pope Francis's reply to why His Holiness

opted to live at the modest Domus Sanctae Marthae – popes normally reside at the luxurious papal apartments within the Apostolic Palace – was unique. With a smile, Pope Francis replied: “I am not a monk to live alone; I was ordained a priest to live in community” (His Holiness words were “Non sono un monaco per vivere da solo; sono stato ordinato sacerdote per vivere in comunità”).

The statement of Pope Francis goes beyond what Professor Massimo Faggioli labels the Vatican I–Vatican II papacy: “a papacy characterized by the absence of nostalgia about papal monarchy and the Papal States; ... and the transition from the pope as a judge to the pope as a teacher of the faith” [32: 117]. Although His Holiness chose Francis as his papal name in honour of Saint Francis of Assisi, he is a member of the Jesuit Order and thus lived in a Jesuit community throughout his tenure in the priesthood prior to being elected to the papacy. Although he is the head of the Catholic Church and sovereign of the Vatican City State, his approach to the papacy is much less formal than his predecessors. His choice to take up residence at Domus Sanctae Marthae is a case in point. This example, together with other existential positions His Holiness has adopted, is associated with humility and concern for the poor. Yet the Pope’s statement to the author’s question was more loaded with wisdom and his vision of the church. It concerns the priesthood and the priestly ministry. It is another dimension than that recalled by the International Theological Commission [33], which states that “the Christian who is called to the priestly ministry receives by his ordination not a merely external function but a new sharing in the priesthood of Christ”. For His Holiness, the priestly vocation goes beyond monasticism, it goes beyond the vows of poverty and celibacy. The call for priesthood is not just a call to lead the community, it is a call for engagement, sharing, experiencing communion with others; it is not an individualistic but a collective act. Unity and diversity enrich the community; the role of the priest is not to exist but to live in communion with it. It is pragmatic spirituality in action, notwithstanding the fact that there are members of the clergy and religious orders who work in silence in the community and for the community without financial remuneration or any funding to undertake the ministry. There are priests who unconditionally give their all for the well-being of the community, without the support of their superiors.

FINAL COMMENTS

Buildings can heal or they can induce sickness. Sustainable built environments focus on the well-being of individuals and the community. Distinct building typologies address distinct functions. Some present immovable properties of the Catholic Church came in its ownership many years earlier, sometimes dating back centuries. This calls for alternative, adaptive reuse which is sensitive to the fabric and historical characters of these buildings, a reuse compatible with existing cultural and/or natural heritage contexts and respects both the site and its provenance. The latter is important: a breach of the original intention of the donor can be challenged by the heirs in lieu to reacquire, say, a particular building. If the initial intended use by the donor is no longer fitting, the adaptable re-use of the property selected by the ecclesiastical authorities should be compatible with the original.

The study module on Sustainable Built Environments was not intended to turn students into specialists in the estates of the church. Within the teaching and mission of the church, it was aimed at creating awareness of issues present within buildings. As tomorrow’s leaders and managers – the specialization offered through the licentiate in leadership and management – they must coordinate both human and financial resources to tackle immovable property-related issues.

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