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Public Theology in the Pastoral Letter of the Diocese of Manado: Religious Narratives for Justice, Peace, and Social Transformation

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Abstract

This study examines public theology as articulated in the Pastoral Letters of the Diocese of Manado, focusing on how religious narratives are constructed and mobilized to address issues of justice, peace, and social transformation. The study specifically concentrates on these pastoral documents to provide a focused and contextually grounded analysis. This research is significant in light of increasingly complex social crises, which require theological reflections that are not merely normative, but also capable of guiding faith-based engagement in the public sphere, particularly in promoting justice and peace. This study employs a qualitative method with a library research approach. The primary data consist of official Pastoral Letters issued by the Diocese of Manado, which are analyzed thematically to identify how religious narratives are constructed and function within the public sphere. The findings indicate that the Pastoral Letters of the Diocese of Manado function not only as moral exhortations, but also as a form of public theology that actively constructs religious narratives as both reflective and practical frameworks for the faithful in responding to social issues, such as injustice and conflict. These narratives serve as a bridge between spiritual values and concrete processes of social transformation. This study contributes to the local Church, and offers a reference for pastoral praxis in developing public theological narratives that promote social justice and peace in a pluralistic society.

Keywords

Public theology, religious narratives, Pastoral Letters, Diocese of Manado, social justice, peace.

INTRODUCTION

One of the essential duties of a bishop in the Catholic Church is to teach. This task, inherited from the apostles, may be carried out directly through preaching or indirectly through pastoral letters addressed to the faithful. In the life of the local Church, pastoral letters function as a significant medium of episcopal teaching, offering guidance and direction for the people of God in responding to various

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realities of life[1]. This teaching responsibility is rooted in the bishop's mission as an authentic teacher of the faith. The diocesan bishop is obliged to proclaim the truths of the faith and ensure that the faithful are properly instructed (Can. 386)[2]. Furthermore, bishops exercise their magisterium as authentic teachers whose teaching deserves religious respect and adherence (Can. 753)[3]. This Underscores that episcopal teaching carries not only doctrinal authority but also pastoral and social responsibility in guiding the faithful within concrete historical contexts.

In the Diocese of Manado, this teaching ministry was consistently exercised by bishop Josef Suwatan through various pastoral letters, including Advent letters, Lenten letters, election-related letters, and other pastoral messages issued on particular occasions. These letters demonstrate that the role of the bishop is not limited to internal ecclesial concerns, but also extends to broader social-political realities[4]. In this sense, pastoral letters function not only as doctrinal communication but also as instruments of ecclesial engagement within the public sphere, articulating moral guidance and theological reflection that respond to concrete socio-political situations experienced by the faithful.

In contemporary society, marked by injustice, conflict, and social fragmentation, theology is increasingly challenged to move beyond purely normative expressions toward active engagement with social realities. The Church is called to participate in the life-world, as emphasized in *Gaudium et Spes*, which opens by affirming solidarity with "the joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the people of this age" (GS, no.1)[5]. This conciliar vision underscores that theological reflection must remain attentive to the concrete realities of human life and social experience, thus affirming that the Church cannot distance itself from the struggles, conflicts, and aspirations of society, but must actively engage in interpreting and responding to them in the light of faith.

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[1] M. M. Wasti, *"Pesan Sang Gembala* (*Surat gembala Mgr. Josef Suwatan, MSC, dari 2000–2010 dan relevansinya bagi hidup menggereja di Keuskupan Manado*)" (Skripsi, Sekolah Tinggi Filsafat Seminari Pineleng, 2012).

[2] Catholic Church, *Code of Canon Law* (Vatican City: Vatican Press, 1983).

[3] Catholic Church.

[4] Wasti, *"Pesan Sang Gembala* (*Surat gembala Mgr. Josef Suwatan, MSC, dari 2000–2010 dan relevansinya bagi hidup menggereja di Keuskupan Manado*)."

[5] Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes: Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* (*Kegembiraan Dan Harapan*) (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1965).

This call to engagement is further developed in contemporary magisterial teaching. In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis emphasizes that the Church cannot remain passive in the face of social injustice but must actively participate in transforming society, particularly by promoting the dignity of the poor and marginalized (EG, no. 183-185)[6]. Similarly, Fratelli Tutti highlights the importance of social friendship and solidarity as fundamental principles for building a just and peaceful society (FT, no. 164-169)[7].

Moreover, in Querida Amazonia, the Church's commitment to justice is closely linked to ecological and social concerns, insisting that authentic social transformation must integrate both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor (QA, no. 8)[8]. Taken together, these teachings reinforce the understanding that theology is inherently oriented toward public life and must be expressed in concrete and transformative actions that promote justice, peace, and the common good.

In this context, public theology has emerged as an important approach that connects theological reflection with public life and social engagement. Public theology seeks to articulate the relevance of faith within the public sphere, addressing issues such as justice, peace, and human dignity. Contemporary scholarship emphasizes that public theology is not merely theoretical but a praxis-oriented and dialogical discipline that engages societal challenges and contributes to the common good[9]. It operates within public spaces where social realities, ethical debates, and communal life take shape, thereby linking faith with lived human experience. Furthermore, public theology is increasingly understood as a response to contemporary crises, including social, environmental, and technological challenges, by fostering ethical dialogue and promoting justice and equality[10], thereby

[6] Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* (*Sukacita Injil*) (Jakarta: Dokpen KWI, 2013).

[7] Francis, *Fratelli Tutti* (Vatican City, 2020).

[8] Francis, *Querida Amazonia* (Vatican City, 2020).

[9] Dirk J. Smit, "Does It Matter? On Whether There Is Method in the Madness," in *A Companion to Public Theology*, ed. Sebastian C. H. Kim, and Katie Day (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 67–92; Dirk J. Smit, "Public Theology? What Is in a Name?," in *A Companion to Public Theology*, ed. Sebastian C. H. Kim and Katie Day (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 67–92.

[10] Dion A. Forster, "The Nature of Public Theology," in *The Routledge Handbook of Public Theology*, ed. Sebastian C. H. Kim and Katie Day (London: Routledge, 2020); Isaac Boaheng, "Doing Evangelical Public Theology: The Gardener Approach as a Methodology," *E-Journal of Religious and Theological Studies* 9, no. 8 (2023): 351–67.

demonstrating that theological reflection must actively participate in shaping public discourse and ethical responsibility within society.

In addition, recent studies highlight the active role of the Church as a social agent in addressing issues of justice and public welfare. For instance, research in the Indonesian context shows that the Catholic Church contributes to shaping public opinion and advocating for environmental justice and community rights through its moral and theological discourse[11]. This demonstrates that theological reflection is not confined to doctrinal teaching but extends to concrete and transformative social engagement, in which faith-based values are translated into real actions that influence social transformation and public life.

However, despite the growing body of literature on public theology, studies that examine pastoral letters as concrete expressions of public theology, particularly within the Indonesian context, remain relatively limited. This gap is significant, considering that pastoral letters constitute an important form of episcopal teaching that directly addresses the lived realities of the faithful. In Indonesia, where society is characterized by religious pluralism, socio-political challenges, and recurring conflicts, the role of the Church in articulating theological responses to public issues becomes increasingly relevant, especially in fostering ethical awareness and social responsibility among believers.

Building on previous research on the pastoral letters of Bishop Josef Suwatan[12], this study examines these pastoral letters from the perspective of public theology. It focuses on how religious narratives are constructed and mobilized to address issues of justice, peace, and social transformation. By doing so, this research seeks to demonstrate that pastoral letters are not merely internal ecclesial documents but dynamic theological texts that actively engage with public life, contributing to the formation of ethical and social consciousness among the faithful, while also offering a contextual contribution to the development of public theology in Indonesia.

THEORICAL FRAMEWORK

Public theology has emerged as a significant field of theological reflection within the public sphere. Rather than confining itself to internal ecclesial discourse,

[11] Boaheng, "Doing Evangelical Public Theology: The Gardener Approach as a Methodology."

[12] Wasti, "Pesan Sang Gembala (Surat gembala Mgr. Josef Suwatan, MSC, dari 2000–2010 dan relevansinya bagi hidup menggereja di Keuskupan Manado)."

public theology engages with social, political, and cultural realities, offering ethical guidance and constructive contributions to society. In this sense, theology is no longer understood as a purely abstract or speculative discipline, but as a dialogical and praxis-oriented mode of reflection that interacts with the lived experiences of individuals and communities. As contemporary scholarship emphasizes, public theology operates within public spaces where social values, ethical debates, and even policy directions are shaped, thereby connecting faith with concrete human realities[13].

Scholars such as Sebastian Kim and Katie Day emphasize that public theology involves the active participation of faith communities in addressing societal issues, including justice, peace, and human dignity[14]. Similarly, Dirkie Smit highlights that public theology must remain attentive to the ethical challenges of contemporary society and contribute to the formation of public moral discourse[15]. In addition, recent studies underline that public theology has increasingly developed as a response to global crises, including social, environmental, and technological challenges by promoting justice, equality, and the common good[16]. These perspectives collectively affirm that theology is inherently public in nature, as it engages with the broader concerns of humanity and participates in shaping ethical responsibility within society.

In addition to contemporary theological scholarship, the foundation of public theology can also be traced to the social teaching of the Church. Documents such as *Caritas in Veritate* emphasize that charity and truth must guide social life and economic structures, highlighting the responsibility of the Church to engage in social transformation (CV, no.5-6 [17] . Likewise, *Laudato Si'* underscores the interconnectedness of social, economic, and environmental issues, calling for an integral approach to justice and peace (LS, no. 139)[18]. This vision is further reinforced in *Querida Amazonia*, which stresses that ecological concerns are inseparable from questions of social justice and the dignity of the poor (QA, no. 8)[19]. These teachings

[13] Smit, "Does It Matter? On Whether There Is Method in the Madness"; Smit, "Public Theology? What Is in a Name?"

[14] Smit, "Public Theology? What Is in a Name?"

[15] Smit.

[16] Forster, "The Nature of Public Theology"; Boaheng, "Doing Evangelical Public Theology: The Gardener Approach as a Methodology."

[17] Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate* (Vatican City: Vatican Press, 2009).

[18] Francis, *Laudato Si'* (Vatican City, 2015).

[19] Francis, *Querida Amazonia*.

affirm that theological reflection must actively engage with public issues and contribute to the common good thus reinforcing the intrinsically social and transformative character of theology.

Within this framework, religious narratives play a crucial role as mediating structures that connect theological ideas with lived experience. Religious narratives are not merely descriptive accounts of faith, but interpretative constructions that shape moral imagination and guide social action. Through narratives, theological concepts are translated into accessible forms that can influence attitudes, values, and behaviours within a community. In this sense, narratives function as a bridge between theological discourse and social praxis, enabling theological insights to be embodied in concrete ethical action.

Recent studies suggest that narratives function as powerful tools in constructing social meaning and mobilizing communities toward justice and reconciliation[20]. Narratives provide a framework through which individuals and communities interpret their experiences and respond to social realities. They also enable the articulation of moral visions that can inspire collective action and foster deeper social engagement, thereby demonstrating that narratives are not passive expressions of belief, but active forces in shaping social transformation.

Furthermore, narratives in the Christian tradition are deeply rooted in Scripture and are continually reinterpreted within changing historical contexts. The biblical call to conversion, justice, and solidarity is not confined to a particular historical moment but is rearticulated in response to contemporary challenges. This dynamic character allows religious narratives to remain relevant and transformative in diverse social contexts, particularly in societies marked by conflict and inequality, where theological interpretation must respond to concrete human suffering and social tensions.

The role of the Church in public engagement is therefore closely linked to its ability to construct and communicate such narratives. Through its teaching authority, the Church articulates moral and theological responses to societal issues, guiding the faithful in their engagement with the world. In this regard, pastoral letters represent a concrete form of this engagement, as they translate theological reflection into

[20] Boaheng, "Doing Evangelical Public Theology: The Gardener Approach as a Methodology."

contextually relevant and practical guidance, thus functioning as a bridge between doctrinal teaching and lived social realities.

Moreover, recent ecclesial teaching continues to emphasize the importance of solidarity and fraternity in addressing global challenges. In Fratelli Tutti, Pope Francis calls for a renewed commitment to social friendship and universal fraternity as the foundation for peace and justice (FT, no. 87)[21]. This perspective highlights that theological reflection must not only interpret social realities but also inspire concrete action that upholds human dignity, thereby linking theological insight with ethical responsibility and social transformation.

By integrating these theoretical and theological perspectives, this study situates the Pastoral Letters of the Diocese of Manado within the broader discourse of public theology. It emphasizes that these letters function as sites where religious narratives are constructed and mobilized, bridging the gap between faith and social transformation. In doing so, the study highlights the importance of local ecclesial texts as significant contributions to the development of public theology, particularly in contexts marked by social complexity, pluralism, and ongoing socio-political challenges, thereby affirming that local theological expressions play a vital role in shaping public theological discourse.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research design using a library research approach. The qualitative method is appropriate for this research as it seeks to explore and interpret theological meanings embedded in textual sources, particularly the pastoral letters issued by the Diocese of Manado. This approach enables a deeper understanding of how theological ideas are articulated and applied within specific socio-historical contexts. In theological research, qualitative and interpretative approaches are widely used to examine the relationship between text, context, and lived experience, allowing for a contextual understanding of faith in society[22].

The primary data of this study consist of official pastoral letters written by Mgr. Josef Suwatan, especially those issued during the Advent period between 2000 and 2010. These pastoral letters are archival ecclesial documents that are not widely

[21] Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*.

[22] John W. Creswell and Cheryl N. Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*, 4th ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2018); John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, 2nd ed. (SCM Press, 2016).

published, but are accessible through diocesan documentation and prior research[23], and are available upon request. The selected period is significant as it reflects a time of social and political transition in Indonesia. These documents are treated as authoritative ecclesial texts that reflect the bishop's teaching ministry and his engagement with both ecclesial and socio-political realities. Secondary data are drawn from relevant theological literature, including recent studies on public theology, religious narratives, and social transformation, in order to provide a broader analytical framework[24].

The data are analyzed using thematic analysis, which allows for the identification and interpretation of recurring patterns within the texts. This method is particularly suitable for examining how religious narratives are constructed and communicated, as it facilitates the systematic categorization of themes within qualitative data[25]. The analysis is conducted through several stages:

- Close reading of the pastoral letters to gain a comprehensive understanding of the texts
- Interpretation of key themes such as conversion, hope, justice, and solidarity
- Categorization of these themes into broader theological frameworks
- Interpretation of their meaning in relation to contemporary social realities.

In addition, this study adopts an interpretative hermeneutical approach to understand the meaning of the texts within their socio-historical contexts. This approach allows the researcher to examine the relationship between theological discourse and concrete social realities, such as conflict, injustice, and socio-political instability, which form the background of the pastoral letters. It also aligns with the perspective of public theology, which seeks to interpret faith in dialogue with societal conditions and public life[26].

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[23] Wasti, "Pesan Sang Gembala (Surat gembala Mgr. Josef Suwatan, MSC, dari 2000–2010 dan relevansinya bagi hidup menggereja di Keuskupan Manado)."

[24] Forster, "The Nature of Public Theology"; Boaheng, "Doing Evangelical Public Theology: The Gardener Approach as a Methodology."

[25] Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology," *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3, no. 2 (2006): 77–101; Lorelli S. Nowell et al., "Thematic Analysis: Striving to Meet the Trustworthiness Criteria," *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 16, no. 1 (December 2017): 1609406917733847, https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406917733847.

[26] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd ed., trans. J. Weinsheimer and D. G. Marshall (Continuum, 2004); Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*.

By situating the texts within these contexts, the study highlights how theology is contextualized and made relevant to public life. This methodological framework ensures that the analysis is not only descriptive but also interpretative, enabling a critical engagement with the texts and demonstrating how the pastoral letters function as dynamic expressions of public theology. Particularly in articulating religious narratives that respond to contemporary social challenges and contribute to ethical reflection in the public sphere.

ANALISIS/DISCUSSION

Religious Narratives of Conversion and Moral Renewal

One of the most dominant religious narratives in the pastoral letters is the call to conversion (metanoia), which is consistently emphasized as both a spiritual and social imperative. The bishop explicitly calls the faithful to conversion, stating that "*dengan semangat pertobatan kita menegakkan kebenaran, kejujuran dan keadilan, mewujudkan penghargaan terhadap hak asasi manusia, cinta kasih, damai dan persaudaraan dan menghentikan tindak kekerasan dan balas dendam*"[27]. As a primary source, this statement reflects the way episcopal teaching is communicated within a concrete pastoral situation. This emphasis reflects a deeply rooted theological tradition in Christianity, where conversion is not understood merely as an individual act of repentance, but as a holistic renewal of life involving personal, communal, and social dimensions. In the broader teaching of the Church, conversion is closely linked to reconciliation and renewal. *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia* highlights that true conversion involves a radical turning toward God that also transforms relationships with others and society (RP, no. 13)[28]. This indicates that conversion has an inherently social dimension, extending beyond personal spirituality to include ethical responsibility toward others. Moreover, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* emphasizes that interior conversion and social commitment (CCC, no.1430-1431)[29], thereby affirming that conversion is both an interior and communal reality.

In the context of the Diocese of Manado, this narrative takes on particular significance due to socio-political realities marked by conflict, injustice, and moral

[27] Diocese of Manado, *Pastoral Letters* (*Advent and Other Occasions, 2000–2010*) (Manado: Diocese of Manado, 2000).
[28] John Paul II, *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia* (Vatican City, 1984).
[29] Catholic Church, *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1992).

degradation. The call to conversion is therefore not abstract but contextual, addressing concrete situations such as violence, corruption, and social fragmentation. In this sense, conversion becomes a moral response that challenges individuals and communities to participate actively in the transformation of society. From the perspective of public theology, this narrative demonstrates that theological reflection is inseparable from public life. As noted in contemporary scholarship, theology carries public consequences and is therefore called to engage concrete social realities rather than remain limited to private belief[30]. Similarly, public theology operates within social contexts where ethical values and communal life are shaped, linking faith with lived human experience[31]. Thus, the call to conversion in the pastoral letters reflects not only a spiritual invitation but also a public and ethical imperative.

Furthermore, recent studies emphasize that public theology emerges as a response to contemporary crises and seeks to promote justice, equality, and the common good[32]. In this light, conversion can be understood as a transformative process that enables individuals and communities to respond to social injustice and moral disorder. It becomes a foundation for ethical action and social responsibility, rather than a purely internal religious experience. This perspective is also supported by the Church's social teaching, particularly in *Gaudium et Spes*, which affirms that authentic faith must be expressed in concrete engagement with that world (GS, no.4)[33], and in *Evangelii Gaudium*, where Pope Francis calls for a missionary conversion that transforms both personal life and social structures (EG, no. 25-27)[34]. Therefore, the narrative of conversion in the pastoral letters functions as a foundational element of public theology, linking personal faith with public responsibility. It illustrates how religious narratives can shape moral consciousness and inspire active participation in social transformation. Through this narrative, the Church invites the faithful not only to renew their relationship with God but also to engage responsibly in the transformation of society.

[30] Forster, "The Nature of Public Theology."

[31] Smit, "Public Theology? What Is in a Name?"; Smit, "Does It Matter? On Whether There Is Method in the Madness."

[32] Boaheng, "Doing Evangelical Public Theology: The Gardener Approach as a Methodology."

[33] Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes: Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* (*Kegembiraan Dan Harapan*).

[34] Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* (*Sukacita Injil*).

Narratives of Hope in Contexts of Crisis

The pastoral letters were written within socio-historical contexts characterized by violence, instability, and uncertainty, such as the Poso conflict and other national crises. This context is clearly reflected in the pastoral letters, where it is stated that *"umat manusia merindukan dan mengharapkan penebusan dan penyelamatan dari Tuhan"*[35]. In such situations, the narrative of hope emerges as a central theological response that sustains the faith of the community. As a primary source, the pastoral letters reflect how theological discourse is contextualized in response to concrete experiences of suffering and crisis. Hope, in the Christian tradition, is not merely an emotional attitude but a theological virtue rooted in trust in God's promises. This is strongly emphasized in *Spe Salvi*, which states that Christian hope transforms human existence by offering a horizon of meaning even in suffering (SS, no.1-2)[36]. Furthermore, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* affirms that hope is the virtue by which believers desire and expect eternal life while trusting in Christ's promises (CCC, no. 1817-1818)[37], thereby grounding hope not only in emotion but in theological conviction. The pastoral letters echo this theological vision by encouraging the faithful to maintain hope amid uncertainty, thereby situating hope as a lived communal reality rather than a purely abstract belief.

In the context of social crises, hope becomes an active and transformative force that enables communities not only to endure suffering but also to work toward renewal. The bishop's message affirms that God's presence accompanies the faithful in their struggles, providing a theological framework through which crisis is interpreted not as meaningless suffering but as a moment of grace that invites deeper faith and solidarity. In this sense, hope functions as a source of moral resilience that sustains both individual faith and communal life, while also fostering a spirit of perseverance and commitment to the common good in the midst of adversity.

From the perspective of public theology, this narrative demonstrates that hope is not limited to personal spirituality but extends into the public sphere as a resource for ethical engagement. Public theology recognizes that theological virtues such as hope can shape how communities respond to social crises and injustices. As contemporary scholarship suggests, public theology emerges in response to situations

[35] Diocese of Manado, *Pastoral Letters* (*Advent and Other Occasions, 2000–2010*).
[36] Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi* (Vatican City, 2007).
[37] Catholic Church, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.

of crisis and seeks to promote justice, equality, and the common good. In addition, public theology emphasizes that faith must engage with real social contexts and contribute to the transformation of society[38]. Moreover, this perspective resonates with *Gaudium et Spes*, which emphasizes that the Church is called to read the signs of the times and respond to them with faith and hope (GS, no. 4)[39], thus highlighting that hope is intrinsically connected to historical responsibility and social engagement.

In contexts marked by conflict and uncertainty, hope enables individuals and communities to resist despair and to remain committed to the pursuit of justice and peace. It functions as a bridge between theological belief and social praxis, linking faith with concrete action in the public sphere. Furthermore, *Pope Francis in Fratelli Tutti* underscores that hope inspires the building of a more just and fraternal society grounded in solidarity (FT, no. 55)[40], thereby reinforcing the idea that hope is not passive optimism but an active force for social transformation. Therefore, the narrative of hope in the pastoral letters serves as a crucial element of public theology, as it not only sustains the spiritual life of the faithful but also motivates their active participation in processes of social transformation and the promotion of justice and peace.

Love and Solidarity as Embodied Theology

Another central narrative in the pastoral letters is the call to love and solidarity, which is expressed in concrete action. The bishop emphasizes that love must be embodied in action, stating that "*damai dan cinta kasih tidak akan terjadi kalau hanya dirindukan dan dinantikan"*[41]*,* but must be realized through concrete action". As a primary source, this statement illustrates how theological teaching is translated into concrete moral exhortation addressed to the faithful. This perspective highlights that love is not merely an abstract ideal but a lived reality that must be embodied in everyday actions and social relationships.

This perspective aligns with the Church's teaching that love is not merely an abstract concept but a lived reality that must be embodied in social relationships.

[38] Forster, "The Nature of Public Theology"; Boaheng, "Doing Evangelical Public Theology: The Gardener Approach as a Methodology."

[39] Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes: Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* (*Kegembiraan Dan Harapan*).

[40] Francis, *Fratelli Tutti.*

[41] Diocese of Manado, *Pastoral Letters* (*Advent and Other Occasions, 2000–2010*).

Deus Caritas Est emphasizes that love (caritas) is at the heart of the Church's mission and must be expressed through concrete acts of charity and justice (DCE, no.25)[42]. Furthermore, *Caritas in Veritate* affirms that charity is not only a personal virtue but also a principle that must shape social and economic life (CV, no. 2-3)[43], thereby underscoring that love has both personal and structural dimensions. In addition, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches that love of neighbor is inseparable from love of God and must be expressed in concrete acts of justice and solidarity (CCC, no. 1822-1829)[44]. This teaching highlights that authentic Christian love is inherently social and transformative, inseparable from responsibility toward others.

In the pastoral letters, this narrative is particularly directed toward the poor, the marginalized, and those affected by social injustice. The call to share resources, to care for others, and to promote solidarity reflects a theological vision in which love becomes a transformative force in society. This perspective resonates with contemporary studies that emphasize the role of the Church in engaging social issues and promoting justice within society[45]. Moreover, *Pope Francis in Fratelli Tutti* emphasizes that solidarity is a concrete expression of love that seeks the good of others and promotes social friendship (FT, no. 116)[46], thereby reinforcing that love must take the form of active concern for justice and human dignity.

From the perspective of public theology, this narrative demonstrates that theological values are not confined to doctrinal teaching but are translated into concrete social engagement. Public theology emphasizes that faith must be expressed in actions that contribute to the common good and promote human dignity[47]. In this sense, love and solidarity function as ethical principles that guide the Church's participation in public life, particularly in responding to social inequality, injustice, and the suffering of vulnerable communities. Therefore, the narratives of love and solidarity in the pastoral letters exemplifies an embodied form of theology, where faith is lived out through concrete actions that foster justice, compassion, and social

[42] Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est* (Vatican City: Vatican Press, 2005).
[43] Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*.
[44] Catholic Church, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.
[45] Forster, "The Nature of Public Theology"; Boaheng, "Doing Evangelical Public Theology: The Gardener Approach as a Methodology."
[46] Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*.
[47] Smit, "Public Theology? What Is in a Name?"; Smit, "Does It Matter? On Whether There Is Method in the Madness."

transformation. This demonstrates that theology is not merely a matter of belief or doctrine, but a lived practice that shapes ethical responsibility and social commitment, thus affirming that the credibility of faith is manifested through acts of love that transform both individuals and society.

Justice, Peace, and Prophetic Social Critique

The pastoral letters also function as a prophetic response to social realities, addressing issues such as corruption, violence, inequality, and abuse of power. This prophetic critique is evident in the description of social reality, where "*kebenaran ditindas oleh kelaliman, dan kuasa jahat serta dosa merajalela"*[48]. They describe a society marked by injustice and moral disorder, calling the faithful to ethical responsibility and social transformation. As primary sources, these texts demonstrate how theological reflection is directed toward concrete social conditions and moral challenges, thus revealing the Church's active concern for injustice and human suffering. This prophetic dimension is deeply rooted in the biblical tradition, where prophets speak out against injustice and call for righteousness. In the contemporary context, the Church continues this prophetic mission through its social teaching. The *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* emphasizes that the pursuit of justice and peace is a fundamental aspect of the Church's mission (CSDC, no.201-208)[49]. This teaching affirms that the Church is called not only to proclaim the Gospel but also to engage actively in promoting social justice and human dignity. Moreover, *Gaudium et Spes* highlights that the Church has the responsibility to scrutinize the signs of the times and interpret them in the light of the Gospel (GS, no. 4)[50], thereby reinforcing the prophetic role of the Church in responding to social injustice.

The pastoral letters of the Diocese of Manado embody this mission by addressing concrete social issues and encouraging the faithful to act justly and responsibly. They do not merely diagnose social problems but also provide moral guidance for addressing them. In this sense, theology functions as a critical and constructive engagement with society, offering ethical reflection that challenges injustice and promotes the common good. Furthermore, *Laudato Si'* emphasizes that

[48] Diocese of Manado, *Pastoral Letters* (*Advent and Other Occasions, 2000–2010*).

[49] Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2004).

[50] Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes: Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* (*Kegembiraan Dan Harapan*).

social injustice, environmental degradation, and economic inequality are interconnected realities that require a holistic ethical response (LS, no. 137-139)[51], thus deepening the understanding that justice and peace are inseparable dimensions of the Church's mission.

From the perspective of public theology, this prophetic role demonstrates that theological discourse must engage with public realities and contribute to social transformation. Public theology emphasizes that faith carries public implications and must respond to issues such as injustice, inequality, and social conflict[52]. In addition, contemporary scholarship highlights that public theology emerges as a response to social crises and seeks to promote justice, equality, and the common good, thereby positioning as an active participant in shaping ethical and social life. Therefore, the pastoral letters can be understood as a contextual expression of public theology that seeks to transform society through ethical reflection and action. They demonstrate how the Church exercises its prophetic mission by confronting injustice and inspiring the faithful to participate in the pursuit of justice and peace. In this way, the pastoral letters not only interpret social realities but also call for concrete transformation, affirming that faith must be expressed through prophetic witness and active commitment to justice and the common good.

Religious Narratives as a Bridge between Faith and Social Transformation

Through the integration of biblical references, social analysis, and pastoral concern, the pastoral letters construct religious narratives that connect faith with public responsibility. These narratives interpret social realities in theological terms while guiding ethical action. As primary sources, the pastoral letters demonstrate how theological reflection is translated into concrete responses to social conditions, thereby showing how faith becomes meaningful within the lived realities of the faithful.

For example, the call to "prepare the way of the Lord" is reinterpreted not only as a spiritual preparation but also as an invitation to address injustice, inequality, and moral disorder in society. Similarly, the emphasis on sharing resources and caring for the poor reflects a theological vision of social transformation rooted in solidarity and

[51] Francis, *Laudato Si'*.

[52] Forster, "The Nature of Public Theology"; Boaheng, "Doing Evangelical Public Theology: The Gardener Approach as a Methodology."

justice. In this way, religious narratives become instruments that form moral awareness and encourage shared responsibility. This perspective is reinforced in *Laudato Si'*, which highlights the interconnectedness of social and environmental issues and calls for an integral approach to justice (LS, no.139)[53]. It is also echoed in *Fratelli Tutti*, which emphasizes the importance of fraternity and social friendship in building a just and peaceful world (FT, no. 87)[54]. Moreover, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches that the moral life is expressed through concrete actions that reflect love, justice, and solidarity (CCC, no. 1928-1933)[55]. Thereby affirming that faith must be embodied in social responsibility and ethical commitment. These teachings affirm that authentic faith must be expressed through concrete engagement with social realities. This is further reinforced by the pastoral call to communal responsibility, where the faithful are invited to *"membangun kepedulian bersama dan persaudaraan, dengan saling memberi perhatian dan saling membantu"*[56].

From the perspective of public theology, these narratives illustrate how theological discourse operates within the public sphere by connecting faith with social transformation. Public theology emphasizes that religious beliefs must engage with societal challenges and contribute to the common good[57]. Moreover, contemporary scholarship highlights that public theology emerges as a response to social crises and seeks to promote justice, equality, and human dignity, thus positioning theological narratives as active agents in shaping ethical awareness and social engagement.

Therefore, the pastoral letters function as dynamic expressions of public theology, where religious narratives are mobilized to inspire social transformation. They demonstrate how theology can engage with public issues in a meaningful and transformative way, particularly within the context of a pluralistic society. Through these narratives, faith becomes a driving force for ethical action and social renewal, bridging the gap between belief and practice, and between spiritual conviction and social responsibility.

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[53] Francis, *Laudato Si'*.

[54] Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*.

[55] Catholic Church, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.

[56] Diocese of Manado, *Pastoral Letters* (*Advent and Other Occasions, 2000–2010*).

[57] Forster, "The Nature of Public Theology"; Boaheng, "Doing Evangelical Public Theology: The Gardener Approach as a Methodology."

The Role of the Bishop as a Public Theologian

An important dimension that emerges from this study is the role of the bishop as a public theologian. Through his pastoral letters, Mgr. Josef Suwatan, exercises his teaching authority not only within the Church but also in relation to wider public concerns. As primary sources, these letters demonstrate how episcopal teaching is directed toward both ecclesial and social realities, thus reflecting the bishop's responsibility to engage the faith community in responding to concrete societal challenges.

As a public theologian, the bishop interprets social realities in the light of faith and provides moral guidance for the faithful. His pastoral letters serve as a medium through which theological reflection is communicated in accessible and contextually relevant ways. This role reflects the broader understanding of public theology as an engagement of faith with societal issues and the common good[58]. Moreover, the *Code of Canon Law* affirms that the bishop, as a teacher of the faith, is called to proclaim the Gospel in a way that addresses the conditions of contemporary life (Can. 386; Can. 747 §2)[59], thereby underscoring that episcopal teaching inherently carries a public and social dimension.

Furthermore, public theology emphasizes that theological discourse must move beyond academic reflection and engage actively with social realities. As noted by Forster[60], theology inevitably has public implications and contributes to shaping ethical and social life. In this sense, the bishop's teaching ministry represents a concrete form of theological engagement within the public sphere, where theological reflection is translated into moral guidance that responds to real social conditions.

The bishop's engagement with issues such as conflict, injustice, and social transformation demonstrates that theology is not confined to academic discourse but is actively involved in shaping public life. His pastoral letters address concrete social challenges and encourage the faithful to respond with ethical responsibility and social commitment. This perspective is further supported by *Evangelii Gaudium*, where Pope Francis calls for pastors to be actively involved in the realities of their people

[58] Smit, "Public Theology? What Is in a Name?"
[59] Catholic Church, *Code of Canon Law*.
[60] Forster, "The Nature of Public Theology."

and to guide them toward social transformation (EG, no. 31)[61], thus highlighting that pastoral leadership must be both theological and socially engaged.

Therefore, the pastoral letters can be understood as a concrete expression of the Church's mission to engage with the world and to promote the common good. They illustrate how episcopal authority functions not only as doctrinal leadership but also a form of public theological engagement that bridges faith and social transformation. In this way, the bishop emerges not only as a teacher within the Church but also as a moral voice in society, demonstrating that theological authority can contribute to shaping public ethics and fostering social responsibility.

CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that the Pastoral Letters of the Diocese of Manado constitute a significant form of public theology, in which theological reflection is actively engaged with concrete social reality es. Through a qualitative and thematic analysis of the pastoral letters issued between 2000 and 2010, it is evident that these texts are not merely internal ecclesial communications, but also public theological engagements. The findings reveal that the pastoral letters construct and mobilize religious narratives such as conversion, hope, love, and justice as interpretative frameworks that enable the faithful to understand and respond to complex socio-political situations. These narratives do not function only at the level of belief, but also as practical guides for ethical action, bridging the gap between spiritual values and lived social realities. In this sense, the pastoral letters become instruments of moral formation that shape the consciousness and engagement of the faithful, thereby demonstrating the transformative potential of theology when it is rooted in concrete human experience.

Furthermore, this study highlights that the pastoral letters embody a contextual and transformative theology. By engaging issues such as conflict, violence, corruption, and inequality, the bishop's teaching reflects the Church's broader mission to read the signs of the times and to contribute to the common good, as emphasized in Gaudium et Spes (no. 4)[62]. This perspective is further reinforced in contemporary magisterial teaching, particularly in *Fratelli Tutti*, where Pope Francis

[61] Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* (*Sukacita Injil*).

[62] Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes: Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* (*Kegembiraan Dan Harapan*).

calls for a renewed commitment to fraternity, solidarity, and social friendship as essential foundations for peace and justice (FT, no. 87)[63]. In this regard, the pastoral letters function as a prophetic voice that calls for moral responsibility, solidarity, and active participation in building a just and peaceful society. They demonstrate that theology is not confined to abstract reflection but is a lived and public reality that engages with the struggles and aspirations of human communities, thus affirming that theological reflection must be both contextual and socially transformative.

Finally, this research contributes to the development of public theology in the Indonesian context by demonstrating how local ecclesial texts can function as theological resources for social engagement. It shows that pastoral letters, as a form of episcopal teaching, have the potential to influence public discourse and inspire transformative action within pluralistic societies. Future research may expand this study by comparing pastoral letters from different dioceses or by examining their reception and impact among the faithful in various socio-cultural contexts. In this way, public theology is not only a theoretical discourse but a transformative practice that shapes both faith and society, inviting believers to participate actively in the pursuit of justice, peace, and the common good, thereby reinforcing the role of the Church as an active agent in the moral and social transformation of society.

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[63] Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*.

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