

## Introduction

The University of St. Thomas is a liberal arts university located in Saint Paul, Minnesota. The school was founded in 1885 by Archbishop John Ireland and [built on the land of the Dakota](#) people. Students enrolled at the university come from a variety of different backgrounds and span from all parts of the United States as well as abroad from various countries around the world.

St. Thomas strives to educate its students academically as well as socially and provide them with a better understanding of the world around them. The university motto is “All for the Common Good” which is reflective of what great Catholic leaders of our past had wanted. This motto was created based on different University of St. Thomas ideals such as educating the whole person, forming ethically moral leaders, and finding harmony between faith and reason.

The university mission is inspired by Catholic tradition which strives to educate students to be morally responsible leaders who think critically, act wisely, and work skillfully to advance the common good. This school was named after St. Thomas Aquinas, who pursued truth wherever it may be found, and who trusted in the fundamental compatibility of faith and reason. The University of St. Thomas values education and strives to find wisdom in all aspects of our lives by achieving academic excellence, finding gratitude in our community, dignifying every individual we encounter, diversifying our community and accepting different ways of life, as well as celebrating our faith and interacting in Catholic intellectual tradition. We, at St. Thomas, and our larger community, cannot truly achieve our goals of achieving wisdom if we do not listen to the cries of the Earth and those who suffer on it. "The human environment and the natural environment deteriorate together; we cannot adequately combat environmental degradation unless we attend to causes related to human and social degradation" (LS 48). St. Thomas strives to combat many of these different issues seen in our community and empower those who cry to be heard.

The University of St. Thomas became a participant in the Sustainability Tracking, Assessment and Rating System ([STARS](#)) with their first report being published in 2018. STARS is a transparent, self-reporting framework for colleges and universities to measure their sustainability performance. There are currently hundreds of higher education institutions participating internationally. Participating institutions earn points toward a STARS Bronze, Silver, Gold, or Platinum Rating. STARS provides a framework for understanding sustainability in all sectors of an institution. The main groups of information collected in the reports are Institutional Characteristics, Academics, Engagement, Operations, Planning and Administration, and, Innovation and Leadership.

St. Thomas uses the report to identify the strengths and areas of opportunity regarding sustainable practices at the university. Between 2018 and 2021, St. Thomas significantly increased its earned STARS points and improved from a Silver to Gold rating. By continuing participation in STARS and closely analyzing where major improvements can be made most

readily, St. Thomas will be able to think critically, work skillfully, and act wisely to continue being a sustainability leader in higher education. Major categories for improvement at St. Thomas identified in the 2021 report include Learning Outcomes, Food and Beverage Purchasing, Greenhouse Gas Emissions, and Waste.

Pope Francis in *Laudato Sí* reveals the need for major institutions to act as guides in necessary sustainability steps and influencing their communities. The Pope writes, “If everything is related, then the health of a society’s institutions has consequences for the environment and the quality of human life – In this sense, social ecology is necessarily institutional, and gradually extends to the whole of society, from the primary social group, the family, to the wider local, national and international communities. Within each social stratum, and between them, institutions develop to regulate human relationships. Anything which weakens those institutions has negative consequences, such as injustice, violence and loss of freedom” (LS 142). It is obvious that building a better future requires “the active participation of all members of the community” (LS 144). St. Thomas has actively chosen to participate in the STARS assessment framework, showing clear intent towards sustainable action and stewardship, aligning St. Thomas with the principles and goals of *Laudato Sí*.

### **Adoption of Sustainable Lifestyles**

The University of St. Thomas has a commitment to adopting more sustainable lifestyles to respond to *Laudato Sí* and the Cry of the Earth. The university also recognizes some of the biggest challenges facing our planet today, such as climate change and pollution, lack of freshwater access, loss of biodiversity, and a decline in quality of life. St. Thomas is committed to adopting lifestyles more conducive to a changing climate, as the university recognizes that “The climate is a common good, belonging to all and meant for all” (LS 23).

One of St. Thomas’s core missions is to advance the common good, and they have taken on a responsibility to adopt sustainable lifestyles in response to a changing climate and work to embed sustainability into the university’s culture. A main focus of orientation for new students is to introduce them to the culture of sustainability at the university. Residence Life also fosters sustainable lifestyles in residence halls through residential advisor training and educational messaging. Many examples can be seen across campus as well; to name just a few, St. Thomas is reducing waste by offering all on campus students compost bins, combating transport emissions with a campus shuttle, and designing more energy efficient buildings to meet LEED certifications. Students are also committed to responding to Pope Francis’ appeal. In a survey, two thirds of responding students reported that they engaged in at least one activity to be more sustainable. Common responses included using reusable containers, separating waste and compost at home, and buying secondhand clothes.

The university also recognizes that sustainability relates to many factors, such as economic status and global inequality. We must seek “comprehensive solutions” to these issues and recall that “We are faced not with two separate crises, one environmental and the other

social, but rather with one complex crisis which is both social and environmental” (LS 139).

### **Ecological Education**

For any significant improvement in our current environmental crisis, education and awareness are crucial. When an individual is educated in environmental issues, they are better equipped and prepared to address them. This idea is highlighted in *Laudato Sí*, where the Pope acknowledges that “basic awareness would enable the development of new convictions, attitudes, and forms of life” (LS 202). He also emphasizes the importance of teaching the young, for the young are the future (LS 213). As an educational institution, St. Thomas exerts influence over many young people. Education is the university’s mission, and although there is room for improvement, St. Thomas is actively working to enrich the curriculum and has goals in place to do so. Not only is there a broad range of newly available environment-focused classes that one can take to obtain a minor in Sustainability, but there are goals in place to strengthen their course material to guarantee that they adequately address the topic. This reflects St. Thomas’s efforts to harness its power to create graduates educated in sustainability. The curriculum is not the only avenue St. Thomas has taken to address this subject: in 2015 the university developed a Living Learning Community with a focus on sustainability. This Living Learning Community gives students a chance to connect with peers who share similar passions for the environment outside of the classroom. By equipping individuals with the knowledge to go forth and make a positive impact in the world, St. Thomas contributes to the common good and takes great pride in this fact.

### **Ecological Economics**

The economics of sustainability are less visible, but changes in this area yield powerful results. St. Thomas’s Investment and Finance section of the STARS report has slightly improved since 2018, but there is still much work that needs to be done. In St. Thomas’s Strategic Plan there is a detailed list of actions to help the university achieve their economic goals. A recent commitment to this plan happened in November of 2021 when St. Thomas’ Board of Trustees formally approved a university commitment to divest from fossil fuels. The newly approved university policy states St. Thomas will, in the next five years, divest from public securities of any company whose primary business is exploring or extracting fossil fuels such as coal, oil and natural gas. With this action, St. Thomas takes a decisive step away from a business model focused solely on short-term financial gain. *Laudato Sí* decries this destructive model, “They (businesses) are less concerned with certain economic theories, than with their actual operation in the functioning of the economy. They support this idea with their deeds by showing no interest in more balanced levels of production, a better distribution of wealth, concern for the environment and the rights of future generations. Their behavior shows that for them maximizing profits is enough” (LS 109).

St. Thomas has also talked about diversifying the public investments, to make them more sustainable. For example, St. Thomas has invested in a Danish biogas company, which generates electricity from renewable biological sources such as manure. St. Thomas is also adding more investment managers that will find renewable energy sources and increase the criteria to focus on how sustainability can raise our profits. Economics is an area for great improvement, and members of the St. Thomas community can help make that change; according to Pope Francis, “The local population should have a special place at the table; they are concerned about their own future and that of their children and can consider goals transcending immediate economic interest” (LS 183).

### **Response to the Cry of the Earth**

The mission of a Catholic university is to foster attentive care for all creation. “The poor and the earth are crying out,” said Pope Francis. “Today, we must realize that a true ecological approach always becomes a social approach; it must integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment, to hear both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor,” (LS 49). This document enumerates many ways that the university responds to the cry of the earth. Environmental research is another way to listen to the cry of the earth.

Through our research and studies, we are listening and learning how to respond. For example, the director of Sustainable Communities Partnership at St. Thomas, taught a course on Society and Sustainability. Students conducted research by collecting community members’ river stories through an online survey and the Natural Heritage Project’s (NHP’s) Elm Tree Story Booth, which traveled across the Twin Cities to listen to diverse voices. They collaborated with the St. Thomas Sustainable Communities Partnership (SCP), the Mississippi Watershed Management Organization, and the NHP to learn about people’s experiences of the Mississippi River and why the river is important to them. An SCP Artist-in-Residence, worked with the students to analyze their communication of online survey data through visual arts.

St. Thomas responds to the cry of the earth by having a Sustainability Strategic Plan and following it. In this plan, the university stated these goals: carbon neutrality by 2025, sustainability components in undergraduate courses, zero waste strategies, and engagement with the global Catholic climate movement organizations. The university made substantial progress by 2022: carbon emissions were reduced, undergraduate courses address sustainability, a zero-waste assessment was completed, and the university joined the Vatican’s *Laudato Sí* Action Platform.

Attention to God’s creation shows respect for the Creator. In his encyclical, Pope Francis writes, “Neglecting to monitor the harm done to nature and the environmental impact of our decisions is the most striking sign of a disregard for the message contained in the structures of nature itself. When we fail to acknowledge as part of reality the worth of [every person] it becomes difficult to hear the cry of nature itself; everything is connected. Once the human

being declares independence from reality and behaves with absolute dominion, the very foundations of our life begin to crumble... (LS 117).” Our job is to pay attention to this cry.

The university is making progress. In 2017, St. Thomas received national recognition for sustainability through the Sustainable Campus Index. Innovation and leadership were the highest scoring categories. The most improved categories from 2018 to 2021 were employee orientation, outreach campaign, and biodiversity. Some of St. Thomas’ biggest opportunities for the future include sustainable investment, clean and renewable energy, building operations and management, waste minimization, greenhouse gas emissions, and learning outcomes. Students also learn how the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor intertwines. We must listen.

### **Response to the Cry of the Poor**

The University of St. Thomas is committed to providing a high-quality Catholic education to many students, regardless of financial status. The university provides many merit-based scholarships, as well as need-based financial aid to all students who qualify. At the University of St. Thomas, nearly all first-year students receive an academic scholarship, which can be used to cover any costs of attending the university. Students can receive significant merit-based scholarships per year. St. Thomas has personal support and financial aid counselors to ensure that each student receives the proper financial support based on their unique experience. The University of St. Thomas’s commitment to providing an affordable quality education to its students is affirmed by *Gaudium et Spes*: “Therefore, there must be made available to all [people] everything necessary for leading a life truly human, such as food, clothing, and shelter; the right to choose a state of life freely and to found a family, the right to education” (GS 26).

Another branch of the university that is working to provide students with an affordable education is Dougherty Family College. This is a 2-year program at St. Thomas where students demonstrate financial need as well as solid academic achievement. Dougherty Family College aids students financially by providing free meals, laptops, and textbooks, as well as providing generous financial aid to those in need. In addition to the many financial support systems set in place, the university also has a strong commitment to standing in solidarity with those in need in the surrounding community. The University of St. Thomas’s Opus College of Business demonstrates this strong commitment through a required community service course for all its undergraduate students. BUSN 200 is a course solely dedicated to students serving their community through volunteer work at local non-profits. In the last three decades, BUSN 200 students have dedicated hundreds of thousands of volunteer hours to non-profit organizations in the surrounding community.

The Center for the Common Good is also a large part of St. Thomas’s mission to help those in need. Through the Center for the Common Good, students can participate in many more volunteer opportunities at the Tommie Together Volunteer Center. Through volunteering in this center, students can work with experts and gain more knowledge on how small-scale structural systems affect large-scale social issues.

## **Community Resilience and Empowerment**

The University of St. Thomas empowers students and builds a resilient community in many ways. First and most fundamentally, St. Thomas works to ensure food security for students. In Pope Francis's 2021 message to the Secretary General of the United Nations ahead of the United Nations Summit on Food Systems, Pope Francis wrote, "We produce enough food for all people, but many go without their daily bread."<sup>1</sup> This "constitutes a genuine scandal", an offence that violates basic human rights".<sup>2</sup> Through the Foodmobile public distribution events, Students of St. Thomas and participants distribute food publicly to those in need of food. This is a great way for St. Thomas students to work together to put an end to poverty and hunger within our communities and anyone can participate. In Catholic Social Teachings "option for the poor", it states that we are given the moral test of how we treat the most vulnerable members of our society. The university applies this by participating in such events and engaging with those in need and their basic rights to goods and food and acknowledging their urgent need for support. Even in wealthy countries such as the United States, food insecurity is common, and college students are one of many groups who are likely to go hungry. Therefore, "the priorities must be to eliminate extreme poverty and to promote the social development of their people" (LS 172). There are no laws in place obligating anyone to give back those in need of food and nourishment, however St. Thomas students are taking it amongst themselves to meet the needs of those who are struggling to strengthen our community.

As part of its educational mission, St. Thomas also empowers students to integrate sustainability into their personal, professional, and political lives. St. Thomas trains students to exercise leadership through groups such as Student Sustainability Leaders, where participating students host sustainable events. According to the survey results from St. Thomas students, the 2 answers with the highest number of votes on how they practice sustainability were, "use reusable food and beverage containers" and "wear clothing more than once before washing". The biggest issue that St. Thomas students run into in practicing sustainability is they believe it is too expensive. A way that St. Thomas can combat this common belief is within "sustainability focused" curricula; there should be a greater focus on what students can do to be more sustainable in their own field. This would better educate the students and show them the next steps to be more sustainable and how empowering it is to our communities.

## **Ecological Spirituality**

Growing in personal and communal agency and cultivating resilience enables us to engage our deepest spiritual commitments. The University of St. Thomas has many organizations and groups that encourage ecological spirituality, which is a "manifestation of the spiritual connection between human beings and the environment."<sup>3</sup> Two centers of spiritual life on campus are the Center for the Common Good and Campus Ministry. The Center for the Common Good aims at connecting students to community partners and opportunities so that students have a better understanding of different social situations and challenges. Campus Ministry includes the Office for Spirituality and the Office for Service and Justice. The Office for

Spirituality focuses heavily on grounding, developing and enriching spirituality through various means. The Office for Service and Justice not only encourages students to reflect on social justice issues in the world, but the program allows students to acknowledge both local and abroad issues. Students have the opportunity to travel and communicate with those living vastly different lives than those in Minnesota, which helps to broaden their understanding of different lifestyles than the lives they live themselves. For example, students can travel to border towns, such as El Paso, and can experience “off-grid” living, which typically includes minimalism, low energy requirements, and low dependency on government subsidies, in places such as California or Missouri. The program is intended to encourage students to reflect on other ways of living and to appreciate the world they live in. In *Laudato Sí*, Pope Francis notes “The continued acceleration of changes affecting humanity and the planet is coupled today with a more intensified pace of life and work ... the goals of this rapid and constant change are not necessarily geared to the common good or to integral and sustainable human development” (LS 18). Students at St. Thomas aren’t unique to the challenges in the world we live in as mentioned by Pope Francis in *Laudato Sí*. Therefore, St. Thomas’s commitment to nurturing the common good through various organization is necessary to ensure that students can slow down and intentionally build respect and appreciation for our world.

Clearly the University of St. Thomas acknowledges the environmental crisis. The leaders of St. Thomas have created many spaces for individuals to integrate spirituality and ecology, which is incredibly important because environmental problems have both ethical and spiritual roots “which require that we look for solutions not only in technology but in a change of humanity” (LS 9). Considering St. Thomas’s slogan, it is very fitting to note that “integral ecology is inseparable from the notion of the common good, a central and unifying principal of social ethics” (LS 156). Therefore, in order for St. Thomas to adhere to the university’s slogan, the organizations that promote ecological spirituality are necessary to ensure prosperity and solidarity between people and the environment.

### **Student Voice**

We, current students at St. Thomas, are excited about many things the university is doing. Faculty and staff are eager to hear and incorporate student voices and welcome constructive criticism regarding sustainability goals. Sustainability is an evolving part of the university’s curriculum and is taught in many classes. Environmental research is generously funded and is encouraged in many areas. We also recognize areas for improvement. Parts of sustainability curriculum and university initiatives do not feel as if they have dived entirely into the march for change. Despite these concerns, we are hopeful for St. Thomas’s future in sustainability. We hope that future commitments, such as carbon neutrality, are not only met, but also achieved before the deadline of 2035. We also hope that the sustainability curriculum can become more developed, and that sustainability becomes a truly core value for the university and all its students as we integrate it into our everyday lives. We, as students, are proud to go to the University of St. Thomas because of the commitment its members show

every day, but we also recognize the need for even greater change. As members of this community who only reside on campus for a few years, we hope to plant this seed of change in our community and come back as alumni to see our plans blossom and take root in the heart of our campus; to see a culture of caring for the Earth and of all the people who cry out on its behalf.

**Sources:**



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