

The Pope and the Planet: Part One

By Richard Franke

This is the latest installment in our Signs of Sustainability series, organized by Sustainable Tompkins. Visit them online at www.sustainabletompkins.org.

"Laudato Si', mi' Signore"—"Praise be to you, my Lord"—so begins Pope Francis' June 2015 encyclical on the environment. The Pope quotes from a famous canticle (chant or religious song of praise) composed in 1225 by Saint Francis of Assisi.

St. Francis' chant goes on to praise Brother Sun, Sister Moon, Brothers Wind and Air, Sister Water, Brother Fire, and Mother Earth, "who sustains and governs us, and who produces various fruit with colored flowers and herbs." But Pope Francis writes that mother earth "now cries out to us because of the harm we have inflicted on her by our irresponsible use and abuse of the goods with which God has endowed her. We have come to see ourselves as her lords and masters, entitled to plunder her at will." [paragraph 3]

As spiritual leader of the world's 1.2 billion Roman Catholics—about 16 percent of the entire world population—Pope Francis might have significant influence on climate and environmental attitudes. Catholics comprise about 50 percent of all the world's Christians, and with 69.4 million members are the largest single religious group with about 22 percent of the population of the U.S.

Churches named after St. Francis are found in Binghamton and Auburn in our area. Various polling studies have shown that U.S. Catholics seem to break down about the same as the general U.S. public on most political issues. Thus, on the eve of the Pope's encyclical, Pew Research found that 62 percent of Catholic Democrats believed that global warming is occurring as a result of human activities, while only 24 percent of Catholic Republicans held that view. This paralleled the views of the public in general. Will his

message significantly change these numbers?

The Pope's encyclical contains 246 numbered paragraphs followed by a prayer for the earth and another for creation. The paragraphs are organized into six chapters which the Pope labels as: what is happening to our common home; the gospel of creation; the human roots of the ecological crisis; integral ecology; lines of approach and action; and ecological education and spirituality.

Pope Francis attempts to integrate overall Catholic religious beliefs about the world, humanity and morality with recent scientific knowledge about environmental devastation, climate change, poverty and inequality. He attacks what he considers over-technological thinking and the loss of community in the anonymity of the modern city. This produces a wide ranging amalgam of often complex thoughts.

Many people may be surprised to learn that "Laudato Si'" contains only 10 mentions of the climate and climate change, especially given the vast media attention suggesting that Francis was speaking to the world particularly on this issue. Instead, Francis has offered the world a larger canvas with a broader conceptualization of what we face, why and what can be done.

The overall theme of the encyclical is a call for what Francis labels "integral ecology"—the best of scientific understanding anchored with a spiritual dimension. The spiritual aspect suffuses especially the final chapter with a detailed, deep Christian mysticism.

To communicate with non-Catholics, Francis offers in earlier sections the phrase "what it is to be human." Connecting this idea of a human essence that goes beyond the material, he calls on readers to learn to see "the mysterious network of relations between things." Because "all creatures are connected, each must be cherished with love and respect for all of us as living creatures are dependent on one another."

Francis introduces the term "rapidification," to capture the fact that human use of earth's resources now outpaces "the naturally slow pace of biological evolution." This arises in the Pope's view, from an "irrational confidence in progress" leading to "a false or superficial ecology" in which human arrogance—"our unrestrained delusions of grandeur," or "an excessive anthropocentrism,"—leads to "the lie that there is an infinite supply of the earth's goods." In several places he strongly denounces the "Obsession with a consumerist lifestyle," that he claims does not bring us the promised happiness or fulfillment.

Francis does not limit his analy-

sis of the causes of environmental destruction simply to attitudes. Provocatively, he blames key aspects of modern capitalism, noting that "...the market cannot guarantee integral human development and social inclusion."

Additional scattered comments include observations about the need for "distributive justice," the dangers of water privatization, how "human intervention, often in the service of business interests and consumerism, is actually making our earth less rich and beautiful," how "huge global economic interests...can undermine the sovereignty of individual nations," why "profit cannot be the sole crite-

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tion to be taken into account," that "The environment is one of those goods that cannot be adequately safeguarded or promoted by market forces," of the benefits of "cooperatives of small producers," and "small-scale food production systems"—and other related topics.

In considering how to solve environmental problems, Francis calls for "one world with a common plan," and insists that "International negotiations cannot make significant progress due to positions taken by countries which place their national interests above the global common good." He also cites a statement from the Bishops of Bolivia, who remind us that the currently wealthy nations bear greater responsibility for current problems, because we have benefited from the carbon emissions that now threaten those poorer nations and seem to block off a parallel route to industrialization.

And what of the media reports that suggest Francis has spoken not only for the environment but also for the world's poor? Watch here for a follow up essay for an overview of his ideas about poverty and the environment. Here is a preview: according to Pope Francis, "...God created the world for everyone."

Richard W. Franke writes about the history of sustainability. He is professor emeritus of anthropology at Montclair State University, a resident of Ecovillage at Ithaca and a board member of Sustainable Tompkins.