

Steps to Sustainability

Part 28 of a Series:

The Pope and the Planet

By [Richard W. Franke](#)

Professor Emeritus of Anthropology: Montclair State University, New Jersey
Resident of [Ecovillage at Ithaca](#); Board Member of [Sustainable Tompkins](#)

This is the latest installment in our Signs of Sustainability series, organized by Sustainable Tompkins. Visit them online at www.sustainabletompkins.org
This version of the text has links to the **particular paragraphs of the encyclical** in which the quotes appear.

“Laudato Si’, mi’ Signore” – “Praise be to you, my Lord” – so begins Pope Francis’s 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’s chant goes on to praise Brother Sun, Sister Moon, Brothers Wind and Air, Sister Water, Bother 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% of the entire world population – Pope Francis might have significant influence on climate and environmental attitudes. Catholics are about 50% of all the world’s Christians and with 69.4 million members, are the largest single religious group with about 22% of the population of the United States. 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% of Catholic Democrats believed that global warming is occurring as a result of human activities while only 24% of Catholic Republicans held that view.

This paralleled the views of the public in general. ¹ 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 readers may be surprised to learn that *Laudato Si'* contains only ten mentions² 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 seems to be 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 (paragraphs 202 – 246) with a detailed, deep Christian mysticism. To communicate with non-Catholics, Francis offers in earlier sections the phrase “what it is to be human.” (para 11) 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.” (para 20) 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.” (para 42)

Francis introduces the term “rapidification,” (para 18) 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

¹ <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/06/16/catholics-divided-over-global-warming/>

² Paras 8, 20, 23, 24, 25, 26, 169, 170, 172, 181

progress” (para 19) leading to “a false or superficial ecology” (para 59) in which human arrogance – “our unrestrained delusions of grandeur,” (para 114) or “an excessive anthropocentrism,” (para 116) – leads to “the lie that there is an infinite supply of the earth’s goods.” (Para 106) In several places he strongly denounces the “Obsession with a consumerist lifestyle,” (para 204) that he claims does not bring us the promised happiness or fulfillment. (para 222)

Francis does not limit his analysis 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.” (para 109) Additional scattered comments include observations about the need for “distributive justice,” (para 157), the dangers of water privatization, (para 30), how “human intervention, often in the service of business interests and consumerism, is actually making our earth less rich and beautiful,” (para 34) how “huge global economic interests...can undermine the sovereignty of individual nations,” (para 38) why “profit cannot be the sole criterion to be taken into account,” (para 187), that “The environment is one of those goods that cannot be adequately safeguarded or promoted by market forces,” (para 190) of the benefits of “cooperatives of small producers,” (para 112; also para 179) and “small-scale food production systems” (para 129) – and other related topics.

In considering how to solve environmental problems, Francis calls for “one world with a common plan,” (para 164) 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.” (para 169) 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. (para 170)

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.” (para 93)

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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.