

# The Pope, the Planet and the Poor

By Richard W. Franke

*This is the latest installment in our Signs of Sustainability series, organized by Sustainable Tompkins. Visit them online at [www.sustainabletompkins.org](http://www.sustainabletompkins.org).*

The previous essay about Pope Francis' June 2015 Encyclical, "Laudato Si', mi' Signore" ("Praise be to you, my Lord") was published on Aug. 24. In that essay I summarized his views on environmental threats and especially global warming.

I noted that, surprisingly given the international attention, Francis devoted only 10 of 246 paragraphs of the encyclical to global warming. The main theme of the encyclical is actually poverty and its relationship to the environment. Francis devotes the content of 11 paragraphs to "poverty" and 19 paragraphs to "the poor."

Most of the references to poverty and the poor discuss the causal relationship in which environmental decay exacerbates poverty and in which the poor become the first and most impacted victims. He gives less attention to how poverty

exacerbates environmental degradation.

Quoting the Bolivian Bishops' Pastoral letter of 2012, Francis emphasizes that "the gravest effects of all attacks on the environment are suffered by the poorest. For example, the depletion of fishing reserves especially hurts small fishing communities without the means to replace those resources..." When faced with polluted water, how do the poor purchase bottled water to replace it? In a world of massive inequality, what options do they have for things many of us take for granted? Francis observes that "We fail to see that some are mired in desperate and degrading poverty with no way out, while others...[leave] ...behind them so much waste which, if it were the case everywhere, would destroy the planet."

Francis dramatically introduces the connections in the second paragraph when he notes metaphorically that "the earth herself, burdened and laid waste, is among the most abandoned and maltreated of our poor..." In considering the achievements of modern technology,

Francis notes, perhaps a bit acerbically, that "The exploitation of the planet has already exceeded acceptable limits and we still have not solved the problem of poverty." Why does this situation arise? For Francis one reason is that the powerful "are far removed from the poor, with little direct contact with their problems."

Occasionally, of course, the confluence of poverty, inequality and environmental destruction forces itself into our consciousness in spectacular news events. In paragraph 25 he points to climate migrants whose desperate flights from degraded lands "are not recognized by international conventions as refugees..." and whose tragic fates illustrate "the loss of that sense of responsibility for our fellow men and women upon which all civil society is founded." These migrants are poor people who "live in areas particularly affected by phenomena related to warming, and their means of subsistence are largely dependent on natural reserves and eco-system services such as agriculture, fishing and forestry." The Mediterranean boat people and the U.S. southern border come to mind.

Pope Francis offers few specific political and economic proposals for overcoming the present situation. He notes, however, that, by itself "the market cannot guarantee integral human development and social inclusion." This puts him directly at odds with U.S. political conservatives. He also suggests "cooperatives of small producers" where resources can be better managed and "technology is directed

primarily to resolving people's concrete problems, truly helping them live with more dignity and less suffering."

Francis text is primarily a moral and ethical call for "a more responsible approach...The same mindset which stands in the way of making radical decisions to reverse the trend of global warming also stands in the way of achieving the goal of eliminating poverty...What is needed is a politics which is far-sighted and capable of a new, integral and inter-disciplinary approach to handling the different aspects of the crisis." "...today...we have to realize that a true ecological approach always becomes a social approach; it must integrate questions of justice in debates about the environment, so as to hear both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor."

Francis' italicized quote about the cries of earth and poor is possibly of great significance for internal Catholic Church politics. The phrase, "The Cry of the Poor," derives from Psalm 34 and similar quotes in the Biblical books of Proverbs and Job. In 1901 it was the title of a book by British journalist and author Robert Sherard (who also wrote about Oscar Wilde and Emile Zola). It became a main phrase in liberation theology in the 1970s, was turned into a popular Catholic liturgical song by John Foley and is referred to in Howard Zinn's "A People's History of the United States."

In 1997 the Brazilian Franciscan theologian Leonardo Boff published a book with the title "Cry of

*Please turn to page 16*

## Pope

*Continued from page 10*

the Earth: Cry of the Poor." That book linked the destruction of the Amazon rainforest with the massive poverty in Brazil. And of course it cannot be accidental that Psalm 34 itself opens with "I will bless the Lord at all times; his praise shall continually be in my mouth"—almost the same words as those opening Francis' encyclical.

It seems likely that Pope Francis has read Boff (as well as the Bible) at least. His reference to a major phrase in liberation theology can hardly be a coincidence. As Francis argues: A true ecological approach sees that everything is connected. When viewed from his spiritual perspective, "...God created the world for everyone."

*Richard W. Franke writes about the history of sustainability. He is a resident of Koorivillage at Ithaca.*