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Pope Francis, the Interfaith Movement and Global Environmental Ethics¹

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THE PEOPLE'S CLIMATE MARCH

The People's Climate March in New York took place on Sunday, September 21, 2014, two days before the Climate Summit convened at the United Nations by Secretary General Ban Ki-moon. At a little before noon I walked towards 58th Street between Ninth and Tenth Avenues to join the faith communities contingent. I had no idea that I was about to have a life-changing experience which would transform my understanding of what the interfaith movement can be. As I approached the meeting point, in the gathering crowds there was already a thrill in the air, a sense that something extraordinary was happening. The first thing I saw telling me that I had arrived

at the interfaith holding location was an inflatable mosque with minarets ten or twelve feet tall. A few yards away was the Ark, even bigger, with passengers of different faiths. The block was packed with ten thousand people of many traditions, with their banners and symbols hoisted above the crowd. From the stage the

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voice of gospel singer Roosevelt Credit resounded, reminding us that “We have the whole world in our hands,” followed by Peter Yarrow’s mournfully tender “Where Have All the Flowers Gone” and Neshama Carlebach’s stirring “Return Again.” The cry of the shofar and the pulse of drums filled the air.

An unprecedented global challenge may bring us the blessing of really knowing how much we need each other – a new phase in interfaith oneness.

Then came prayers, including Vedic chanting, a group of Buddhist nuns powerfully invoking the Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara and a reading from the Genesis creation narrative by Rabbi Larry Troster and the Reverend Dr. Melanie Harris that charged every word with meaning. People of every tradition referred to the Earth as our Mother and to all beings as our family. What was profoundly moving was not only the great intensity of feeling and commitment, but the way it was shared by all. After two hours of our immersion in this deep community, the Reverend Fletcher Harper of GreenFaith shouted, “Are you ready to march?” and we moved off. As we looked down Sixth Avenue it was full of marchers as far as the eye could see.

At the head of the march, Ban Ki-moon, New York Mayor Bill de Blasio, and Al Gore were leading along with the groups of Indigenous partici-

pants in pride of place, accompanied by Sting and Leonardo DiCaprio. The march was inclusively diverse, by no means made up mainly of environmental activists, but with everyone from health care workers, youth groups, New York State employees and Teamsters, teachers, the League of Women Voters, Latino and African-American groups, historically black colleges and universities, and more. About 400,000 people marched in New York and over 2,600 solidarity events and marches took place in more than 160 countries around the world.²

For more than thirty years in the interfaith movement I had heard, “We must accept each other” and “We must understand each other.” But now I was hearing and feeling something new — “We *need* each other.” Others I talked to afterwards said they felt the same change. We have to engage the climate crisis *together*. An unprecedented global challenge may bring us the blessing of really knowing how much we need each other – a new phase in interfaith oneness. Indeed, the motto of the People’s Climate March was “To change everything, we need everyone.” And speaking of global ethics, the March had a code of moral precepts for all who took part: “We will use no violence (physical or verbal) towards any person. We will not destroy or damage property. We will promote a tone of respect, honesty, transparency, and accountability in our actions. We will not carry anything that can be construed as a weapon, nor possess (or consume) alcohol or drugs. We will all hold each other accountable to respect these agreements.”³



Elephants, Sri Lanka

FAITH-BASED CLIMATE MOBILIZATION

The United Nations Paris Climate Conference, also called COP21 for the 21st Conference of the Parties, took place on November 30-December 4, 2015.⁴ The fourteen months between the People's Climate March and the Paris meeting saw an extraordinary civil society mobilization on climate change, including a wide array of faith-based and interfaith groups. On November 28, a petition with approximately 1.8 million signatures was presented by religious leaders to Nicolas Hulot, France's Special Envoy for Protection of the Planet, and Christiana Figueres, Executive Secretary of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. Present at the ceremony were some four hundred religious activists, including many "climate pilgrims" who had walked long distances to Paris from different parts of the world. Figueres, who had been

encouraging faith-based activism for two years, shed tears and then joined hands with the religious leaders to dance in celebration. She said, "Despite differences, we can all unite as human beings." The petition was later presented to French Prime Minister François Hollande. The 1.8 million signatures had been collected by ACT Now for Climate Change (part of the ACT Alliance), the Global Catholic Climate Movement, Our Voices and Religions for Peace.⁵

The petition was one of many kinds of faith-based climate activism leading up to COP21. On the same weekend as the People's Climate March, the Religions for the Earth conference took place at Union Theological Seminary. The Parliament of the World's Religions, the Interfaith Center of New York, GreenFaith, Religions for Peace, Jewish Theological Seminary, the World Council of Churches, the Yale Forum on Religion and Ecology, the National Religious



Natural sculpture, Utah National Parks, USA

Partnership for the Environment and the American Indian Institute were the Partner Organizations.⁶ The conference led to the founding in January 2015 of the Global Catholic Climate Movement, which now has over 400 member groups.⁷ GreenFaith, the leading multi-faith environmental organization in the United States,⁸ joined with the Conservation Foundation in the U.K. to form Our Voices, an international campaign to bring religious voices to the Paris Climate Conference.⁹ One of its first projects was Light for Lima, hundreds of climate vigils which were held in twenty countries around the world in conjunction with the COP20 meeting in the beginning of December 2014 in Lima, Peru.¹⁰ Other Our Voices programs included the People's Pilgrimage, walking from Rome to Paris with affiliated walks elsewhere,¹¹ and the earlier "One Earth, One Family" march on June 28 2015, received by

the Pope, to celebrate the release of his encyclical *Laudato Si'* and followed by a Multifaith Climate Emerging Leaders Conference.¹² The World Council of Churches, the Lutheran World Federation, the Unitarian Universalists, Franciscan Action Network and Islamic Relief should also be mentioned among the many groups that were active and sent delegations to Paris.

Through the fall, much more activity took place, including some connected to the Pope's visit to the United States and the United Nations, which after he addressed the General Assembly on September 25, on the same day adopted the seventeen Sustainable Development Goals, the thirteenth of which is climate change.¹³ The leading climate group 350.org organized the Global Climate March November 28-29 with 2,300 events in over 175 countries, with 785,000 people – a multi-sectoral mobilization with abundant faith-based participa-



Delegates at the Parliament of Religions 2015

tion.¹⁴ UN officials and negotiators as well as NGOs themselves commented afterwards that the role of civil society had been critical in achieving the Paris agreement, hailed as “a landmark” and “a turning point” after the Copenhagen climate meeting in 2009, which did not succeed and left a wake of mistrust and cynicism. And the long, hard road to Paris had begun not after Copenhagen but more than twenty years before, at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, which had negotiated the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and also gave impetus to the involvement of religious communities in the environmental movement, which had been gradually increasing through the 1970s and 1980s.

One feature of faith-based climate advocacy has been a series of impor-

tant religious and interfaith statements, recently including that of the Parliament of the World’s Religions in October 2015,¹⁵ where climate change was a major theme of a gathering of 10,000 in Salt Lake City, and major declarations from Islam¹⁶ and Hinduism¹⁷ in November just before COP21. These followed others which had been published earlier, including a “Rabbinic Letter” signed by over four hundred rabbis of different streams of Judaism¹⁸ as well as Buddhist, Christian, Indigenous and interfaith statements.¹⁹

VALUES, PRINCIPLES & *LAUDATO SI*

Since I chaired the committee that drafted “Embracing Our Common Future: An Interfaith Call to Action on Climate Change,” the climate declaration of the Parliament, let me say a few words on how it was written. As the Parliament is not an officially representative body, it cannot hold a deliberative process, so we researched as many interfaith and religious climate statements as we could and created a synthesis, also drawing on a few statements by eminent person, namely the Pope, the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Desmond Tutu. In this way what we wrote was already approved, one might say. Our committee made the document brief and theologically thin but ethically thick, so as to be strong yet non-controversial and thus achieve consensus. It was adopted by acclamation in the Climate Change Plenary of the Parliament. It reads in part: “As members of religious and spiri-

tual communities, we affirm these values and principles, which are taught by all our traditions and will guide our actions:

- *We are profoundly interconnected with Nature, on which we depend for our existence.*
- *We must respect and care for Nature and all life.*
- *We uphold the dignity and rights of every human being.*
- *We must provide for the needs and well-being of all people.*
- *We must act with love and compassion, and for justice and fairness.*
- *We are morally responsible for our chosen actions.*
- *We have duties to future generations, who will bear the consequences of our action or inaction.”*

This was an interreligious exercise in global ethics building on earlier work in environmental ethics, including most notably the Earth Charter, a civil society document or people’s treaty on fundamental values and principles, finalized in 2000 after the most broad-based consultative process ever conducted for such a statement.²⁰

Moving into 2015, climate activism had begun to focus on the release of the encyclical of Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’: On Care for Our Common Home*, which takes its opening phrase, “Praise be to You,” from the Canticle of the Sun of St. Francis of Assisi. It had been known for some time that the Pope was working

on this document, but it was not known exactly when it would be promulgated. It was highly anticipated. A program of the Forum on Religion and Ecology at Yale hailed the document two months before its publication as a game-changer for public awareness, because it would frame the climate issue and the environmental crisis in moral terms and not only in political, economic and scientific terms, though including those aspects.²¹ It would also stress the seriousness of the crisis in a statement by a religious figure of unique global prominence. There was a widely shared feeling that in view of the urgency of climate change, politics as usual was no longer acceptable – but that in the past protest against inaction had been inadequate. That was now changing, as just described. John Schellnhuber, founder of the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research, who had been to climate talks for eleven years, commented at the beginning of the Paris meeting that government leaders “know they will be measured against the encyclical” and were aware that the religious communities of the world were watching them.²² Also, the fact that religion and science were now in alliance was seen as making a significant difference.

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As it turned out, the official publication of *Laudato Si’* on June 18, 2015, was



Pope Francis

deliberately timed to draw attention to the Paris Climate Conference and to create mounting support for an ambitious climate agreement.²³ Schellhuber, a member of the Pontifical Academy of Sciences, was at the press conference.²⁴ UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon welcomed the encyclical on the day of its publication,²⁵ as did Jim Yong Kim, President of the World Bank.²⁶ Bill McKibben, founder of 350.org, embraced it in an essay in *The New York Review of Books*²⁷ and the pre-eminent science journal *Nature* commended it in an editorial.²⁸ There was extensive media coverage. It is safe to say that the encyclical did have a great impact. Clearly a very important factor was the immense popularity and credibility of Pope Francis, already established without much reference to the environment and ecojustice (although his choice of

the name Francis had sent a signal). Some other reasons for its impact are that this is the first encyclical to be entirely about the environment, endowing it with a combination of acute timeliness and the interest of something new. Also, it is written in a clear, accessible style and appeals directly to the heart as well as the intellect. Last but hardly least, its content is compelling.

The Encyclical has six chapters: “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.” Can *Laudato Si’* be read as a statement of global ethics? At the beginning of their chapter on the Earth Charter, the co-authors (including myself) of *The Practices of Global Ethics* suggest that a statement of global ethics is affirmed by “a global community of some sort”²⁹ and it could be argued that this cannot be said of an encyclical, which originates from a single religious community and moreover is a letter with a single named author. At the same time it fits our characterization in terms of its audience and the intended applicability – if not authority – of its vision, norms and aims, which embrace the whole world of human beings and indeed other life. Pope Francis at the beginning refers to the encyclical *Pacem in Terris* of Pope John XXIII, which is addressed not only to “the Catholic world” but also “to all men and women of good will” and then declares, “I wish to address every person living on this planet” (Par. 3). He says,

“We lack awareness of our common origin, of our mutual belonging, and of a future to be shared with everyone” (Par. 202), and thus “This Encyclical welcomes dialogue with everyone, so that together we can seek paths of liberation” (Par. 64). He calls for inter-religious dialogue “for the sake of protecting nature, defending the poor, and building networks of respect and fraternity,” and also for dialogue among the branches of science and between ecological movements which have differing ideologies (Par. 201). The greater part of the document is not expressed in particularist Christian or even religious language, even when it quotes from Catholic documents, but appeals to themes and concerns seemingly viewed as understandable by all. The Pope comments that “the fact that they [ethical principles] may be couched in religious language [does not] detract from their value in public debate. The ethical principles capable of being apprehended by reason can always reappear in different guise and find expression in a variety of languages, including religious language” (Par. 199). According to theologian John Pawlikowski, with whom I discussed whether *Laudato Si'* can be read as an expression of global ethics, in making this statement the Pope argues that ethical principles may be understood both as natural law and as religious revelation. If the encyclical is not, strictly speaking, a statement of global ethics in some pure sense, it approaches and engages the concerns of global ethics from the standpoint of the tradition in which it is rooted.

The Pope in this encyclical builds upon the statements of his three immediate predecessors. Pope Paul VI, who was the first to speak of the environment, John Paul II and Benedict XVI constructed a Catholic environmental ethics by drawing on and extending Catholic social teaching. To summarize, the basic concepts of Catholic social teaching are the dignity of the human person and the universality of human rights with a symmetry of rights and responsibilities; the common good, which is “above national interest” and means the good of each person (never to be confused with a utilitarian average good); subsidiarity or the principle that human affairs should be dealt with at the most local level possible, and at intermediate and higher levels of centralization only when necessary; solidarity, closely related to love of neighbor; distributive justice and the preferential option for the poor, and most recently, by development of Catholic environmental teaching, care for the earth with environmental justice. All of these terms and ideas play significant roles in *Laudato Si'* and I mention this because many of them, if not all, have become part of public moral discourse (as the Pope points out) and are part of a common ethical language by virtue of their global intelligibility.

The Encyclical’s central concept of “integral ecology” calls for “a broader vision of reality” (Par. 138, Par. 141) and warns against “partial views.” Thus we must recognize the ecological principle that “everything is interrelated” – a theme often repeated. This can be applied in at



Rock formation, Utah National Parks, USA

least three ways. First, we should be conscious that in the natural world there is interconnection of all organisms and systems. Second, the human as such should be viewed in its integral wholeness, without excluding the relational, ethical, aesthetic and spiritual aspects of human nature and human life. Human beings should not be reduced to their material needs and desires as happens in consumerism which seeks immediate gratification through amassing of “possessions and pleasures,” nor should their relations with one another and to nature be molded into modes of domination, by the “one-dimensional” technocratic paradigm of a subject seeking to manipulate the object. The Pope stringently critiques these paradigms, very often mentioning consumption and lifestyle,

commenting that “Obsession with a consumerist lifestyle, above all when few people are capable of maintaining it, can only lead to violence and mutual destruction” including conflict among people and damage to Nature (Par. 204). Third, integral ecology means that humans and Nature must be considered together. “Nature cannot be regarded as something separate from ourselves or as a mere setting in which we live. We are part of nature, included in it and thus in constant interaction with it” (Par. 139). Humans are not isolated from the natural world and must be seen within it and as belonging to it. At the same time, problems of “the environment” must not be analyzed apart from human problems, especially poverty and the suffering of “the excluded” in human

societies, a perspective long established in environmental ethics and often referred to as ecojustice or, especially when responding to particular instances of injustice, as environmental justice.

Another sense of integrality is the need to view any state of affairs from all perspectives, and not in fragments. This calls for interdisciplinary and multi-stakeholder or inclusive approaches to any enterprise or problem. Action based on narrow views of action leads to “unintended consequences.” The Pope is clear that scientific and technical approaches alone are inadequate. The arts, humanities and spirituality must be brought to bear on the issues. Laws and regulations are necessary but even combined with appropriate education will not suffice to bring about the “new synthesis” and “bold cultural revolution” the Pope calls for. Ethics is indispensable. As well, integrality means taking a long-term view rather than focusing on the short-term; here there is a marked tension between concern for “the long-term common good” and the well-being of future generations or intergenerational solidarity and short-term gain as sought by consumerism and the market, which prioritizes self-interest. In these ways the ethics of *Laudato Si'* is articulated for and can be valid for a global community; it aspires to make its contribution to global ethics in dialogue with others.

The encyclical does quote the Earth Charter and there are a number of correspondences between the two documents. Father Pawlikowski has com-

mented to me that the Earth Charter was regarded with suspicion in papal circles before Francis became Pope, chiefly because it mentions population increase and indeed, *Laudato Si'* side-steps this issue. Yet the affinity, to my mind, is extensive and it is possible to picture the Pope and other drafters writing this encyclical with a copy of the Earth Charter lying beside them. There are whole sentences from the Earth Charter which could be included seamlessly in the encyclical, such as this, the first lines of its Preamble: “We must join together to bring forth a sustainable global society founded on respect for nature, universal human rights, economic justice, and a culture of peace. Towards this end, it is imperative that we, the peoples of Earth, declare our responsibility to one another, to the greater community of life, and to future generations.” Both documents sound a note of warning, and call for a profound shift in vision and values. In addition to describing Earth as “our home,” with concern for its “fragility” and emphasis on the value of beauty, the Earth Charter and the encyclical share the moral norms of responsibility, care, respect, the common good and concern for future generations. They also both hold up preservation of biodiversity, the precautionary principle, preserving traditional knowledge (local cultural values), a critique of “production and consumption,” the need for meaningful livelihood, concern for youth, for the ignored and vulnerable, and for treating non-human living beings with care and kindness.

Each being has its own dignity and worth, apart from its usefulness to humans.

The encyclical frequently repeats the theme, prominent in the Earth Charter, of the community of all life. It does so in a Christian mode with a tone of Franciscan “fraternalism.” Each being in creation, however small, is our brother or sister as a child of a common Father, God our Creator. Each being has its own dignity and worth, apart from its usefulness to humans. God is present in each being and in all of Nature. The encyclical does affirm the uniqueness of the human species, but offers a highly tempered anthropocentrism, affirming in no uncertain terms the intrinsic value of the more-than-human world and reminding us that communion with all beings is an essential part of our experience and is needed for fulfillment and a vision of truth.

It may be commented that many documents on environmental ethics develop these points, and of course that is true. Both the Earth Charter and the encyclical draw from many sources both secular and religious. The Earth Charter in particular, the earlier of the two by fifteen years, was the outcome of a very extensive multi-sectoral and multi-traditional consultative process or “dialogue”. And indeed, this is exactly the point I would like to make: that there is a convergence of reflection with motivation for action, as demonstrated in the cooperative mobilization leading up to Paris. This convergence displays a shared set of environmental values or a

common ecological morality – a global environmental ethics, if one may call it that, to which many have contributed. The closing words of the Earth Charter, quoted by Pope Francis, are: “Let ours be a time remembered for the awakening of a new reverence for life, the firm resolve to achieve sustainability, the quickening of the struggle for justice and peace, and the joyful celebration of life” (Par. 207).

NOTES

¹ This paper was originally delivered as part of the book launch of *The Practices of Global Ethics: Historical Backgrounds, Current Issues and Future Prospects*, by Frederick Bird, Sumner B. Twiss, Kusumita P. Pedersen, Clark A. Miller and Bruce Grelle (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016) at the Lincoln Center for Applied Ethics, Arizona State University, on March 25, 2016. I wish to express my gratitude for helpful discussion to my co-authors of that work as well as to John Pawlikowski.

² For information on the People’s Climate March, see <http://2014.peoplesclimate.org>.

³ The People’s Climate March Code of Conduct was agreed upon by the People’s Climate March Host Committee on July 17, 2014 (<http://2014.peoplesclimate.org/logistics/>).

⁴ For general information on the Paris Climate Conference, see <http://www.cop21.gouv.fr/en/what-was-cop21/>.

⁵ The meeting and the presentation of the petition was widely covered. This account relies on Ryan Rodrick Beiler, “Nearly 2 million people-of-faith petition on the eve of COP21,” 29 November 2015, Lutheran World Information, available at <https://>

www.lutheranworld.org/news/nearly-2-million-people-faith-petition-eve-cop21.

⁶ See <http://unionforum.org/religions-for-the-earth/>.

⁷ See <http://catholicclimatemovement.global/>.

⁸ See <http://www.greenfaith.org>.

⁹ See <http://www.ourvoices.net>.

¹⁰ See <http://ourvoices.net/lightforlima>.

¹¹ See <http://peoplespilgrimage.org>.

¹² See <http://oneearthonefamily.org>.

¹³ See <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdgs>.

¹⁴ See <https://350.org/global-climate-march/>.

¹⁵ Available at <https://parliamentofreligions.org/civicrm/petition/sign?sid=4>.

¹⁶ See <http://islamicclimatedeclaration.org/islamic-declaration-on-global-climate-change/>.

¹⁷ See <http://www.hinduclimatedeclaration2015.org>.

¹⁸ See <https://theshalomcenter.org/RabbinicLetterClimate>.

¹⁹ Many of these statements have been collected by the Yale Forum on Religion and Ecology, and are available at <http://fore.yale.edu/climate-change/statements-from-world-religions/>.

²⁰ For background, current programs and the text of the Earth Charter see <http://earthcharter.org/biblio-category/the-earth-charter> and for a detailed history and ethical analysis, "The Earth Charter" in *The Practices of Global Ethics*, 59-78.

²¹ See <https://environment.yale.edu/news/article/pope-francis-and-the-environment-why-his-new-climate-encyclical-matters>.

²² Seth Borenstein, Associated Press, "Scientists enlist the big gun to get climate action: Faith," Associated Press December 6, 2015, available at <http://www.newsmax.com/t/world/article/704727>.

²³ The text of the encyclical is available at the Vatican website at http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html. Here the text is referred to by paragraph number; these numbers are consecutive through the whole encyclical.

²⁴ See <https://cruxnow.com/church/2015/06/18/expert-calls-the-science-behind-the-papal-encyclical-water-tight/>.

²⁵ See <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statement/2015-06-18/statement-attributable-spokesman-secretary-general-papal-encyclical>.

²⁶ "The Pope's encyclical on climate change – as it happened," *The Guardian*, June 18, 2015, available at <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/blog/live/2015/jun/18/pope-encyclical-climate-change-live-reaction-analysis#block-5582b62de4b0c09f64bfa923>.

²⁷ "The Pope and the Planet," *New York Review of Books*, August 13, 2015, available at <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2015/08/13/pope-and-planet/>.

²⁸ "Hope from the Pope," *Nature* 522 (2015), 391.

²⁹ *The Practices of Global Ethics*, 59.