

# Integrating Ecology and Justice: The New Papal Encyclical

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*Una Terra Una Famiglia Humana*, One Earth One Family climate march in Vatican City in June 2015.

## In Brief

In June of 2015, Pope Francis released the first encyclical on ecology. The Pope’s message highlights “integral ecology,” intrinsically linking ecological integrity and social justice. While the encyclical notes the statements of prior Popes and Bishops on the environment, Pope Francis has departed from earlier biblical language describing the domination of nature. Instead, he expresses a broader understanding of the beauty and complexity of nature, on which humans fundamentally depend. With “integral ecology” he underscores this connection of humans to the natural environment. This perspective shifts the climate debate to one of a human change of consciousness and conscience. As such, the encyclical has the potential to bring about a tipping point in the global community regarding the climate debate, not merely among Christians, but to all those attending to this moral call to action.

On June 18, 2015 Pope Francis released *Laudato Si*, the first encyclical in the history of the Catholic Church on ecology. An encyclical is the highest-level teaching document in Catholicism. There have been earlier statements by popes and bishops on environmental issues, but never an encyclical.

With 1.2 billion Catholics on the planet, the potential for attention to environmental and climate change issues is unprecedented. Even if, as some argue, encyclicals do not draw the response and obligation from Catholics as in the past, it is clear that this one will be discussed in religious and educational circles radiating out into the larger Christian world and beyond. Indeed, the media coverage of this document has already been robust. Scientists and ecologists have been keen to draw on its message for conservation as UN climate change negotiations in Paris approach in December 2015. What distinguishes the Pope's intervention is his linking of environmental concerns with issues of social justice and economic inequality—themes often lacking from the climate change discussions. This article suggests that the Pope's message has the potential to transform that debate by connecting environmentalism with a century of Catholic social justice teachings. Ecology and social justice are inextricably linked, says the Pope. That's a Christian message but also a profoundly human one

Pope Francis could not have chosen a more central topic than the human role in ecological degradation and climate change. He critiques our "technocratic paradigm" and "throwaway culture." He calls for a transformation of our market-based economic system that he feels is destroying the planet and creating immense social inequities. Indeed, the encyclical is highly critical of unfettered capitalism and rampant consumerism.

This might seem like a radical message—but it's also the culmination of a century of Catholic social justice

thinking. By drawing on and developing the work of earlier theologians and ethicists, this encyclical makes explicit the links between social justice and eco-justice.<sup>1</sup>

One of the key architects of the encyclical, Cardinal Peter Kodwo Appiah Turkson, believes Pope Francis' phrase "integral ecology" is central to understanding this interrelationship. Cardinal Turkson has identified several principles behind the phrase: 1) the moral imperative of all peoples to be protectors of the environment; 2) care for creation as a virtue in its own right; and 3) the need

## Key Concepts

- "Integral ecology" brings together nature and humans.
- Eco-justice encompasses the vulnerability of people and the planet.
- Inequities and environmental degradation being caused by market capitalism need to be addressed.
- These moral principles are part of Catholic social justice teachings of earlier Popes.
- A cosmological perspective or interrelatedness is also part of the encyclical.
- The encyclical calls for "ecological conversion."

for a new global solidarity to direct our search for the common good.<sup>2</sup>

Integral ecology means that ecological integrity and social justice are linked because humans and nature are part of nurturing, interdependent life systems. Given that the poor and vulnerable are most adversely affected by an ailing planetary system, the two must be addressed together. While this draws on traditional Christian teachings regarding the poor, it also marks an important shift in the church's conception of the relationship of humans to nature and humans to work.

We can compare Pope Francis' thinking to the writing of Pope John Paul II, who himself builds on Pope Leo XIII's progressive encyclical *Rerum Novarum* on workers' rights in 1891. A hundred years after Leo, John Paul II writes:

The original source of all that is good is the very act of God, who created both the earth and man, and who gave the earth to man so that he might have dominion over it by his work and enjoy its fruits (Gen 1:28)...It is through work that man, using his intelligence and exercising his freedom, succeeds in dominating the earth and making it a fitting home...Obviously, he also has the responsibility not to hinder others from having their own part of God's gift; indeed, he must cooperate with others so that together all can dominate the earth. (*Centesimus annus*: 31)

Drawing heavily on biblical language of domination, John Paul underscores the modern separation of humans from nature. However, he also emphasizes the dignity of cooperative human labor as making something productive of God's gift of nature. Thus, the more traditional perspective of "dominion" in Genesis is balanced by a call for "stewardship" of nature. This stands in marked contrast to his successors' more holistic view of nature.

Pope Benedict expanded Catholic thinking regarding the environment. His 2009 encyclical, *Caritas in Veritate*, is focused on charity and our duty to the poor as well as to present and future generations. He wrote of this responsibility arising from:

...our relationship to the natural environment. The environment is God's gift to everyone, and in our use of it we have a



Jeffrey Bruno / Aleteia

Pope Francis appears outside of the Vatican at an event in April 2014.

responsibility towards the poor, towards future generations and towards humanity as a whole. When nature, including the human being, is viewed as the result of mere chance or evolutionary determinism, our sense of responsibility wanes. In nature, the believer recognizes the wonderful result of God's creative activity, which we may use responsibly to satisfy our legitimate needs, material or otherwise, while respecting the intrinsic balance of creation. (*Caritas in Veritate*: 48)

Pope Benedict moves away from language of domination of nature toward the protection of nature. Yet, he holds to a view of creation as in balance, which differs from the more

dynamic perspectives of contemporary ecological science. Pope Benedict also presents what he calls the "grammar of nature" saying:

...the natural environment is more than raw material to be manipulated at our pleasure; it is a wondrous work of the Creator containing a 'grammar,' which sets forth ends and criteria for its wise use, not its reckless exploitation. Today much harm is done to development precisely as a result of these distorted notions. Reducing nature merely to a collection of contingent data ends up doing violence to the environment and even encouraging activity that fails to respect human nature itself.

He goes on to write that global development:

...cannot ignore coming generations, but needs to be marked by solidarity and inter-generational justice, while taking into account a variety of contexts: ecological, juridical, economic, political and cultural. (*Caritas in Veritate*: 48)

There is a clear shift here from Pope John Paul. Yet Pope Benedict still relies on an anthropocentric ethic of "wise use" of nature. Perhaps he was wary that talking about nature's inherent goodness might open him to the charge of neopaganism from conservative factions within the church.

Pope Francis doesn't seem to have such reservations. Indeed, following





Mat McDermott

A participant in the climate change march at Vatican City in June 2015 holds a placard depicting the modern Pope Francis and the Canticum of the Creatures.

Francis of Assisi, he invokes “Mother Earth” in the opening paragraph of the encyclical. Pope Francis also shifts the church to a view of nature in line with environmental science and environmental philosophy. He calls for great ecological literacy and understanding of environmental problems. He has

left the earlier biblical language of domination for an understanding of integral ecology that connects humans to their environment and to the whole evolutionary process.

Indeed, in this respect there are echoes in the encyclical of the influence of two progressive Catholic

thinkers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, namely, the scientist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881–1955) and the cultural historian Thomas Berry (1914–2009). Both of these thinkers saw the “grammar of nature” as reflecting an evolutionary unfolding of Earth’s ecosystems.

Teilhard de Chardin was a Jesuit priest and paleontologist whose thinking about the place of humans in evolution led to his exile from Europe to China in the late 1920s. Of particular import is Teilhard’s understanding of evolution that he saw being driven by life’s “zest.” Teilhard wrote: “A zest for living...would appear to be the fundamental driving force which impels and directs the universe along its main axis of complexity-consciousness...”<sup>3</sup>

Pope Francis has drawn on the same notion to describe a dynamic ecological relationship of humans with Earth’s evolution. There are echoes also of cultural historian, Thomas Berry, who situated the human as arising from, and dependent on, this long evolutionary journey. Berry writes:

At such a moment, a new revolutionary experience is needed, an experience wherein human consciousness awakens to the grandeur and sacred quality of Earth’s process. This awakening is our human participation in the dream of Earth...<sup>4</sup>

From this cosmological perspective Berry calls on humans to participate in the Great Work of transformation—building new ecological economics, new educational and political systems, and new religious and spiritual communities that are aligned with Earth’s capacities and limits.

It is this evolutionary understanding of Earth’s systems, so central to Teilhard and Berry, that provides a larger context for the Pope’s own revolutionary thinking. Indeed, this is also the perspective of *Journey of the Universe*, which narrates the epic story of evolution in film and book form





Thierry Ehrmann

A painted street portrait of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin in France. Teilhard de Chardin was a Jesuit priest whose revolutionary thinking on the relationship between humans and the Earth's evolution led to his exile from Europe in the late 1920s.

and shows the implications of this story for environmental living in the Conversations.<sup>5,6</sup>

Without this integrated sense of mutually enhancing human—Earth relations in an evolving universe, climate discussions can become simply business as usual amidst policy proposals, market-based schemes, and technological fixes. This integrated perspective for humans of a change of consciousness and conscience promises to have a rippling effect on the contemporary climate debate. In

this spirit, the encyclical calls on governments and individuals to engage in action for climate justice.

The hope is the Pope's intervention can provide a tipping point for the global community—not just among Christians but among other religious groups as well. There are more than a billion Muslims, a billion Hindus, a billion Confucians, and nearly 500 million Buddhists, many of whom are hearing this call to action. The encyclical will also be a source of encouragement to environmentalists

who are not overtly religious but who care deeply about the environment, often for aesthetic and spiritual reasons.

The Pope convened religious leaders, scientists, and economists from all over the world at the Vatican on April 28, 2015 to highlight the moral dimensions of our global environmental crisis. He urged these leaders to join him in speaking out on the human suffering climate change is causing, especially for the most vulnerable. In a similar spirit, he commissioned






Mat McDermott

The hope is that *Laudato Si* will provide a tipping point for the international climate debate, appealing to all religions and humanities in its global moral call to action.

Cardinal Turkson to convene a gathering at the United Nations on June 30, 2015 to call for concerted ecological and social change. The Pope has also addressed politicians and business leaders at Davos, noting that the wealthier countries have responsibilities to the poor in terms of fair and healthy development. In September, he will address the UN General Assembly and the US Congress to highlight the urgent need for climate change action.

Thus the publication of the papal encyclical is a unique opportunity to scale up and move forward. That is

because it provides a renewed moral force and shared ethical commitment regarding environmental issues, especially climate change.<sup>7</sup> It also highlights that we have a special kinship with nature and are responsible for its continuity for future generations. Indeed, the flourishing of the Earth community may depend on how humans heed this moral call to what Francis calls “ecological conversion.” 

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