
Pope's Encyclical Inspiring Government Action

by Paul Stinson

With his recent encyclical, *Laudato si'* ("Praise Be to You"), Pope Francis brings the moral dimension of climate change to the forefront. Politicians worldwide have long debated the issue, but it's precisely because the Pope writes not as a politician, but as a spiritual leader who transcends political boundaries, that more people—especially politicians—are listening. "Catholic" means, literally, "universal," and by throwing down the moral gauntlet on climate change, Pope Francis has created a universal platform from which government leaders and policymakers are springing into action.

What's more, the Pope is making sure they do.

In July, just weeks after the release of *Laudato si'*, Pope Francis shrewdly convened a group of about 60 mayors from around the world for a two-day conference at the Vatican. This was not the first Vatican meeting on climate change, but it was the first meeting specifically for local government officials. Why? Because the Pope believes they can get things done.

Where international efforts can stall, local governments have proven effective at implementing concrete policies and programs such as clean energy resource plans, energy-efficiency building regulations, and public transit systems. The Pope's idea is to mobilize action at the local level to create global momentum for December's United Nations climate talks in Paris. So far, it appears to be working: At the Vatican conference, New York Mayor Bill de Blasio announced his commitment to reduce the city's emissions by 40% by 2030, and all the mayors in attendance formally pledged to urge world leaders to pass a bold global climate agreement in Paris.



At the national level, the U.S. Clean Power Plan represents the greatest climate achievement in the wake of *Laudato si'*. It embodies the spirit of the encyclical and responds to the Pope's call for a transition to a low carbon energy future. Announcing the plan in August, President Obama cited Pope Francis when he referred to the fight against climate change as a "moral obligation." The Clean Power Plan strikes at the heart of the matter by establishing—for the first time in history—limits on carbon pollution from existing U.S. power plants, the nation's biggest polluters.

In addition to its environmental benefits, the Clean Power Plan promises

vast societal benefits. It will reduce public health risks, particularly childhood asthma. It will create local jobs through the labor-intensive and rapidly scaling renewable energy industry. And it will save money for U.S. families by encouraging energy efficiency, cost-competitive renewables, and smart electricity pricing like demand response and time-of-use pricing. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency expects a 7% reduction in electricity bills when the plan is fully implemented. This is good news for all, but especially for the poor and marginalized, who are most vulnerable to environmental injustice.



In discussing climate change as a moral issue, the Pope's encyclical considers not only environmental, economic, and scientific benefits, but also human benefits—and therein lies its greatest power. The encyclical's second name is, "On Care for Our Common Home." In it, we're asked to think more deeply about our place in the world, our relationship with our neighbors, and our responsibility to both.

Climate change can seem nebulous, distant, and overwhelming, but by engaging local government officials to inspire action, Pope Francis is helping to show that it's none of those things. Rather, climate change affects us in very real ways, right where we live, and it requires an equally concrete response at the local, national, and international levels to combat it effectively.

With the Paris climate talks on the horizon, we'll see if *Laudato si'* is a sufficient battle cry.

Paul Stinson is the Clean Energy Project Manager for Environmental Defense Fund (EDF), which is helping to transform the U.S. electricity system by rewriting outdated regulations, spurring energy services markets, and modernizing our century-old electric grid.

Ecological Challenges Evoke Ethical Response

by Mary Evelyn Tucker

Pope Francis is clearly one of the most popular people on the planet at present. With his genuine humility and his love for the poor, he has captured the hearts of millions. He has inspired minds as well by his willingness to take on difficult issues such as ecology, economy, and equity, which he sees as inextricably linked. Indeed, these three interwoven issues are at the heart of his Papal encyclical, *Laudato si'*,

released in June.¹ What does the encyclical say and will it make a difference?

First, Pope Francis addresses ecology. Following in the tradition of Francis of Assisi, he celebrates the natural world as a gift. He does this with his reference to Francis's *Canticle of Brother Sun, Sister Moon*. The kinship with all of nature that Francis intuited we now study scientifically as complex ecological relationships that have evolved over

billions of years. For Pope Francis these relationships have a natural order or "grammar" that needs to be understood, valued, and carefully used.

Second, the Pope speaks about the economy. Within this valuing and appropriate use of nature, he encourages us to see the human economy as a subsystem of nature's economy, namely, the dynamic interaction of life in ecosystems. Without healthy ecosystems