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Greening the Media

Pope Francis' Environmental Message

Pro-environment media strategies get a boost from papal authority

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Pope Francis' environmental encyclical "Laudato Si (Be Praised), On the Care of Our Common Home" offers a compelling counter to the anti-environmental powers. It combines political-economic analysis with an ecologically-centered ethics, backed up by science.¹

The Vatican's pronouncement has presented special difficulties for the longstanding question of the separation of church and state in the US constitution and psyche. As we all know, the Republican Party specializes in blending the two, and draws repeatedly on religion to justify its actions and policies. The Democrats are only a short way behind, sad to say.

But Francis' broadside touches two raw parts of the Republican Party. The first is certain evangelicals' contempt for Catholicism. The second is white conservatives' anti-science rejection of the reality of climate change.²

So the Republican Party at prayer and in the mainstream media was quick to respond. *The Wall St Journal* disparaged Francis' "signature theme" of "economic justice and his vehement criticism of capitalism" amidst "passages of almost apocalyptic moralizing." The *Journal* featured a lay catholic policy wonk from the "Acton Institute, a conservative ecumenical think tank that advocates for a free market," to point out the encyclical's "significant blind spots" about market economics. The article also gave space to the chief executive of the World Coal Association who said of Francis' call "to get fossil fuels out of the mix, I don't think is realistic."³

The New York Times called up Richard Viguerie, the direct-mail and survey guru who helped build the political and religious right in the US. He called the encyclical "a confusing distraction [from] crises in the Church and in Western culture."⁴

The Heartland Institute had been on hand two months before the release of the encyclical, protesting an international symposium on climate change organized by the Pontifical Academy of Sciences at the Vatican. Worried about the conference's outcome, the director of Heartland's communications wanted to "prevent the pope from making the mistake" of paying attention to the "alarmists."⁵

The encyclical is ambitious: it's addressed to everyone on the planet, not just the one billion Catholics who form part of an old, hierarchical communication network in which the teachings of papal authority are studied, propagated, and amplified by bishops, who meet with priests and media to foster ongoing study and lecturing about the document.

It is a call for everyone, everywhere to take action on climate change, with the ultimate aim of convincing world leaders at the December 2015 UN Climate Conference in Paris to make binding and enforceable agreements that would stop the worst human causes of global warming and environmental degradation in order to reverse impacts, which disproportionately affect people living in the poorest regions of the world. MIT has since acknowledged that his words are well-supported by the science.⁶

Francis employs a number of rhetorical devices reserved for papal authority—the dogma of divine revelation, which insists that Christians are morally responsible to care for all of creation; the definitive (infallible) and authoritative (interpretive) doctrines, which teach adherence to dogma; and prudential authority, the formal instructions used by popes and bishops to implement dogma and doctrine. He draws heavily on the judgments of his predecessors on matters of environment, environmental justice, labor, and consumerism. Prudential judgments are offered to the faithful as sage wisdom to consider “openly, thoughtfully, and prayerfully” as “they form their consciences” regarding, in this case, the climate crisis.⁷

The encyclical focuses on the failure of the contemporary political economy and its “technocratic paradigm” to tie technological innovation and economic growth to moral and social progress. It cites the decline of biodiversity, pollution of land, air, and waterways, deforestation, desertification, and disappearing beauty of landscapes due to overdevelopment and exploitation of natural resources—all of which Francis calls sins.

The Earth’s atmosphere is defined as a common good that gives life to the planet. Humanity is called upon to combat the climate crisis any way we can, including fighting its very human causes. Francis targets multinational corporations’ reckless disregard for people and environment, citing research, church teachings, and his own observations to argue that the poorest regions have benefited the least from modern industrialism and consumerism but have become the most vulnerable to their negative environmental impact.

Francis emphasizes the fallibility of the idea of private property, in particular when used to benefit only a few. Eco-centric values embodied in a culture of sustainability are praised; hyper-consumerism is pilloried.

The encyclical basically proposes a transformation in how we think and act in the world. It offers an “integral ecology”—via combinations of education, lifestyle, spirituality, politics and policy, and a sensual relation with non-human nature. It describes labor—especially the labor of marginalized peoples—in a vital position to end our reliance on anthropocentric, technocratic answers to the crisis (these include carbon credits, which are criticized as a ploy to stave off radical action).

We almost forgot—it’s worth watching the trailer for the encyclical that was produced by a Brazilian group. Next time anti-science evangelicals do something as smart as that—or as the encyclical—we all need to worry.⁸

1. <http://w2.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/encyclicals/documents/pap...>

2. Krogstad, J. M. (2015, February 27). “Hispanics more likely than whites to say global warming is caused by humans.” Pew Research Center <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/02/27/hispanics-more-likely-th...>

3. <http://www.wsj.com/articles/pope-delivers-powerful-message-on-climate-ch...>

4. <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/19/world/in-footsteps-of-popes-seeking-wo...>

5. <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/29/world/europe/scientists-and-religious-...>

6. <http://www.technologyreview.com/news/538586/climate-change-why-the-tropi...>

7. <http://www.uscatholic.org/articles/201505/papal-authority-and-climate-ch...>

8. <http://ecowatch.com/2015/06/12/pope-encyclical-spoof-trailer/>



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