



COMMENTARY

Pope Francis

Priest and Prophet in the Anthropocene

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One of the most significant aspects of *Laudato si'* is that it is a deep cry of the heart: *laudato si'*, praise be!¹ My central argument is that this cry stems from Pope Francis's charism as a priest and prophet in the epoch of the Anthropocene.² The rhetoric of "irreversible changes" to the earth that is implied by the idea of the Anthropocene has struck a cultural chord way beyond its original geologic home by generating ongoing and heated debates in the environmental humanities.³ There are negative aspects in using such a term that Pope Francis manages to avoid by eschewing its use. Nonetheless, the point of the whole encyclical is how humanity has failed to meet our human responsibilities to people and to the planet, how to address that failure, and how all of this can ultimately be reconciled with a belief in God, who is creator and redeemer of the world. Francis does not simply rehash traditional Roman Catholic doctrine: there are new elements in *Laudato si'* that stem from his own particular background as the first Latin American, the first Jesuit, and the first pope in history to take the name of that patron saint of ecology, Francis of Assisi.

Pope Francis as Priest

Pope Francis walks the walk: that much is obvious to anyone. Insofar as his call is addressed to the world, he has set himself the task of being a minister not just to the Catholic Church as its institutional leader but to the whole world. But this orientation is expressed through everyday actions. He has declined to live in the palatial

1. Latour, "Immense Cry"; Francis, *Laudato si'* (hereafter cited by section number in the text).

2. Crist, "On the Poverty of Our Nomenclature."

3. Deane-Drummond, Bergmann, and Vogt, *Religion in the Anthropocene*.

accommodations provided for his office; deliberately meets ordinary people on the street; washes the feet of prisoners; welcomes those of other religious traditions, including inviting Muslim refugees to the Vatican; refuses to castigate those of different sexual orientations; and confers with women priests and other leaders from different religious denominations. He has also set himself the task of cleaning up corruption within the Vatican and in doing so is getting his own house in order.

All these changes have been disorienting for those who are used to considering the pope a bastion of traditional European authority on ecclesial matters. It is hardly surprising that the serious and somewhat blunt message of *Laudato si'* has been met with resistance by many conservative Catholics, including those who advocate climate denial, such as Australian Cardinal George Pell.⁴ Pell's idea that Pope Francis has no business meddling in either scientific or political matters crept into the conservative press. Such criticisms are false in light of the historical contribution of the Catholic Church to both scientific research and politics more broadly. In contrast with climate change deniers, Pope Francis is a man of the people, embracing the particular Argentinian variety of liberation theology that emphasizes a theology *of* the people and *for* the people.⁵ He wants to look beyond climate denial and find the human roots of that tendency—roots related to insecurities in the face of challenges to the market economy, habits of consumption, and addiction to technologies that have dominated the Western, wealthier nations of the world.

As a priest and liberation theologian, Pope Francis quite deliberately desires to place himself in the shoes of the poorest of the poor, so as to see things from their perspective. No wonder that another liberation theologian and great advocate for ecology, Leonardo Boff, has written so warmly about Pope Francis's ministry.⁶ Pope Francis's scope in *Laudato si'* is truly global: he wants to address "every person living on this planet" (§2). In particular, through quoting the Orthodox Ecumenical Patriarchate Bartholomew I, Pope Francis acknowledges that the way human beings have treated the natural world is not something that can simply be brushed aside but amounts to a grave sin (§8). The language of sin and repentance is generally avoided in environmental humanities literature, but it is an important way to recognize the severity of the breakdown in human relationships with others, including others living in our creaturely home. For Pope Francis and many other religious believers, this breakdown reflects a broken relationship with God, and he expresses shock at the complacent attitude shown toward degradation in the natural environment: "Obstructionist attitudes, even on the part of believers, can range from denial of the problem to

4. Scammell, "Cardinal George Pell Takes a Swing." Putting Pell in charge of the economic operations of the Vatican in 2014 was a shrewd move on Pope Francis's part: it has moved Pell away from potential influence among the Australian populace.

5. Scannone, "Papa Francesco e la teologia del popolo."

6. Boff, *Francis of Rome and Francis of Assisi*.

indifference, nonchalant resignation or blind confidence in technical solutions” (§14). Such indifference shown toward the serious plight of environmental refugees (§25) is only going to get worse over time as environmental problems start to escalate. The overconfidence that ecomodernists place in technical solutions is quite the opposite of Pope Francis’s approach.⁷

The catalog of environmental disasters, their contribution to creaturely suffering and extinction, and the prospect of a collapse of the planet as a system raise the same questions of theodicy as the horrors of war and test even the most ardent religious faith. The cry in this case is not simply hopelessness but also a cry of intense anger against God—the God of love, goodness, and justice. Pope Francis refuses to allow God to be blamed in this way and sees the Church’s role as protecting humanity from self-destruction (§79). God’s power is self-limited, so that “many of the things we think of as evils, dangers or sources of suffering are in reality part of the pains of childbirth which he uses to draw us into the act of cooperation with the Creator” (§80). In his view, God is not removed from suffering but is intimately present with creatures while also not flouting their autonomy. He has faith, therefore, that “something new can always emerge” (§80). Further, he believes that faith in God and the power of the Holy Spirit will enable humanity to overcome the web of evils in which it is caught up. Pope Francis offers these encouraging words to prevent religious believers from sinking into despair when presented with so many complex challenges.

As priest, Pope Francis also understands the ultimate future of the earth through the lens of Christian faith in Christ: “The ultimate destiny of the universe is in the fullness of God, which has already been attained by the risen Christ, the measure of the maturity of all things” (§83). This transcendent dimension not only demonstrates his own faith in the ultimate future but also serves as a literary device that provides the reader with a reprieve from narratives of loss and destruction. Religious stories of hope are far more profound for the religious believer than merely optimistic, humanistic accounts of recovery, since their inner existential anchor rests in trust in the One who is able to act beyond natural human capabilities.

Pope Francis as Prophet

Pope Francis’s model since the beginning of his papacy has been Francis of Assisi. His determination to grant due attention to poverty, peacemaking, and creation comes through strongly in *Laudato si’*, regardless of the consequences. This commitment to his mission is prophetic and comes through in strident assertions such as that “the earth, our home, is beginning to look more and more like an immense pile of filth” (§21) or that “these problems are closely linked to a throwaway culture which affects the excluded just as it quickly reduces things to rubbish” (§22) and that “whatever is fragile,

7. Hamilton, “Theodicy of the ‘Good Anthropocene.’” The other essays in the same issue of *Environmental Humanities* deal with these topics as well.

like the environment, is defenseless before the interests of a deified market” (§56). The scientific discussions of the loss of biodiversity, climate change, agriculture, impacts of pollution, and water resources are accurate, even if Pope Francis could have gone further in places and brought his discussion more in line with recent scientific debates.⁸ To claim, therefore, that by consulting activists like Naomi Oreskes, Peter Wadhams, Hans Joachim Schellnhuber, and Jeffrey Sachs Pope Francis is somehow aligning himself with anti-Catholic agendas (e.g., enforced population control)⁹ is propaganda of the worst kind. His scientific discussion is measured and in line with the overall consensus found in the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)—reports that are conservative in their estimates of climate change. But any prophet is bound to have his critics, especially as his message invites a “bold cultural revolution” (§114) requiring changes in patterns of consumption and lifestyle.

However, unlike climate advocates such as Bill McKibben, Pope Francis does not actively encourage civil disobedience.¹⁰ Rather than active, illegal resistance, he is concerned with the reform of legal authority (§142). He does bemoan the lack of political will in global agreements and recent world summits, anticipating the Paris meeting in late 2015 (§166) and calling for civil society to employ “legitimate means of pressure” in order to bring about change (§38). In this sense he is no extremist, but he is still a prophetic voice in his context as leader of 1.2 billion Roman Catholics worldwide.

While Pope Francis’s message seeks to push the global community within the limits of legal authority, he still retains a traditional Catholic view on the dignity of the human person. His approach to the doctrine of creation is also traditional, retaining a view of “laws of nature” (§68) that he understands as inherent laws put in place by the Creator (§69). Although he avoids the term “natural law,” his position on the absolute worth of each and every person is in line with traditional views on both human dignity and the human family (§50). He refuses, for example, to blame population growth for the extreme environmental challenges facing the global commons and insists that the root causes are an undue attachment to the technocratic paradigm and habits of overconsumption (§109).

One of Pope Francis’s central ideas is *integral ecology*, by which he means due attention to the needs of the human person at all levels, including individual, familial, and societal; these needs should be understood in close relationship with both economic and environmental frameworks.¹¹ For him, it is not enough to encourage conformity to existing legal frameworks; rather, we need to promote best practices through adequate institutional and political change (§178). A legal system that responds simply to the

8. Deane-Drummond, “*Laudato si’* and the Natural Sciences.”

9. Morano, “Special Report.”

10. McKibben, *Oil and Honey*.

11. Integral ecology was also used in 2009 as part of the International Theological Commission’s discussion on natural law. See International Theological Commission, “In Search of a Universal Ethic.”

short-term economic demands of the market will be inadequate, and the “myopia of power politics delays the inclusion of a far-sighted environmental agenda within the overall agenda of governments” (*ibid.*).

Nonetheless, the force of law is not sufficient for the task, since the most important issue to address is change in human attitudes and will. Pope Francis therefore promotes ecological virtues, so that we find “a nobility in the duty to care for creation through little daily actions” (§211). By pressing simultaneously for change both at an inner moral level and at a structural, political level, he aims to face all aspects of the problem simultaneously. Inner change also includes openness to those of other religious traditions (§§199, 222), including indigenous communities (§146). Drawing on the words of Pope John Paul II, he speaks boldly of the need for ecological conversion (§§5, 216–21). As discussed further below, such conversion is grounded in the spirituality of Saint Francis of Assisi and takes its bearings from an understanding that both individuals and communities need to change.

To what degree is that conversion in line with broader literature in the environmental humanities? Pope Francis recognizes the interdependence between people and other creatures that resonates with the stress on kinship in the work of scholars such as Donna Haraway.¹² There are important differences, however. Pope Francis resists the kind of biocentrism that Haraway advocates. For him, the human person is still worth more than all the sparrows (§§81, 119); yet his recognition of the intrinsic worth of all creatures and interconnectivity is an important first step (§42). For those writing in the postmodern or posthuman context, he will still sound anthropocentric. My judgment is that he could not have gone any further in his role as prophet in the Anthropocene without losing many of those he intended to reach. An affiliation with Gaia is something with which liberation theologian Boff was prepared to experiment,¹³ but Pope Francis resists this move. He is not prepared to align with Haraway and claim that bacteria are the greatest transforming agents on planet Earth, even if, from a purely biological perspective, that might well be the case. Indeed, the inversion of hierarchical ordering through Gaia is something that relatively few commentators have been prepared to admit.¹⁴

As with any prophet, Pope Francis brings out the old and the new. Traditional terminology in Catholic social teaching, such as the *common good*, is re-presented in order to take into account climate change and other environmental harms. Integral

12. Haraway, “Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene.” Pope Francis does not cover the issue of what Haraway and others have termed the Plantationocene—that is, in Haraway’s words, “the devastating transformation of diverse kinds of human-tended farms, pastures, and forests into extractive and enclosed plantations, relying on slave labor and other forms of exploited, alienated and usually spatially transported labor” (162n5)—but he does discuss exploitation of the earth and the vulnerable more generally (§§4, 27, 67, 106, 123, 230).

13. Boff, *Ecology and Liberation*.

14. Deane-Drummond, “Gaia as Science Made Myth.”

ecology builds on the concepts of natural law and human ecology developed by Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI.¹⁵ Francis's sharp critiques of market economics and the dangers of capitalism push harder than his predecessor, but it is not out of kilter with the direction of Benedict XVI's criticisms of the dangers of the global market economy and his ideas on a renewed economy of gratuitousness.¹⁶ Finally, his attention to interdependence among all creatures shares aspects of John Paul II's nature mysticism but is now given much more flesh through a broader understanding of ecological conversion that draws on Franciscan spirituality. He also follows the praxis of liberation theology by taking up its process for change: first, to pay attention to what we see; then to judge aright; and finally, to act. That call to action is one that ecological activists the world over will recognize and affirm as their own; but now it is driven not just by wonder at the natural world but also by a specific commission and invocation to act on behalf of the created world, which "is not an optional or secondary aspect of our Christian experience" (§217).

The impact of this encyclical beyond the normal bounds of official magisterial teaching speaks for itself. Quite regardless of its inherent limitations, this remains a significant contribution to the environmental humanities. As someone who has worked in this field as an ecotheologian for the last quarter century, my final remark has to be: thank you, Pope Francis!

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15. For full discussion, see Deane-Drummond, "Joining the Dance."

16. Benedict XVI, *Caritas in veritate*.

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