

# Pope Francis: The Cry of the Earth

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Donatella Giagnori/epa/Corbis

Pope Francis at the Vatican, September 1, 2014

The old conceit that the president has a “bully pulpit” needs updating; it’s clear that the pulpit at St. Peter’s Basilica is now the bulliest of all. Pope Francis may lack legions, but he has 6.3 million followers on Twitter, and for a week now the world has been following leaks of his new encyclical on climate change and the environment.

*Laudato Si’*, finally released Thursday morning in Rome, is a remarkable 183-page document, incredibly rich—it’s not dense, but it is studded with aphorisms and insights. It will take time to fully digest it, but a few things are immediately evident.

First, simply by writing it, the pope—the single most prominent person on the planet, and of all celebrities and leaders the most skilled at using gesture to communicate—has managed to get across the crucial point: our environmental peril, and in particular, climate change, is the most pressing issue of our time. We face, he says, “desolation,” and we must turn as fast as we can away from coal, oil, and gas. Most thinking people knew this already, but since dealing with global warming would mean standing up to the most powerful forces in the status quo, most world leaders have never fully engaged the question. (President Obama, for instance, the earth’s most powerful politician, made it to the closing days of his 2012 reelection campaign without mentioning climate change—until Hurricane Sandy finally made it impossible not to.) It’s been a side issue, but no more: Francis has made it clear that nothing can be more important.

More, he's brought the full weight of the spiritual order to bear on the global threat posed by climate change, and in so doing joined its power with the scientific order. Stephen Jay Gould had the idea that these two spheres were "non-overlapping magisteria," but in this case he appears to have been wrong. Pope Francis draws heavily on science—sections of the encyclical are very nearly wonky, with accurate and sensible discussions of everything from genetic modification to aquifer depletion—but he goes beyond science as well. Science by itself has proven empirically impotent to force action on this greatest of crises; now, at last, someone with authority is explaining precisely *why* it matters that we're overheating the planet.

It matters in the first place, says Francis, because of its effect on the poorest among us, which is to say on most of the population of the earth. The encyclical is saturated with concern for the most vulnerable—those who, often in underdeveloped countries, are breathing carcinogenic air, or are being forced from their land by spreading deserts and rampant agribusiness. This comes as no surprise, for concern—rhetorical and practical—for those at the bottom of the heap has been the hallmark of his papacy from the start. "A true ecological approach," he writes, "*always* becomes a social approach; it must integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment, *so as to hear both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor.*"

Less expected, perhaps—at least for those who haven't understood why Francis chose his [papal name](#)—is how seriously he takes that cry of the earth. Though he's no tree-worshipping pagan (it's clear throughout the encyclical that the world belongs to God), there's a celebration of nature and the natural world that undergirds the document. He rails at the destruction of the Amazon and the Congo, of aquifers and glaciers. Speaking of coral reefs, he writes: "who turned the wonderworld of the seas into underwater cemeteries bereft of color and life?"

But the heart of the encyclical is less an account of environmental or social destruction than a remarkable attack on the way our world runs: on the "rapidification" of modern life, on the way that economic growth and technology trump all other concerns, on a culture that can waste billions of people. These are neither liberal nor conservative themes, and they are not new for popes: what is new is that the ecological crisis makes them inescapable. Continual economic and technological development may have long been isolating, deadening, spiritually unfulfilling—but it has swept all before it anyway, despite theological protest, because it has delivered the goods. But now, the rapidly rising temperature (and [new data](#) also released Thursday showed we've just lived through the hottest May since record-keeping began) gives the criticism bite. Our way of life literally *doesn't work*. It's breaking the planet. Given the severity of the situation, Francis writes, "we can finally leave behind the modern myth of unlimited material progress. A fragile world, entrusted by God to human care, challenges us to devise intelligent ways of directing, developing, and limiting our power."

Neither liberal nor conservative—but definitely radical. Francis calls for nothing less than the demotion of individualism and a renewed concern for what we hold in common as humans (the encyclical is explicitly directed to all of us, Catholic or not, since the environmental crisis is more universal than any challenge before it). "The rejection of every form of self-centeredness and self-absorption [is] essential if we truly wish to care for our brothers and sisters and for the natural environment," he writes. Get your nose out of your iPhone ("When media and the digital

world become omnipresent, their influence can stop people from learning how to live wisely, to think deeply and to love generously”) and join in the fight for a livable world.

Because a fight it is. The pope may have combined the orders of science and spirituality, but he knows they must battle a third magisteria: money, which so far has usually won. He’s caustic about the failures of international conclaves and national politicians, rightly isolating the cause as the ongoing triumph of those for whom accumulation is the only god. “Whatever is fragile, like the environment, is defenseless before the interests of a deified market,” he has written, adding knowingly today that, “consequently the most one can expect [from our leaders] is superficial rhetoric, sporadic acts of philanthropy, and perfunctory expressions of concern.” Indeed, an hour or two after the release of his encyclical, the House voted to give the president “fast-track” authority to negotiate a free trade agreement with Pacific Rim nations, over the protests of advocates for both environmentalists and workers that it would only worsen the problems the encyclical describes.

It will take a while to see what power the pope’s letter ultimately possesses. Usually, as Francis writes, “any genuine attempt by groups within society to introduce change is viewed as a nuisance based on romantic illusions or an obstacle to be circumvented,” which certainly describes how many American politicians reacted to the encyclical. But one would perhaps be unwise to bet against Pope Francis, who has a wily sense of how to pressure, expose, and prod. At any rate, the battle is joined, more fully than ever before.

My own sense, after spending the day reading this remarkable document, was of great relief. I’ve been working on climate change for a quarter century, and for much of that time it felt like enduring one of those nightmarish dreams where no one can hear your warnings. In recent years a broad-based movement has arisen to take up the challenge, but this marks the first time that a person of great authority in our global culture has fully recognized the scale and depth of our crisis, and the consequent necessary rethinking of what it means to be human.

June 18, 2015, 7:19 p.m.