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Caring for Our Common Home

A Readers'
Guide and
Commentary
on Pope Francis'
Encyclical on the
Environment

By Thomas Reese, S.J.



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Chapter 1 What is happening to our common home?

Pope Francis is a firm believer in the need to gather the facts in order to understand a problem. [Chapter 1](#) presents the scientific consensus on climate change along with a description of other threats to the environment, including threats to water supplies and biodiversity. He also looks at how environmental degradation has affected human life and society. Finally, he writes about the global inequality of the environmental crisis.

Questions:

1. How has pollution affected you or your family personally?
2. What does the pope mean by a “throwaway culture” (Paragraph 22)? Do you agree with him? Why?
3. What does the pope mean when he says, “The climate is a common good” (Paragraph 23)?
4. What is the evidence that climate change is happening and is caused by human activity (Paragraph 23)? What will be its effects?
5. The pope says “access to safe drinkable water is a basic and universal human right,” yet many poor people do not have access to it (Paragraphs 27-31). Why is this? What can be done?
6. Why does the pope think biodiversity is important (Paragraphs 32-42)? What are the threats to biodiversity?
7. What are the effects on people’s lives of environmental deterioration, current models of development, and the throwaway culture (Paragraphs 43-47)?
8. Why does the pope believe “we cannot adequately combat environmental degradation unless we attend to causes related to human and social degradation” (Paragraph 48)?
9. Why does the pope think that simply reducing birth rates of the poor is not a just or adequate response to the problem of poverty or environmental degradation (Paragraph 50)?
10. “A true ‘ecological debt’ exists, particularly between the global north and south,” the pope writes (Paragraph 51). What does he mean?
11. Why does the pope think the response to the world’s environmental crisis has been weak (Paragraph 53)?

Commentary: Pope Francis says ‘Facts are more important than ideas’

“Facts are more important than ideas” is a statement from Pope Francis that one would have never heard from Popes Benedict XVI or John Paul II.

It is not that Pope Francis is dumb or an anti-intellectual. He is well-read and thoughtful, but by no stretch of the imagination can he be called a scholar. His training as a scientist and his life experience make him approach theory in a different way than John Paul and Benedict. It also helps explain his approach to the environment in *Laudato Si’*.

John Paul was trained first as a philosopher and then as a theologian, and as a priest, he taught ethics at a university. He wrote in a style that was not easily digested. Benedict was trained in theology and became one of the leading theologians of his generation. Both wrote scholarly books that promoted a particular perspective.

On the other hand, Francis’ initial training prior to entering the seminary was as a chemist. He never finished his doctorate in theology. He is what academics refer to as ABD, “all but dissertation.” He never wrote scholarly books. He was a wide-ranging consumer of theology, not the proponent of a particular view.

For John Paul the philosopher and Benedict the theologian, ideas were paramount. But for Francis the scientist and pastor, facts really matter.

For John Paul and Benedict, if reality does not reflect the ideal, then reality must change, whereas for Francis, if facts and theory clash, he, like a good scientist, is willing to question the theory.

The personal histories of these three popes also marked them. For John Paul, it was the experience of a church under siege, first by the Nazis and then by the communists. Church unity was paramount in such a struggle. Even after the fall of communism, his model of the church was still that of a church under siege, except now the enemy was much of Western culture — relativism, consumerism, etc.

Likewise, Benedict was influenced first by the Second Vatican Council and then by the upheaval that followed it and the 1968 student riots, which reminded him of the Nazi Brownshirts of his youth. As with John Paul, unity and order were important values.

As a teacher of graduate students and a director of dissertations, Benedict spent much of his time guiding and correcting students. He did not interact all that well with his theological colleagues. It was not surprising that as head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, he saw his job as guiding and correcting theologians whom he treated like graduate students, not intellectual equals.

Francis, on the other hand, as a young priest was quickly thrust into the spiritual formation of young Jesuits and became director of novices, provincial and rector of the Jesuit seminary. He dealt with people, not ideas; discernment, not logic, was the guiding principle.

This experience of Jesuit governance was rewarding but not irenic. He experienced

conflict and failure. He acknowledges that he was too young for the authority he was given and that he made mistakes. He learned that he needed to listen and consult before making decisions. He brought these learned lessons to his work as archbishop of Buenos Aires, Argentina, where he spent much of his time with people in the slums.

Francis also lived in Argentina at a time when there was a clash of ideologies going on, and he grew to hate ideological thinking. I define an ideology as a system by which we ignore data and experience in order to preserve our opinions. Peronism, communism, and libertarian capitalism were fighting for power. The military, following the idea of the national security state, violently suppressed all opposition.

At the same time, while John Paul experienced communism as a foreign oppressor, Francis met communism as a young man in the person of his first boss and mentor, whom he admired and with whom he maintained friendship for life. He learned early that a communist could be a good person.

Pope Francis is uncomfortable with ideologies on the left and the right. He was critical of certain forms of liberation theology because they incorporated Marxist analysis and supported violent revolution. He felt that these theologians were imposing their ideas on the poor rather than listening to their views.

But Francis is even more critical of libertarian capitalism, which blindly claims that all boats would rise with the tide of economic growth, because the people he met in the slums of Buenos Aires were in fact drowning without boats.

All of this background influenced the writing of Francis' encyclical *Laudato Si'*. Rather than starting with philosophy and theology, the first chapter of the encyclical starts with science. What are the facts?

The pope and his collaborators began by consulting widely with the scientific community. What is happening to the environment? They went to the scientific community not to argue with it, but to learn from it. If there was a consensus in the scientific community, they accepted it.

Although the church gets a bad rap for Galileo, in fact, the Catholic church has been a supporter of science through the centuries (Jesuit astronomers, Gregor Mendel, Georges Lemaître, etc.). This was grounded in Catholic theology that argued that there can be no conflict between faith and reason because both are from God.

This does not mean that there were not bumps along the road (Galileo, Darwin, Freud), but Catholicism was usually able to reconcile itself with new science faster than those for whom the Bible was the only source of authority. Today, conflict is over how science is used, not over what science discovers.

What did the pope learn about the environment from scientists?

[Chapter 1](#) of the encyclical first reports on air pollution: "Exposure to atmospheric pollutants produces a broad spectrum of health hazards, especially for the poor, and causes millions of premature deaths." Pollution is "caused by transport, industrial fumes, substances which contribute to the acidification of soil and water, fertilizers, insecticides, fungicides, herbicides and agrottoxins in general."

Then the chapter moves on to the pollution caused by waste. “Each year hundreds of millions of tons of waste are generated, much of it non-biodegradable, highly toxic and radioactive, from homes and businesses, from construction and demolition sites, from clinical, electronic and industrial sources.”

The pope also learned that “a very solid scientific consensus indicates that we are presently witnessing a disturbing warming of the climatic system” and that “a number of scientific studies indicate that most global warming in recent decades is due to the great concentration of greenhouse gases (carbon dioxide, methane, nitrogen oxides and others) released mainly as a result of human activity.”

[Chapter 1](#) includes a discussion of how global warming can lead to melting of glaciers and polar ice, rising sea levels, and the release of methane gas from the decomposition of frozen organic material. It also notes that “carbon dioxide pollution increases the acidification of the oceans and compromises the marine food chain.”

“If present trends continue,” the encyclical states, “this century may well witness extraordinary climate change and an unprecedented destruction of ecosystems, with serious consequences for all of us.”

[Chapter 1](#) devotes an entire section to the loss of biodiversity, its causes and consequences. “Each year sees the disappearance of thousands of plant and animal species which we will never know, which our children will never see, because they have been lost forever. The great majority become extinct for reasons related to human activity.” These are resources that will not be available to future generations.

The encyclical reports on polluted water supplies, dying coral reefs, and deforestation. It summarizes the current thinking of scientists about environmental issues.

Later in the encyclical, Francis writes, “Doomsday predictions can no longer be met with irony or disdain. We may well be leaving to coming generations debris, desolation and filth. The pace of consumption, waste and environmental change has so stretched the planet’s capacity that our contemporary lifestyle, unsustainable as it is, can only precipitate catastrophes.”

Facts matter when it comes to the environment, which is why Francis begins his encyclical with a presentation of the scientific consensus on the state of the environment and where we are going. These facts present the world with a moral dilemma that will be explicated later in the encyclical.

Facts, in Francis’ universe, should not be twisted to fit our ideas. Rather, facts can force us to change our ideas. For example, what it means to be a Christian in the 21st century must change when confronted with environmental crisis we face.

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