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Vatican City—Pope Francis blesses the faithful in St. Peter's Square.

## Laudato si'

by Joseph DiMento

*It must be said that some committed and prayerful Christians, with the excuse of realism and pragmatism, tend to ridicule expressions of concern for the environment. (Laudato si')*

Will Pope Francis's words influence Americans' thinking about the environment, people's role within it, and specifically climate change?

According to the Pew Research survey, 68% of American adults, about one-fifth of whom are self-identified Catholics, say they "believe the Earth is warming," and that belief is about twice as common among Democrats as Republicans. As to whether human activity is causing global warming, 64% of Democrats think this is the case and that this is as a very serious problem, with about one-third of that percentage of Republicans so concluding (<http://wakeup.lazarus.net/2015/laudato.htm>, accessed on August 1, 2015).

One way of addressing our question is whether American beliefs will be affected by the words of the Pontiff, but another way, more important in this third decade of our recognition of the phenomenon of climate change is: Will it affect behaviors?

There is a massive literature on whether deeply held views can be altered by information; within that knowledge base is the understanding that the nature of the message, how the message is communicated, by whom, and whether it communicates the kinds of changes that are possible are important elements of behavioral shifts.

With this as background, the long Papal letter should have different impacts depending on who the audience

members are and which parts of the letter they read, or are (or assume they are) informed about—in church bulletins, news outlets, by colleagues, friends, political leaders, and so on. For some the message will be dismissed as extreme, for this 74-page opus is in parts a quite radical document. It summarizes what many in the activist environmental community have been preaching for years. Some of that message is not welcomed by many Americans, including Catholic Americans.

The Pope has pulled from the strongest analyses of the nature of the environmental challenge and the role of corporations, governments, and individuals within it. Among the statements:



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*We know that technology based on the use of highly polluting fossil fuels ... needs to be progressively replaced without delay. [Oil is noted but also gas.]*

*Technology, which, linked to business interests, is presented as the only way of solving problems, in fact proves incapable of seeing the mysterious network of relations between things and so sometimes solves one problem only to create others.*

Business is called out in sections such as in the Pope's deep concern over "proposals to internationalize the Amazon, which only serve the economic interests of transnational corporations."

*Men and women of our postmodern world run the risk of rampant individualism, and many problems of society are connected with today's self-centered culture of instant gratification.*

*That is why the time has come to accept decreased growth in some parts of the world, in order to provide resources for other places to experience healthy growth ... there is a need to change "models of global development."*

*Environmental protection cannot be assured solely on the basis of financial calculation of costs and benefits. The environment is one of those goods that cannot be*

*adequately safeguarded or promoted by market forces.*

There has been "a relentless exploitation and destruction of the environment from a reckless pursuit of profits, excessive faith in technology and political shortsightedness." Technology is discussed in great length and its negative effects are emphasized by the Pope.

These views are not reflective of modern American thought on progress, wise approaches to a clean environment, and the compatibility of consumer goods and preservation of the planet.

But the letter also calls for dialogue and does not assert that the Church and religion have the answers. As a call for dialogue, for love, and for actions by many, the message may be less jarring to Americans—including conservatives.

And a fundamental procedural message of the encyclical is acceptable to most Americans: Unless "citizens control political power—national, regional and municipal—it will not be possible to control damage to the environment."

Nor is the message all doom and gloom, a characteristic of communication that often has counterproductive effects ("we can't do anything anyway, so business as usual ..."). The Pope describes his as a "lengthy reflection which has been both joyful and troubling." Yet all is not lost. Human beings, while capable of the worst, are also capable of rising above themselves. And the Pope does recognize that "some countries have made considerable progress,"

citing decreased demands for energy in production and transportation, rivers cleaned up, landscapes beautified, public transportation improved.

## Nonbelievers

As to nonbelievers and non-Catholics, the influence may be based on how beloved a person is this Pope. For this audience the considerable focus in *Laudato si'* on Catholic doctrine probably has very limited valence.<sup>1</sup> The sources that the Pope cites are heavily Church dominated: Apostolic letters, other encyclicals, bishops' conference statements, the catechism. And in parts the message is identical to the one that was part of my deep strict Catholic education of the 1960s, based on the catechism, for example, and with many references to traditional beliefs in an all good God, being "The Father ... the ultimate source of everything ... Son ... through whom all things were created ... formed in the womb of Mary ... Spirit, infinite bond of love." There are references to the "misguided focus" on population control. And "concern for the protection of nature is also incompatible with the justification of abortion."

My own experience, after decades of teaching and writing about global environmental problems, environmental law, environmental education, and climate change: For information to affect environmental behavior, people need both to see disaster as linked to environmental problems and to be able to identify something they can do to influence change. The Pope has made the disaster scenario a tiny bit more believable and has laid out in a lovely, almost sweet way, how our behaviors can make a difference.

As for communicating what can be done, he speaks with remarkable specificity. Reflecting a message of modern environmental law ("Laws may be well framed yet remain a dead letter") he offers action forcing ideas (with details surprising for a religious message):

- Individuals make a difference by "avoiding the use of plastic and

paper, reducing water consumption, separating refuse, cooking only what can reasonably be consumed, showing care for other living beings, using public transport or car-pooling, planting trees, turning off unnecessary lights.”

- Environmental impact assessment should be done and “should not come after the drawing up of a business proposition or the proposal of a particular policy, plan or programme.”
- The precautionary principle should be recognized.

## Conclusion

Opinion leaders (and those who would like to be) have already declared their views on the effects of the

encyclical. They range predictably: from “I don’t get economic policy from my bishops or my cardinal or my pope” (Rick Santorum, a presidential candidate; <http://www.usnews.com/opinion/articles/2015/06/18/conservatives-balk-at-pope-francis-climate-change-encyclical>), to “I do think the encyclical is going to have a major impact. It will speak to the moral imperative of addressing climate change in a timely fashion in order to protect the most vulnerable” (Christiana Figueres, executive secretary of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, *The Guardian*, June 13, 2015).

As to those whose opinions they and the Pope wish to influence, the effect, unknowable with any precision, in my opinion will be modest and positive, both on attitudes and even on some

behaviors. The Pope writes that “All it takes is one good person to restore hope!” A wonderful thought it seems, and if there is any truth to this, the Pope is one.

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## NOTE

1. Here I use the term to mean the intrinsic attractiveness (positive valence) or aversiveness (negative valence) of a phenomenon.

*Disappearing sea ice.*

