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Pope Francis stands up for the environment

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As Americans try to get a better sense of the pope during his visit, they will be looking to his gestures, spontaneous comments, and activities. Will he take a subway? How much will he talk about the unborn? Will he sound like a communist? Will he visit the homeless? On some topics he will be interpreted to be all things to all people. But in one policy area there is little ambiguity.

Pope Francis is an ultra-green pope. This is a radical Environmental Vicar of Christ. He has told us so in a 74-page letter, *Laudato Si'*. Many have cited, praised or attacked this missive, but few have read it - at least in total. Americans have a vague sense of what Pope Francis wrote - informed about it in church bulletins, news outlets, by colleagues, friends, political leaders.

In fact, the encyclical summarizes what many in the activist environmental community have been preaching for years. 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.

It is specific and points fingers:

"We know that technology based on the use of highly polluting fossil fuels ... needs to be progressively replaced without delay."

There has been a relentless exploitation and destruction of the environment from a reckless pursuit of profits, excessive faith in technology and political shortsightedness, he says.

Technology is discussed in great length and its negative effects are emphasized. Linked to business interests, in fact, it is 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."

It attacks the growth shibboleth:

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"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.'"

And it is skeptical of the function of the market:

"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."

Is it communist? No more than strong environmentalism is communist - i.e., it is not. Independent of the political system, it calls for involvement of the affected and those who want to protect Mother Earth: Unless "citizens control political power - national, regional and municipal - it will not be possible to control damage to the environment."

The message is not all doom and gloom, the hallmarks of some early environmentalists: It is a "lengthy reflection which has been both joyful and troubling." Human beings, while capable of the worst, are also capable of rising above themselves. The pope recognizes that "some countries have made considerable progress," And Pope Francis gets specific as do truly dedicated and hopeful environmentalists. When he helps us to identify something we can do to influence change, he offers details surprising for a religious message: We can avoid the use of plastic and paper, reduce water consumption, separate refuse, cook only what can reasonably be eaten, use public transport, plant trees, turn off the lights.

In short, the new Saint Francis has taken a strong position on what has destroyed the environment, pulling few punches. Taking the side of the environment, he teaches what we can do through individual and governmental collective action to turn things around.

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