

Because We All Matter:

**A View on the Climate Change Papal
Encyclical**

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Pope Francis's May 24 encyclical on "[Care for Our Common Home](#)" has changed the scenery on the climate change stage. In 184 pages, he used theology to lift climate change out of the halls of political and governmental debate and put it into our heads, hearts, and hands.

He used the tactics of a skilled debater, of course, to support this bold resolution that climate change is a matter for all of us:

1. Climate change is real
2. We humans contribute to it
3. The effects of climate change on the poor are disproportionately adverse
4. Doing something about it rests in all of our hands
5. All of us must change our lifestyles, just as we must change—in the earlier words of Pope John Paul II—the “structures of power and our models of production and consumption.”

With this encyclical—essentially, a teaching—Pope Francis has done three courageous things, made powerful because his words contain no equivocation:

- He embraced the conclusions of [international scientists](#).
- He recognized the practices and scope of the “powerful opposition” to those who “seek concrete solutions to the environmental crisis we are in.” In this recognition, he looked at the roots of that crisis—including “a model of development based on the intensive use of fossil fuels, which is at the heart of the worldwide energy system.”
- Using a recurring theme of Earth stewardship, he has reinforced the theology of our connectedness to the creatures of the Earth, and it is in our relationship to all creatures that we can “discover a key to our own fulfillment.”

None of this is overtly a political position, as some have asserted, even though the topic is, in fact, something that has been on political plates worldwide in some form or other for a long time. Perhaps ever since the publication in 1962 of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, or the establishment of Earth Day in 1970, or the 1992 Earth Summit.¹ Pick your starting point.

Instead, the encyclical is grounded in a respect for science, in the obligation to speak about climate change, and in addressing climate change through our relationship to one another. Head, heart, and hands. This isn't politics. He has not advocated for compromise. He has not tried to influence the governance of a country. This is about re-introducing us to our human potential.

There is art in what Pope Francis has done. He wrote us all a letter. It maps out how we can be looking at climate change differently. Unlike a professional paper delivered at a conference, a letter carefully written demands a careful response. That is one of the main strengths of this encyclical. That strength causes us to turn inward on ourselves, to examine our daily actions

¹ United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, Rio de Janeiro, 1992. <http://www.un.org/geninfo/bp/enviro.html>. For other historical events related to the environment and climate change, see Clark, William C., Jill Jäger, & Josee van Eijndoven, *Learning to Manage Global Environmental Risks, Vol. 1*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press: 21 ff. 2001.

and derive changes to our lifestyles. This inward-looking action is a fitting counter-action to the largely external-facing phenomena to which the science of climate change has given rise:

- political activism
- governmental action
- legal challenges
- a host of other impassioned reactions—including furthering the scientific investigations into climate change

How Effective Can the Encyclical Be?

Just as the [Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change](#) (IPCC) has articulated the *scientific evidence* on climate change and its environmental and socio-economic effects, Pope Francis has articulated a rationale for *collective action* on climate change and its environmental and socio-economic effects. We do not yet know how effective it can be. But like the IPCC, he has made no concessions to political positions, governmental or intergovernmental interests, or commercial concerns. And thus he has not tilted or softened his inconvenient conclusions.

Science: Our Heads

In the past several decades, the international body of scientists has distilled its wide range of knowledge and thinking to a single set of conclusions. And partly because of this evidentiary approach, governmental organizations, particularly the United Nations, have taken some significant and effective steps in changing what had been the status quo. Perhaps that encouraging history will give us clues about how effective a single theologian with a framework of 246 theses and 2 prayers can be.

For starters, we can look at the work of the IPCC, begun 27 years ago under the auspices of the United Nations. That body has led to some notable achievements, including now a [Fifth Assessment Report](#) that distills and integrates working group findings, making it the “most comprehensive assessment of climate change yet undertaken.”

As an activity of the United Nations, the work of the IPCC (begun in 1988) complemented the subsequent Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer (1989 – 2007), onto which all 196 UN members and the European Union have signed. To date, the Montreal Protocol has achieved:²

- Virtual elimination of ozone-depleting substances (98 percent)
- Ongoing improvements in the thickening of the ozone layer
- Support, via the Multilateral Fund, to developing countries that were earlier producing the ozone-depleting substances for the developed-world market

² United Nations Environment Programme, “Key Achievements of the Montreal Protocol to Date.” New York: United Nations. 2012

[http://ozone.unep.org/new_site/en/Information/Information Kit/Key achievements of the Montreal Protocol 2012.pdf](http://ozone.unep.org/new_site/en/Information/Information%20Kit/Key%20achievements%20of%20the%20Montreal%20Protocol%202012.pdf).

- Averted cases of skin cancer and cataracts, projected in the tens of millions worldwide; in the United States alone, by 2065, more than 6.3 million deaths from skin cancer will have been avoided
- Greenhouse gas (GHG) emission reductions equivalent to 135 billion tons of carbon dioxide, already

The subsequent [United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change](#), to which 195 of the UN's 196 members have signed on as Parties, offers a structure for intergovernmental action on matters relating to climate change effects. To date it has resulted in:

- Ratification of the Kyoto Protocol (2005), binding Parties to international limits on GHG emissions
- An emissions trading program for the European Union
- The launch of the Clean Development Program, allowing a country with an emission-reduction or emission-limitation commitment under the Kyoto Protocol to implement an emission-reduction project in developing countries (certified emission reduction [CER] credits can be counted toward meeting Kyoto targets)
- Three agreements, including creating in 2010 the [Green Climate Fund](#), that assist developing countries in addressing climate change
- A rulebook produced in 2013 (the [Warsaw Outcomes](#)) for reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation, and a mechanism for addressing damage from long-term climate change effects

Despite all these achievements, there is much more work to be done. We know this from (1) news reports about the hottest year on record (2014), (2) the fact that we have crested 403 ppm of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere (350 ppm is considered a safe level for stable climate conditions), and (3) the inexorable rise in the numbers of people displaced by climate change events—a phenomenon described from a human perspective in *Climate Refugees*.³ The IPCC concludes that only an “aggressive mitigation scenario” can keep temperature rise below 2 degrees C.⁴ There are other alarming realities the IPCC cites, too. The Panel is not alone in such citations. Certainly, the science on climate change doesn't stop at the United Nations. Just ask the activist [Bill McKibben](#).

Speaking: Our Hearts

The power of the pope in addressing climate change goes beyond his leadership of the Roman Catholic Church. It is true that the office has given him a voice that the world pays attention to. But what he has done is to step beyond the limits of the Church. He has spoken as one human being, writing a letter to “all people.”

That group includes the ranks of politicians, business interests, and those in the “powerful opposition” who are already fighting back, some with the Bible in their hands. And just as

³ A Sundance Film Festival multiple award-winner, described by NPR as a documentary that “puts the human soul in the science of climate change.” <http://www.climate-refugees.com/>.

⁴ A temperature rise of 2 degrees C. from 1880 levels is considered the threshold above which climate change risks become “unacceptably high.” For perspective on the UN collective achievements, see http://unfccc.int/files/inc/graphics/image/jpeg/tl_reality_check_xl.jpg.

powerfully, the encyclical is already one step ahead of them. Pope Francis has laid out a theological argument against selective interpretations of the Bible—notably, in Genesis, the declaration of humans’ having dominion over the earth. Using that argument to justify exploitation of the earth’s resources must stop, he says. In isolation, such rationales dismiss the broader teaching—still in Genesis, as he cited—that human life is grounded in relationships. This includes relationships with the “earth itself.”

He further calls for continuity in action to address climate change, regardless of changes in governments.⁵ Politicians practicing any religion and who are supported directly or indirectly by Big Oil—but are in turn supporting economic freedom “while real conditions bar many people from actual access to it” will be made uncomfortable by this encyclical. Their only recourse is to chide the pope for having chosen what they believe is a topic best left in their hands, not his. Again, the encyclical is a step ahead of them, warning that “doublespeak...brings politics into disrepute.”⁶

Here we are literally at the heart of the matter. Leading by example, the pope has demonstrated that courageous and all-inclusive speech is critically important. Speaking to the creatures of the Earth, speaking up in the face of powerful opposition, speaking with each other in relationship. On environmental and climate matters, this has been going on worldwide for decades. So it is neither a radical statement nor anything new.

But it is a reminder that when we all agree there is more work to be done, it comes at a price. By speaking to, speaking up, and speaking with, we must address the practicalities of what we say. We can do this if we accept the broader perspective that the encyclical reveals:

- Recognize that the environment is on loan to us, and that loan is inherited by the next generation
- Continue insisting that those who pollute assume responsibility for the costs of cleaning it up
- Echo the growing sentiment that all lives matter, especially including the lives of those who suffer the most from the effects of climate change

Fixing Climate Change, Because All Lives Matter: Our Hands

Pope Francis exhorts his readers (or better yet, his recipients) to see the worth in every thing. He also exhorts them (or better yet, us) to touch the hearts of those who look only for gain at the expense of the poor and the Earth, to rescue the abandoned and the forgotten of this Earth, and to protect the world—not to prey on it.

⁵ “...in the absence of pressure from the public and from civic institutions, political authorities will always be reluctant to intervene, all the more when urgent needs must be met. To take up these responsibilities and the costs they entail, politicians will inevitably clash with the mindset of short-term gain and results which dominates present-day economics and politics.” Francis, *Encyclical Letter, On Care for Our Common Home*. The Vatican: Vatican Press: 133.

http://w2.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si_en.pdf.

⁶ *Our Common Home*, 96.

Through our own speech, in thousands of languages, we will continue to set goals on GHG emissions, to challenge ourselves to come up with practical solutions and to imagine improbable ones, and to help those most adversely affected by our contributions to climate change.

We must get our hands dirty in everything we do to care for our common home. And when we respond to one another in this tremendous effort, we must be open to being changed by our own—and our interlocutors'—words. This is how we will discover the key to our own fulfillment.