

Anticipating Pope Francis' Forthcoming Encyclical on the Human-Earth Relationship
Jame Schaefer, Department of Theology, Marquette University
© Jame Schaefer, Ph.D.

Momentum is building for the first encyclical¹ dedicated to ecological and planetary problems caused by human activities. Forthcoming this summer from Pope Francis, speculation is ongoing about what he will write. According to Cardinal Peter Turkson, President of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace who prepared a first draft of the encyclical, it will focus on "human ecology" and "explore the relationship between care for creation, integral human development and concern for the poor."² The cardinal underscored the importance of the pope's encyclical in light of events that are occurring this year--the Third International Conference on Financing for Development in Addis Ababa in July, the United Nations' General Assembly consideration of goals for sustainable development in September in New York City, and the Conference of the Parties to the Framework Convention on Climate Change in December in Paris. Apparently Pope Francis intends to influence these proceedings.

"Human ecology" is a topic discussed previously by Pope Benedict XVI in *Caritas in Veritate*, the encyclical he issued in 2009 and to which he referred in his message on the 2010 World Day of Peace.³ Human ecology is also the name given to interdisciplinary academic programs that probe the relationship of people and their ecological environment, while the

¹An encyclical is the most authoritative document issued by the head of the Roman Catholic Church to explain a doctrine and/or moral issue that is occurring. Encyclicals issued by various popes as far back as the first quarter of the 13th century can be accessed according to the name of the pope at <http://www.papalencyclicals.net/>. Usually addressed to bishops and archbishops generally or in specific countries, recent encyclicals have been oriented more inclusively. For example, Pope Francis addressed his first encyclical, *Lumen Fidei*, that he completed from a draft by his predecessor, Pope Benedict XVI, to "Bishops Priests and Deacons, Consecrated Persons and the Lay Faithful." Issued 29 June 2013, this encyclical can be accessed from the Vatican site at http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20130629_enciclica-lumen-fidei.html. To whom will he address this long-awaited encyclical?

²Cardinal Peter Turkson Delivers the Trócaire 2015 Lenten Lecture, Saint Patrick's Pontifical University, Maynooth," Irish Catholic Bishops Conference, 5 March 2015, <http://www.catholicbishops.ie/2015/03/05/cardinal-peter-turkson-delivers-trocaire-2015-lenten-lecture-saint-patricks-pontifical-university-maynooth/>.

³Pope Benedict XVI, "If You Want to Cultivate Peace, Protect Creation," Message on the 2010 World Day of Peace, Vatican City, http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/messages/peace/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20091208_xliii-world-day-peace.html. This message was the 20th anniversary of the first message by a pontiff dedicated to the moral responsibility for addressing the ecological crisis--Pope John Paul II, "Peace with God the Creator, Peace with All of Creation," Message on the World Day of Peace, Vatican City, 1990, http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/peace/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_19891208_xxiii-world-day-for-peace.html.

academic journal Human Ecology highlights scholarly research. Because popes usually point to and build upon their predecessors when writing encyclicals, Pope Francis will probably explore the human-ecology relationship in his forthcoming encyclical in response to problematic signs of our time. He may surprise us with a unique integrated approach, but we can anticipate key points he will make and actions he will urge. And, we can wonder how influential his encyclical may be on decisions to be made in Addis Ababa, New York City, and Paris.

Following are prominent points Pope Francis has already expressed and may explore in his forthcoming encyclical:

1) Creation is a gift from God intended for everyone who should show gratitude by respecting, protecting, caring for, and using this good and wondrous gift to benefit all people.

For Pope Francis, creation--Earth with its many diverse species and systems--is God's gift intended for all people. Creation is not a property to "rule over" or to be used by "only a few."⁴ Creation is for all people to use to their mutual benefit. Furthermore, all should be "protectors of God's gifts"⁵ as "a way of saying thank you to God." The faithful should develop proper attitudes toward creation that demonstrate valuing its goodness and appreciating its beauty. All should show gratitude to God for this "priceless gift."⁶

From the beginning of his papacy, Pope Francis has underscored the need for the faithful and all people of good will to care for and protect God's creation. This exhortation was clear in his homily the day he officially became the 267th pontiff of the Roman Catholic Church:

Please, I would like to ask all those who have positions of responsibility in economic, political and social life, and all men and women of goodwill: let us be "protectors" of creation, protectors of God's plan inscribed in nature, protectors of one another and of the environment.⁷

The day of his inauguration was the feast of St. Joseph, and the new pontiff pointed to St.

⁴Pope Francis, "If We Destroy Creation, It Will Destroy Us," General Audience, Vatican Radio, 21 May 2014, <http://www.news.va/en/news/pope-at-audience-if-we-destroy-creation-it-will-de>.

⁵"Homily of Pope Francis," Inaugural Mass, Imposition of the Pallium, and Bestowal of the Fisherman's Ring for the Beginning of the Petrine Ministry of the Bishop of Rome, Saint Peter's Square, Vatican City, 19 March 2013, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2013/documents/papa-francesco_20130319_omelia-inizio-pontificato.html.

⁶Pope Francis, "If we destroy Creation, it will destroy us."

⁷"Homily of Pope Francis," Inaugural Mass.

Joseph's protection of Mary and Jesus as an exemplar not only for Christians but for "everyone" to be protectors of God's creation. That is the "human vocation," according to Pope Francis, and he explained what being a protector of God's creation means:

It means protecting all creation, the beauty of the created world, as the Book of Genesis tells us and as Saint Francis of Assisi showed us. It means respecting each of God's creatures and respecting the environment in which we live.⁸

"In the end," the new pope added, "everything has been entrusted to our protection, and all of us are responsible for it."⁹ There is dignity in "responsibly cultivating the goods of creation" when "nurturing and protecting...and caring for it." In this way, he continued, we "share in the work of creation."¹⁰

He has appealed to young people in the Philippines to accept their vocation "to show concern for the environment," to be "responsible citizens," and "to make the earth a beautiful garden for the human family. When we destroy our forests, ravage our soil and pollute our seas, we betray that noble calling."¹¹ He continued by pointing to climate change, which the multi-island nation "more than many others, is likely to be seriously affected."¹²

The pope's descriptions of how St. Joseph protected Mary and Jesus suggest virtuous characteristics of protectors of God's creation--discretion, humility, fidelity, compassion, attentive, aware, realistic, open, and loving.¹³ These characteristics have significance for how all

⁸Ibid.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰General Audience, Saint Peter's Square, 1 May 2013, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2013/documents/papa-francesco_20130501_udienza-generale.html.

¹¹Daniel Politi, "Pope: Failing to Care for Environment is a Betrayal of God," 18 January 2015, http://www.slate.com/blogs/the_slatest/2015/01/18/pope_francis_failing_to_care_for_environment_is_a_betrayal_of_god.html.

¹²NG, "The Pope Is Calling For Action On Climate Change," Young Christian Workers, GMA News, 21 January 2015, <http://www.gmanetwork.com/news/popefrancis/story/409710/pope-francis-to-philipino-youth-make-the-earth-a-beautiful-garden>.

¹³In his inaugural homily cited above, the pope identified characteristics of St. Joseph: acting "discreetly, humbly and silently" with "an unfailing presence and utter fidelity," "constantly attentive to God, open to the signs of God's presence and receptive to God's plans, and not simply to his own," "at every moment with loving care...in good times and bad," "sensitive to the persons entrusted to his safekeeping," looking at things realistically "in touch with his surroundings" in order to "make truly wise decisions," "great tenderness" that signifies "a capacity for concern, for compassion, for genuine openness to others, for love."

people should be addressing ecological problems individually and collectively. Pope Francis has demonstrated these characteristics not only as the head of the Roman Catholic Church but also as a Jesuit and Archbishop of Buenos Aires, and his virtuous living has been publicized widely by the media.

2) Creation “speaks” of God and God’s love for all creatures, so faith-filled people should be open to and avoid thwarting the visible creation’s revelations.

Pope Francis follows the tradition of St. Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Society of Jesus to which the pope belongs, urging the faithful to be open to the presence of God in the world and to seek a God-centered life that is oriented toward eternal happiness with God. Pope Francis also follows a long theological tradition that the world tells us about God--a characteristic that theologians refer to as “the sacramentality of creation” and others “the book of nature” to convey their belief that the visible world discloses attributes of the invisible God. He has urged the faithful to wonder about creation and to use their intellectual ability to study “the reality that surrounds us” and “the laws that govern nature and the universe.” He has lamented the loss of this “attitude of wonder, contemplation, [and] listening to creation,” thereby moving away from God and no longer reading “God’s signs.” Thus, they fail “to grasp...the greatness and love of God” and God’s “profound relationship with every creature.”¹⁴

For the pope, the natural environment is also instructive of how Christians should function. There is a “grammar” inscribed in nature that Christians should acknowledge and follow by using resources wisely for the benefit of all while respecting “the beauty, finality and usefulness of every living being and its place in the ecosystem.”¹⁵

3) Exploiting God’s creation is sinful.

Reflecting on the Genesis 1 story of creation, Pope Francis has proscribed considering ourselves “masters of Creation” who exploit and destroy God’s gift of creation,¹⁶ “the sign of God’s love for us.” When destroying Creation, we are telling God: “I don’t like it!. This is not

¹⁴Pope Francis, “If we destroy Creation, it will destroy us.”

¹⁵Pope Francis, “Fraternity, The Foundation and Pathway to Peace,” Message of His Holiness Francis for the Celebration of the World Day of Peace,” 1 January 2014, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/peace/documents/papa-francesco_20131208_messaggio-xxviii-giornata-mondiale-pace-2014.html.

¹⁶Pope Francis, “If we destroy Creation, it will destroy us.”

good!" Thus, "this is sin!"¹⁷ This is "our sin," he proclaimed on another occasion, and described the exploitation of Earth as "one of the greatest challenges of our time."¹⁸ His invoking Earth's exploitation as sinful parallels Patriarch Bartholomew who proclaimed in 1997 the sinfulness of human actions that degrade and destroy God's creation.¹⁹

The pope has pointed to several examples of the exploitation of Earth, including an industrial development in southern Italy and vast areas in South America where many forests have been cut, soya has been planted until the soil is exhausted of its nutrients, and the land "can no longer give life."²⁰ When enroute to the Philippines after visiting Sri Lanka, a reporter asked for his views on global climate change. He responded that "we have exploited nature too much" and attributed changes in the global climate "to a large extent" to "man that slaps nature's face continually." He continued:

We have taken somewhat possession of nature, of sister earth, of Mother Earth. I remember...what an old peasant once said to me: "God forgives always, we...forgive sometimes, nature never forgives." If you slap her on the face, she does so in turn.²¹

In his message on the 2014 World Day of Peace, he attributed the "arrogance of dominion, possession, manipulation and exploitation" of Earth to people driven by "greed."²²

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Philip Pulella, "Pope calls exploitation of nature a sin of our time" Reuters, July 5, 2014. Pope Francis was speaking at the University of Molise in Campobasso, an agricultural and industrial region in southern Italy. In his Easter message *Urbi et Orbi* (for the city and the world) on 31 March 2013, Pope Francis lamented the exploitation of Earth as "ubiquitous."
http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/urbi/documents/papa-francesco_20130331_urbi-et-orbi-pasqua.html.

¹⁹"Address of His Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew," Environmental Symposium, Santa Barbara Green Orthodox Church, Santa Barbara, California, November 8, 1997: "For humans to cause species to become extinct and to destroy the biological diversity of God's creation... for humans to degrade the integrity of Earth by causing changes in its climate, by stripping the Earth of its natural forests, or destroying its wetlands... for humans to injure other humans with disease... for humans to contaminate the Earth's waters, its land, its air, and its life, with poisonous substances... these are sins. In prayer, we ask for the forgiveness of sins committed both willingly and unwillingly. And it is certainly God's forgiveness, which we must ask, for causing harm to His Own Creation."
<http://www.acton.org/public-policy/environmental-stewardship/theology-e/orthodox-churches-statement-environment>.

²⁰Philip Pulella, "Pope calls exploitation of nature a sin of our time."

²¹"Text of Pope's Press Conference en Route to Manila," Echoes, 16 January 2015,
<http://www.thebostonpilot.com/Opinion/article.asp?ID=172914>.

²²Pope Francis, "Fraternity, The Foundation and Pathway to Peace."

They commit "crimes against human life and against creation," he exclaimed during a homily.²³ They are "personal sins" epitomized by failures of "respect towards God, towards our neighbour and towards the whole of creation."²⁴

We can anticipate hearing more from Pope Francis about the sins of ecological degradation, destruction, and exploitation. Perhaps he will point to the sinfulness of actions that relate to the foci of the three key international decision-making events this year and urge conversion to respecting, protecting, and caring for Earth in particular ways.

4) Poor and vulnerable people now and in the future require special concern when making decisions about ecological matters at all levels of governance.

Pope Francis has often expressed his deep concern for vulnerable people--children, the elderly, and the poor--who are most adversely affected by ecological abuse, exploitation of Earth, and over-consumption. There should be no doubt that he will underscore his concern for vulnerable people in his forthcoming encyclical, especially those whose ancestral lands are inundated with rising sea levels and are forced to migrate to other areas. He chose the name Francis because St. Francis of Assisi was "the man of poverty, the man of peace, the man who loves and protects creation."²⁵ The poor and vulnerable persist in his thinking and expressions of concern.

Papal precedents abound for connecting poor and vulnerable people with the degradation and exploitation of Earth. Whereas "preferential option for the poor" has been a constant principle in Catholic social teaching grounded in the prophets of the Hebrew Bible and the teachings and ministry of Jesus Christ, popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI linked the degradation of the environment with the poor and vulnerable now and into the future.²⁶ Pope

²³"Homily of Pope Francis," Celebration of Palm Sunday of the Passion of Our Lord, St. Peter's Square, XXVIII World Youth Day, Sunday, 24 March 2013, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2013/documents/papa-francesco_20130324_palme.html.

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵Nick Squires, "Pope Francis says he chose his name because he wants a 'Church of the poor, for the poor'," The Telegraph, 16 Mar 2013, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/the-pope/9934596/Pope-Francis-says-he-chose-his-name-because-he-wants-a-Church-of-the-poor-for-the-poor.html>.

²⁶The messages, statements, and encyclicals in which these popes linked the plight of the poor and vulnerable with ecological degradation are identified and discussed in my "Solidarity, Subsidiarity, and Preference for the Poor: Extending Catholic Social Teaching in Response to the Climate Crisis," *Confronting the Climate Crisis: Catholic Theological Perspectives*, 389-425 (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2011).

Francis was firm about their interconnection in his first homily as pope. Linking protection of God's creation and the poor, he urged protecting "especially children, the elderly, those in need, who are often the last we think about."²⁷ His interrelated concern for the poor and for God's creation was clear in his first message on the World Day of Peace in 2014 when he worried about children who suffer from hunger while food goes to waste in "the throwaway culture" in many parts of the world.²⁸ His concern extended to future generations who fall prey to people who fail to preserve, respect, and consider nature as "a gracious gift" that should be and "set at the service of our brothers and sisters, including future generations."²⁹ We can expect him to identify and explore in his forthcoming encyclical specific threats to poor and vulnerable people now and in the future, and to urge our special concern for them in all aspects of decision-making from personal to international levels.

5) The faithful should work in solidarity with others for justice.

Jesuits are known for their commitment to justice for all, and Pope Francis' commitment is clear. He has appealed to people who possess greater wealth, hold government positions, and work for social justice to "never tire of working for a more just world, marked by greater solidarity!"³⁰ "No one can remain insensitive to the inequalities that persist in the world," he exclaimed. He has criticized the "culture of selfishness and individualism that often prevails in our society," emphasizing twice that this culture does not lead "to a more habitable world." Only "the culture of solidarity" in which we see others "not as rivals or statistics, but brothers and sisters" can lead to a habitable world.³¹

Solidarity is a key principle of Catholic social teaching. This principle is grounded in the

²⁷Homily of Pope Francis, "Inaugural Mass.

²⁸Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to the Members of the Diplomatic Corps Accredited to the Holy See," 13 January 2014, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/january/documents/papa-francesco_20140113_corpo-diplomatico.html.

²⁹Pope Francis, "Fraternity, The Foundation and Pathway to Peace."

³⁰Address of Pope Francis, "Apostolic Journey to Rio De Janeiro on the Occasion of the Xxviii World Youth Day, Visit to the Community of Varginha (Manguinhos), Rio de Janeiro, 25 July 2013, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/july/documents/papa-francesco_20130725_gmg-comunita-varginha.html.

³¹Ibid.

belief that all people possess an inherent dignity, are intimately related to one another, and should strive together for their mutual good. Popes and bishops have called people to solidarity for addressing injustices occurring during their times.³² Pope Benedict XVI emphasized God's love as a stimulus to the faithful to demonstrate their relatedness to all people as one family in search of their material and spiritual common good.³³ Pope Francis has called people to work together for peace, helping displaced people in Iraq and Nigeria, respecting gays, and ridding the world of nuclear weapons. In his forthcoming encyclical, we can expect more calls for solidarity at various levels of governance to assure the future flourishing of the entire community of Earth with its many people, species, and systems.

6) Collaborative action is morally imperative at the international level to minimize the threats of predicted changes in the global climate that are attributable to human activities.

The pope's concern for present and future generations is exemplified in his statements about climate change. In his message to the President of the Conference of the Parties (COP 20) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change held in Peru last year, he exhorted the nations to accept their "moral responsibility" to collaborate in enacting a climate change agreement:

The effective struggle against global warming will only be possible with a responsible collective answer, that goes beyond particular interests and behavior and is developed free of political and economic pressures ... On climate change, there is a clear, definitive and ineluctable ethical imperative to act ... The establishment of an international climate change treaty is a grave ethical and moral responsibility.³⁴

Underscoring the importance of the pope's exhortation, this quotation was included in the

³²For an historical overview of the use and application of the principle of solidarity by popes, see "Solidarity, Subsidiarity, and Preference for the Poor" in *Confronting the Climate Crisis: Catholic Theological Perspectives*, 389-425 (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2011).

³³Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas est*, Encyclical Letter, 25 December 2005, http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20051225_deus-caritas-est.html

³⁴"Message of Pope Francis to the President of COP 20 under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)," 11 December 2014, <http://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2015/03/13/0185/00412.html>.

statement by H.E. Silvano M. Tomasi, the Permanent Observer of the Holy See³⁵ to the United Nations less than three months later.³⁶

In his encyclical, Pope Francis will most likely emphasize human activities that are forcing changes on the global climate, adversely affecting vulnerable people today, and threatening the well-being of future people and the entire community of Earth. He has mentioned climate change in interviews, homilies, and statements. However, if his forthcoming encyclical follows the pattern of his first encyclical, *Lumen Fidei*,³⁷ we can expect him to explore the climate crisis systematically and in greater depth than he has to date.

7) Addressing the ecological signs of this time requires openness to scientific facts in order to make informed decisions about acting.

The humble but realistic pope has confessed that problems on which he has acted required that he first become better informed. He said he has been reading a great deal when preparing to write his forthcoming encyclical, and he expressed his gratitude for the many voices that speak to these and other problems because "man has gone too far" in exploiting Earth. He values knowledge and the human capacity to seek to know. Jesuits follow the founder of their Society, St. Ignatius of Loyola, in a process that requires seeing (openness to knowing about an issue), judging (deciding how best to respond), and acting (implementing the best solution at that time).³⁸ Pope Francis has already demonstrated this process during the two years of his pontificate, and we can expect in his encyclical a full exposition of key examples of ongoing ecological degradation, exploitation, and threats to the biosphere with emphasis on climate change. Of course, he is not speaking as a scientist, though he has had training in chemistry, nor will he pose himself as an expert on ecology or climate science. There is no

³⁵"Holy See" is taken from the Latin *Sancta Sedes* (Holy Chair) to designate the residence of the supreme pastor of the Catholic Church and the various authorities who constitute its central administration. See "Holy See" in *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: Robert Appleton Company), <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/07424b.htm>.

³⁶H.E. Silvano M. Tomasi, "Statement by the Permanent Observer of the Holy See to the United Nations and Other International Organizations," 28th Session of the Human Rights Council on Human Rights & Climate Change, 13 March 2015, <http://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2015/03/13/0185/00412.html>.

³⁷Pope Francis, *Lumen Fidei*.

³⁸An example of this process is *Healing a Broken World* in which many Jesuits report specific cases of ecological degradation and destruction that they have observed within the six "conferences" of the Society of Jesus, judged morally unacceptable, and acted in various ways to try to transform. Prepared by The Task Force on Ecology of the Society of Jesus and published in the 2011-12 issue of *Promotio Iustitiae*, this impressive document is accessible at <http://www.sjweb.info/documents/sjs/pjnew/PJ106ENG.pdf>.

hubris in Pope Francis--the epitome of humility, simplicity, joyfulness, and love.³⁹ However, I suspect his encyclical will reflect his having grasped sufficient knowledge of the real and predicted ecological signs of our time to provide wise direction for how the Catholic faithful and all people of good will should act now for the common good of the Earth community--its flourishing.

When anticipating the pope's encyclical, we can wonder if it will influence decision-making at personal to international levels. Surveys underscore Pope Francis' popularity in the United States among Catholics, other Christians, and the general public,⁴⁰ so his encyclical may influence individuals and other decision-makers at local to national levels. Response statements by bishops may be helpful, especially if they particularize the pope's encyclical for their locales in order to reach the faithful in their parishes and schools. Catholic colleges and universities can advance attention to the encyclical by providing symposia for students, faculty, and staff, by encouraging its study in pertinent classes, and by welcoming representatives of local colleges and universities to explore the encyclical. Catholic advocacy groups in the United States are already active under the leadership of the Catholic Climate Covenant with plans to publicize the pope's message, organize Catholics to discuss its significance, and initiate action at various levels of governance. If Catholic organizations collaborate with other interfaith groups sharing their concerns, Pope Francis' encyclical may be more influential in decisions to be made by the United States. Parallel efforts within countries around the world may yield decisions in Addis Ababa, New York City, and Paris that aim to assure the flourishing of Earth--God's beloved creation.

Milwaukee, Wisconsin
11 April 2015

³⁹See "Pope Francis Calls for Solidarity and Dialogue," *America*, 12-19 August 2013, where examples of his "characteristic humility, simplicity, and joyful demeanor" are observed; also accessible at <http://americamagazine.org/issue/pope-francis-calls-solidarity-and-dialogue>.

⁴⁰For example, see "In U.S., Pope's Popularity Continues to Grow," Pew Research Center, 5 March 2015, http://www.pewforum.org/2015/03/05/in-u-s-popes-popularity-continues-to-grow/?utm_source=Pew+Research+Center&utm_campaign=06df015817-3_5_2015&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_3e953b9b70-06df015817-399590189; and, Jason Kinney, "Pope Francis' Popularity Remains High Nationally," St. Leo University Polling Institute, 27 March 2015, <http://polls.saintleo.edu/pope-francis-popularity-remains-high-nationally>.