

The Pope's Encyclical, Part 1: The Pope and the Planet

On September 24, 2015 as part of his first-ever visit to the U.S., Pope Francis visited Washington DC and spoke before a joint Congress, calling on the U.S. to take “courageous actions” to address climate change.

[The Earth] now cries out to us because of the harm we have inflicted on her by our irresponsible use and abuse of the goods with which God has endowed her.

—Pope Francis

Last year I wrote a series of columns about the possible emergence of a worldwide consensus that humanity's primary, urgent task is to save the biosphere from destruction by humans.

I proposed that the consensus could emerge if the right conditions were met:



photo by Valerie Robertson

Students from Warren Wilson College in Asheville, NC worked with Beyond Extreme Energy to create this 55-foot “United States of Fracking” banner, which they brought to the Nation's Capital to display on the National Mall during Pope Francis' talk before Congress. They joined thousands of people—representatives of local to national environmental groups, and citizens of all ages and backgrounds—to hear the address to Congress, which was displayed on large screens on the Mall, to allow thousands to watch it together.

The entire banner can be seen on the beyondextremeenergy.org website, and is currently on a 10,000-mile tour of the country.

if a broad-based, diverse movement grew around the core idea of living in harmony with nature and then a spark—an environmental event, an election, even the publication of a book—set that movement ablaze, capturing the human imagination and ultimately steering policy.

The job of people who envision a healthy planet, I said, is to keep building the environmental movement incrementally, never losing faith in the emergence of the consensus or the inevitability of the spark.

Little did I imagine then that, within a few short months, a major advance in the movement's growth, possibly the spark that will ensure its predominance, would come from the head of the Catholic Church, Pope Francis. But in his June 18 “encyclical”—essentially a papal policy statement to which all of the world's 1.2 billion Catholics nominally adhere—the Pope addressed the causes and effects of the planet's environmental crisis in no uncertain terms.

Opening with statements such as “The earth, our home, is beginning to look more and more like an immense pile of

filth,” the lengthy encyclical identifies the causes of the planet's malaise as the megatrends that drive contemporary commerce and development: overconsumption and its excessive extraction of resources; and the concentration of wealth in the hands of those who exploit the environment and people while obfuscating the problems they create and inequalities between nations and peoples.

Thus it calls for a new vision of the

world order based on spiritual, rather than merely economic, values.

Fundamental to the Pope's vision is the relationship between God, the earth He created, and man's relationship to that earth. Here, by redefining a standard interpretation of the Bible's first book, Genesis, he offers one of his most profound challenges to the philosophical underpinnings of our modern economic order.

Genesis states that God gave humans “dominion” over the earth and its creatures. This has been interpreted to mean that humans are separate from and placed above the rest of God's creation and have a right, in the Pope's words, to the “unbridled exploitation of nature.” However, as Francis states directly, “This is not a correct interpretation of the Bible as understood by the Church.”

Taken in the context of whole book of Genesis, “dominion” is seen not to be a gratuitous gift but a charge, a command to “till and keep” the garden of the earth. According to the Pope, and therefore the Church, “‘Tilling’ refers to cultivating, plowing or working while ‘keeping’ means caring, protecting, overseeing and preserving.”

This is how the 15 percent of the world's population that self-identifies as Catholic—and, in my opinion, the rest of us—should understand “dominion.” We have been given the privilege of guardianship over God's, or, if you prefer, Nature's beautiful domain. To merit the honor, we must perform commendably.

A scientist by training, the Pope sides with science on the human causes and potentially disastrous results of climate change. But although this one aspect of his encyclical made the biggest splash in the media, the document is a more far-reaching, fundamental challenge to any rationalization that attempts to justify the exploitation of nature and humans. Indeed, the Pope exposes the inescapable link between the degradation of the earth and its people, especially the poor, as we'll learn next at our ecological house.

© Philip S. Wenz, 2015

The Pope's Encyclical, Part 2: The Poor, the Planet, and the Pope

"... a true ecological approach always becomes a social approach; it must integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment, so as to hear both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor."

—Pope Francis

It was interesting for me to observe myself struggling to write this column, which intends to tie environmentalism to morality.

Sure, it's wrong to trash the planet and in the process to cause others, including our own heirs, to suffer the consequences of our heedless behavior. But long ago I concluded that moralizing is not persuasive. Instead of telling my readers that they should change their behavior—reduce excessive consumption, for example—because they owed at least that much to others, I decided to explain the practical effects that degrading our environment could have on them.

For example, I might say "Climate migrants could arrive in your county, straining public services and competing for scarce jobs." Or, "A megadrought might have you scrambling to feed your family."

Thinking that playing the morality card might be counterproductive, and frequently questioning my own ethical certainties, I've carefully avoided confronting my readers (and myself) with a fundamental question: Am I my brother's keeper?

However, as the head of the world's largest unified religious organization, Pope Francis suffers from no such misgivings. Moral leadership is part of his job description.

You can find the text of Pope Francis' encyclical letter on the environment and climate change, at <https://laudatosi.com/watch>.

Taking his mandate seriously and treading the path followed by prophets, philosophers and pontiffs for millennia, Francis has addressed the immorality of allowing a vast gulf to separate the world's wealthy from its poor; of the exploitation of the have-nots by the haves. But, in tune with our modern condition, and to the delight of most environmentalists, he has taken a new turn on that path by addressing the links between environmental and human degradation.

In his recently issued "encyclical," a document of moral instruction for the world's 1.2 billion Catholics, the Pope states, "the human environment and the natural environment deteriorate together; we cannot adequately combat environmental degradation unless we attend to causes related to human and social degradation."

He goes on to give examples of how people in environmentally degraded areas often must choose between starving and migrating, giving up their way of life in the hope, often illusory, of reaching a safe harbor. Additionally, he ties environmental degradation to localized resource wars, especially wars fought over the increasingly scarce supplies of potable water.

Addressing the "ecological debt" owed by the global north to the south—the overuse of resources and overconsumption of goods by developed countries—he states that "meeting vital needs" of the largely impoverished south is "inhibited by a system of commercial relationships and ownership which is structurally perverse." To remedy this iniquity, he states that "The developed countries ought to help pay this debt by significantly limiting their consumption of non-renewable energy and by assisting poorer countries to support policies and programmes of sustainable development."

"...perverse..." "...ought to..." This is the language of morality, of eschewing the wrong path and doing the right thing not only to reap the benefits of enlightened self-interest, but because we owe it to our fellow humans and creatures.

But do we?

What is owed to whom? There are those who make the social Darwinism argument—that only the strong should survive—but somehow societies adhering to that principle quickly come unglued. Because our current global society is quickly coming unglued, perhaps its time to consider the dimensions of the environmental/social crisis from an ethical perspective.

No matter what your religious predictions are, you might want to read the Pope's encyclical (available online) and take him up on his invitation to all citizens of the planet, not just his Catholic flock, to join a conversation about morality in our ecological house.

© Philip S. Wenz, 2015

*Philip S. (Skip) Wenz is a freelance writer specializing in ecological design issues. He was a general contractor, residential designer, teacher and writer in the San Francisco Bay Area. In the early 1990s he founded, and for ten years directed, the Ecological Design Program at the San Francisco Institute of Architecture. He also teaches "Creating Your Ecological House," at Berkeley's Building Education Center and wrote the book, *Adding to a House* (Taunton Press, 1995).*

Skip now lives with his wife, Pam, in Corvallis, Oregon. He may be reached by email through his website: www.your-ecological-house.com.



photo by Valerie Robertson

Some of the many signs the enthusiastic crowd carried as they showed support of Pope Francis' speaking before Congress.