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Encyclical on environment stimulates hope among academics and activists

by Thomas Reese

Faith and Justice

Francis: The Environment Encyclical

The encyclical on the environment from Pope Francis is stimulating a great deal of discussion and hope in academia and the environmental movement. The encyclical is expected in June or July.

The pope wants to make the environment one of the signature issues of his papacy. As he explained to reporters three days after his election, one of the reasons he took the name Francis was because St. Francis of Assisi is "the man who loves and protects creation." He went on to say, "These days we do not have a very good relationship with creation, do we?"

Conservationists are hoping that the encyclical's attitude toward animals, especially wildlife, will reflect the spirit of St. Francis of Assisi, according to Lonnie Ellis, associate director of Catholic Climate Covenant.

The encyclical is widely expected to give support to those who attribute climate change to human activity since the pope has already said he accepts this scientific conclusion. Although popes are clearly not infallible when it comes to science, Francis is the first pope to have a modern scientific training: He was educated as a chemist and worked as one in Argentina before he entered the seminary.

Christiana Peppard of Fordham University said she hopes the encyclical will affirm that "contemporary science is a marvelous way of knowing the world and that it represents a collective, collaborative way of discerning important realities about the Earth that we share, and thus that there is zero justification for skepticism of climate change among Catholics."

"The climate crisis is an issue of unparalleled urgency," says Dan DiLeo of the Catholic Climate Covenant. "Scientists generally agree that there is a closing window of opportunity within which to avoid runaway and largely irreversible human-forced climate change."

In order to set the stage for the encyclical and to respond to critics who say the pope should not dabble in science, the Vatican announced plans for a one-day conference at the Vatican on climate change on April 28.

But the encyclical will, of course, need to be about more than science.

"Having worked for a number of years on global climate change concerns," reported Immaculate Heart of Mary Sr. Nancy Sylvester, "it is clear that data alone will not convert people. We need to 'feel' differently about Earth. Doing what Pope Francis does so well, I'd like to see him to frame the issue in a pastoral way."

This pastoral approach would speak "to a new relationship to Earth that sees all beings as partners and interconnected," she continued. "To stress not stewardship but our responsibility with all of life to work together for not only our survival, but our flourishing as a planetary community. To bring new metaphors and symbols to how we think and feel about who we are on this our Earth home."

But the encyclical also needs a theological foundation.

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Walter Grazer said he hopes the pope "will place our concern for the environment within the theological framework of the Trinity, Genesis, and the prophetic tradition." Grazer, a consultant on religion and environment, is a former manager of the Environmental Justice Program at the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

Many Catholics wonder why the church is getting into this issue, and it would be helpful for them to know that our ecological concern flows from our theology. Catholics see "the Trinity as relational and social," Grazer said, and "all of creation and life reflects this relational and social notion -- so all creatures are intimately linked and share kinship."

"People need to see that the church's concern about ecology and the environment is not about 'greening the church and Catholic community,' " Grazer said. "Our concern is coming out of who we are and should be."

But, he said, "while Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI strongly called for a respect for the integrity of nature, it was always qualified by references of nature ultimately in service to humans."

"I hope the encyclical will stress that nature and the rest of creation has an integrity of its own as a creation of God," he said. "This does not mean a diminishment of the unique and special place of humans in creation or a hands-off approach, but rather a call for an even greater respect and intimacy with nature and a less instrumental notion. We should be able to both honor the integrity of the rest of creation while still acknowledging that humans are made to reflect the Creator most perfectly and that as part of nature we can utilize nature but not in a rapacious way."

This is a major concern of Dan Scheid of Duquesne University. "The one thing I would most like to see is

for Francis to describe a vision of the common good that is non-anthropocentric and that sees caring for the environment not only as a concern for the poor and for future generations but also because human flourishing is only possible as part of a flourishing planet and cosmos," he said. "I would like to see 'human ecology' and 'natural ecology' unified back into what many religious orders describe as a concern for the 'Integrity of Creation.' "

Scheid would like the encyclical "to move beyond dominion and stewardship models and closer to 'partnership' models of ecological theology that celebrate the commonalities between humans and nonhumans." And "since mercy has been a prominent theme of his, I would love it if he expressed the call to be merciful to the Earth and to nonhumans."

Margaret Farley of Yale University agreed that the encyclical needs to offer a new perspective on the relationship between humans and nature. "From relations primarily of utility, domination, exploitation, nature-human relations may instead be based on the intrinsic value inherent in each, and in all non-living, living, non-human, and human beings," she said. "The relationship is one of interdependence, participation and, for humans, the possibility of conscious gratitude and awe."

What is said about the environment also needs to be connected to Catholic social teaching about the common good, solidarity, and concern for the poor. Farley notes that this teaching has helped people recognize that "ethical claims for justice and care" apply "not only in one's own group but in relation to all peoples, including future generations."

Gaudium et Spes of the Second Vatican Council is a good place to start for the new encyclical, said Dolores L. Christie of John Carroll University. "There is good stuff in the tradition, but it needs to be applied explicitly to critical contemporary issues. A ravaged earth is not sustainable."

"Ecological degradation compromises the Catholic commitment to protect and defend human life and dignity," argues DiLeo, "especially of the poor and vulnerable."

"An ethical-theological treatment of shared, vital environmental goods, like fresh water," would be helpful, Peppard said. It should articulate "responsibility across geographic space and chronology (including duties to future generations)."

Ron Pagnucco of the College of St. Benedict and St. John's University "would like to see Francis continue to use the concept of 'solidarity' in the encyclical, discussing what global solidarity means in regards to the environment."

"Just as Catholic social doctrine teaches that no person exists without society," said Vince Miller of the University of Dayton, "we need to also learn that our species does not exist without the rest of creation."

"How climate change and related environmental issues connect with other important concerns, including war and peace, economics, and health care," needs to be articulated in the encyclical, according to Tobias Winright of St. Louis University.

"It is very important to discuss the environment, conflict and peace," Pagnucco agreed, since environmental degradation is a "threat multiplier."

The relationship between the environment and the economy is especially important.

"Environmentalists are looking to the pope for continued linkages to poverty and impact of degradation on the poor," said Catholic Climate Covenant's Ellis. Jesuit Fr. James Keenan of Boston College would

also "like to see the sustainability issues related to climate change woven into issues related to economic inequality."

Environmental problems are also connected to racism, said Alex Mikulich of Loyola University New Orleans. And "it would be important to consider the connection between the desire to dominate the earth/cosmos and domination of women," according to M. Shawn Copeland of Boston College.

One of the reasons environmentalists are embracing religion is because it is one of the few things that can motivate people to sacrifice their own self-interest for the sake of others.

David Cloutier of Mount St. Mary's University calls for a "forthright confrontation with so-called lifestyle choices."

"It's all the choices we make that cause the per capita carbon footprint of the average American to be roughly twice that of most European countries, and that cause the insanity of California lawns and water-thirsty agriculture," he said. "I'm all for better laws and structures, but until we stop expecting strawberries in February, spacious living quarters, and large SUVs, I'm not sure how those structures change."

Likewise, Scheid said he hopes for "a critique of consumerism and a 'scrap culture' or 'throwaway culture' that uses and then discards as trash people, especially the poor, created goods, and the Earth as a whole. I hope he ties the preferential option for the poor and solidarity with ecological concerns."

Grazer said he hopes the pope "will call upon the larger and more wealthy nations to lead and make the 'sacrifices' needed to make urgent progress regarding climate change, and in particular, helping the most vulnerable people and nations mitigate and adapt to climate change." The pope "needs to call for much greater leadership on the part of wealthier nations and also for sufficient changes in personal and corporate life style, moving away from consumerism," he said.

But Miller of Dayton University stressed that structural change, not just individual choices, is essential. "Our moral and Christian obligation is not simply to change our consumption as individuals, but to collectively build a culture/society/civilization that is sustainable," he said.

It requires "a broadening of moral responsibility to care for creation from individual choice to the larger, structural, policy responses that are required to address the environmental crises we face," he said. "Yes, greed is a problem, but environmental despoliation is cooked into the system we have built."

Peppard agreed that "market processes are not morally trustworthy guides to long-term flourishing of the physical bases on which all life depends" because the markets are oriented "towards short-term profit and economic growth without a recognition of natural capital as a substrate of those developments."

How people and governments respond to the encyclical will be critical. "The theology of the encyclical is important," said Marian Diaz of Loyola University Chicago, "but the implementation or the lack thereof matters more."

The encyclical is being prepared in advance of the Paris talks on climate change to be held from Nov. 30 to Dec. 11.

"It would be good for Pope Francis to set a higher standard and urge nations to be bolder in adopting a broader and more meaningful agreement," Grazer said. "It would be good if he called for full funding for the Green Climate Fund. That would help send a message that the poor of the world will not be left to

handle climate impacts on their own. They did not cause the problem, but they do end up paying the price."

Since few people read encyclicals, the teaching of "our vocation to serve and protect creation" needs to be tied to "the one practice that most of us regularly participate in: the Eucharist, which is the source and summit of Christian life in this world," Winright said.

Keenan said he hopes the pope will specifically "appeal to institutions, including Catholic ones, to look to their own internal practices and policies and to their investments to see whether they promote economic equity and environmental sustainability."

Lisa Cahill of Boston College and Peppard said they hope the pope encourages ecumenical and interreligious cooperation and learning on the environment.

And since "environmental issues, like politics in general, is intensely local," John Langan of Georgetown University said after the encyclical is issued, "business leaders [should] be positively involved in discussions of the issues."

"This is one way of preventing the dismissal of environmental proposals," he said. The lack of such local discussions, he said, "limited the effectiveness of Economic Justice for All," the 1986 pastoral letter issued by the USCCB.

The encyclical has already triggered "reflection and conversation about our natural world and climate change among Americans of many faiths," said Jeremy Symons, senior director for climate policy at the Environmental Defense Fund. "It's a welcome conversation, because protecting the natural world and caring for our children's future are matters that touch all parts of our lives."

When it comes out, the encyclical "will elevate the church's powerful voice on the moral imperative of advancing justice, defending human dignity and protecting the poor and the most vulnerable among us," said Edwin Chen of the Natural Resources Defense Council. "It is our duty to do all we can to secure a peaceful and safe planet for this and all future generations. We expect his message will resonate in every corner of the world."

We will have to wait and see if the encyclical fulfills the expectations of academics and activists. They are eagerly waiting for it and will have lots to say about it.

[Jesuit Fr. Thomas Reese is a senior analyst for *NCR* and author of *Inside the Vatican: The Politics and Organization of the Catholic Church*. His email address is treesesj@ncronline.org. Follow him on Twitter: @ThomasReeseSJ.]

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