

# Pope Francis' Appeal for the Future

Pope Francis is pleading for world leaders to defend the rights of mankind and the future of nature against the power of corporations and the pillage of "free market" dogma, a warning about the planet's survival that vested political and media interests reject out of hand, writes Daniel C. Maguire.

By Daniel C. Maguire

The Right has no applause for Pope Francis's powerful encyclical *Laudato Si* (See, for example, David Brooks's June 23 [column](#)) What the pope sees and his conservative critics do not is that the world economy is in crash mode, an accelerating train hurtling down the track and ignoring all the signs that say **Bridge Out Ahead**.

The instinct for self-preservation is strong: but in the human species, it seems, not strong enough. Like any good preacher, Francis tries to stir hope as he calls for radical reforms and the reforms he calls for *are* radical but the shrill of despair keeps peeking out at the brim of his Jeremiad.

At no point in this eloquent *cri de coeur* is the pope playing Pollyanna, but at times he seems close to Cassandra who was blessed with the knowledge of the future but cursed with the realization that no one will believe her.

The oceans with their coral treasures and rich animal life are dying of acidity and poison. The pope asks: "Who turned the wonder-world of the seas into underwater cemeteries bereft of color and life?" Arctic ice is in a death spiral and ice sheets are melting in Greenland as well as in the Himalayan-Tibetan glacier that provides water to hundreds of millions. The portents are nightmarish.

The governments of low-lying nations states like Tuvalu and Maldives have plans in place to remove their entire populations. To where? Topsoil and rainforests are perishing as we turn up the heat. We have double-based the planet with CO2 and we are near to passing or have passed some tipping points in the "big melt" where human efforts to stay catastrophic results will avail nothing. Agricultural scientists calculate that for every degree Celsius that temperature rises, wheat yields drop 10 percent in the earth's hotter midriff.

Clive Ponting notes grimly: "About 40 million people die every year from hunger and related diseases, equivalent to 300 Jumbo jet crashes every day, with half of the passengers being children."

The Pope sees all this and cries **crisis!** The neoliberals, drunk on our 300 years

of nature-rape, insist we are doing fine. Minor tinkering like carbon credits will do all that we need but the overall system is fine, indeed sacrosanct. Beyond that, conservative critics complain that Francis has no practical alternative vision to the status quo he criticizes. Nonsense! He has an alternative vision replete with practical details that the Right finds abhorrent.

### **The Alternative Vision**

The two dirtiest words in the neoliberal lexicon are *redistribution* and *regulation* and the pope repeatedly calls for both. Indeed he calls for *regulation* on a “global” scale by a supranational authority, “a true world political authority,” a concept tribal nationalism cannot abide.

He addresses governments and those gargantuan corporations that roam the planet like rogue behemoths; their legitimacy depends on their commitment to social and distributive justice. He mocks the self-serving naivete that says “the problems of global hunger and poverty will be resolved simply by market growth.” He scores the “numbing of conscience and tendentious analyses” that ignore the “excluded” poor, the expendables, “the majority of the planet’s population, billions of people.”

As Eduardo Galeano says, the reigning economic system vomits out the poor. The nub of the Pope’s message is: the poor need nourishment and it is murder for greedy hyper-accumulators to deprive them of it.

### **Redefining Social Life**

Government, by definition is *the prime caretaker of the common good*. Francis redefines the “common good” to include the rest of nature, animals, and future generations. He *conscientizes* basic concepts like “development” and “progress” to encompass the well being of nature and future citizens of the earth. He forcefully redefines the most morally pregnant word in our vocabulary ***owning***.

There is no *absolute* ownership, he says; *owning* imports *owing*. There is a “social mortgage” on everything we own.

As Warren Buffet says, he could not have built his wealth in the Gobi desert. We *receive* from society more than we ever *contribute*. We owe back: *taxes are not evil* but are essential forms of social and distributive justice to repay part of that debt.

Francis condemns the speculative financial games played by the rich and the accumulation of “virtual wealth.” This casino economy is divorced from “the real economy.” It lacks contact with flesh and blood and soil.

As Nicholas Fagnoli says, it's not capitalism; it is "greedalism." And as Thomas Piketty has shown, this form of capitalist economy bleeds inequality. Pope Francis calls the dominant form of capitalism "structurally perverse."

Are all these the words of an innocent impractical idealist? Hardly. What the Pope offers is what Franklin Delano Roosevelt late in his life said we need badly: an Economic Bill of Rights. Such rights-talk has to get down to facts and the Pope does. Francis calls for "steady employment for everyone, no matter the limited interests of business and dubious economic reasoning."

As Economist Alice Rivlin says: "It does not seem, from an analytical point of view, that there is any magic number below which we cannot push unemployment. It is a question of the will and of choosing the right mix of politics." It is a question, the Pope says, of ethics.

The practical wisdom of this encyclical talks details: we need "small scale food production systems ... using a modest amount of land and producing less waste." We need to break the power of monopolistic seed providers, not mentioning Monsanto by name but referring to it and other "oligarchies."

People need to be free of noise, overcrowding, lack of safety, poor quality food. The right to clean water is a "human right," not a consumer item for those who can afford it. "Saving banks at any cost, making the public pay the price" is immoral as is the corporate love of socializing costs while privatizing profits.

None of the needed changes will occur without public pressure, including boycotts since purchasing is a moral act. A more attentive and passionate and less compromised press is needed to call constant attention to the ongoing wrecking of the earth. This Pope hits all of that and more.

### **Where the Pope Fails**

Pope Francis has a problem with women and it bedevils this encyclical. While citing the various groups who are exploited the Pope does not call special attention to the worldwide sexist exploitation of women and girls.

Moreover, he insists that "concern for the protection of nature is also incompatible with the justification of abortion." In so saying he insults the millions of women who end their pregnancies for reasons they perceive as serious. A blanket condemnation of all these choice by women is wrong and even violates Thomas Aquinas's insistence that "human actions are good or bad *according to the circumstances.*" This sorry part of the encyclical is a lamentable remnant of long-tenured woman-free Catholic ethics.

The Pope should realize that there is not a single topic he discusses in this otherwise marvelous encyclical that is not impacted by overpopulation. Every four and a half days a million people are added to our planet, most of those in the poor world. Yet, seemingly deaf to the limits of this planet, Francis says "demographic growth is fully compatible with an integral and shared development."

As biologist Harold Dorn says, no species can reproduce without limit: "There are two biological checks upon a rapid increase in numbers, a high mortality and a low fertility. Unlike other biological organisms [humans] can choose which of these check shall be applied but one of them must be." Otherwise, famine and disease will do it for us and have already begun to do so.

### **On the Art of Looking**

Pope Francis in this encyclical makes a point that is often missed. There is an inexorable link between aesthetics and ethics. He stresses that the disenchanted cannot save and serve this good earth. He repeatedly urges that we open our wizened hearts to the beauty of this blessed plot. A human spirit that is not alive to the splendor of life, to its poetry and its art, is ill fitted to do earth ethics.

Curious as it may seem, the Pope's stress on aesthetics recalled to me the witness of my son, already terminally ill, when he was around five years old. Danny was severely retarded by Hunter's Syndrome and would die at age ten. I took him one day to see the lovely lagune near our home which is also a kind of bird sanctuary.

I had passed this scene regularly on my way to Marquette University, thinking serious thought to be sure, but not really looking. When I first took Danny there, he took one look at the sparkling lagoon waters and the mallards and other water fowl bedecked in lovely colors. He grabbed my leg excitedly and shouted: "Daddy, look! Daddy look!!"

This little boy with blighted mind but exquisite affections was retarded but not blasphemous. He was stunned at the beauty of the scene, and he begged me to "look." In his eulogy, I said that that one word "look" was Danny's valedictory to the world, a world more retarded than he in the art of looking and relishing and rejoicing in the gift we have received on this privileged planet.

That too is the heart of the Pope's plaintive appeal. Policy without ecstasy will be barren and ineffectual.

**Daniel C. Maguire is a Professor of Moral Theology at Marquette University, a Catholic, Jesuit institution in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. He is author of *A Moral***

*Creed for All Christians* and *The Horrors We Bless: Rethinking the Just-War Legacy* [Fortress Press]). He can be reached at [daniel.maguire@marquette.edu](mailto:daniel.maguire@marquette.edu)

---