

Pope Francis

Encyclical on Climate Change & Inequality

On Care for
Our Common Home

Introduction by Naomi Oreskes

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Encyclical on Climate Change & Inequality

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Introduction

by Naomi Oreskes

Historians looking back often recognize turning points, but ordinary people living through them rarely do. Sometimes, however, a book catalyzes thought into action. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* did this, and so did *Silent Spring*: they called attention to facts that had long been known but upon which people had failed to act. Like those works, Pope Francis's *Encyclical* is a call to action that insists we embrace the moral dimensions of problems that have heretofore been viewed primarily as scientific, technological, and economic.

While it has been billed as an encyclical on the environment, the letter covers virtually every important topic in contemporary life. Climate change, deforestation, and the need for clean, safe drinking water are, of course, included here, as is population (and abortion), but also various problems of science and technology—including public transportation, urban

planning and architecture, social media, genetic modification of crops, embryonic stem cell research—and law, economy, and governance—including the problems of deregulated markets, corruption, and weak governance.

Two lines of thought particularly stand out. The first is an affirmation of our interconnectedness and mutual responsibility toward one another, as well as toward our common Earthly home. The second is a denunciation of the aspects of modern life that have led to our current predicament. The essence of the critique is that our situation is not an accident—it is the consequence of the way we think and act: we deny the moral dimensions of our decisions and conflate progress with activity. We cannot continue to think and act this way—to disregard both nature and justice—and expect to flourish. It is not only not moral, it is not even rational.

INTERCONNECTEDNESS AND THE COMMON GOOD

The wide-ranging character of the encyclical is consistent with its central, anti-reductionist argument, which is, quite simply, that everyone and everything is related because it is all part of Creation. In this, Pope Francis finds the fundamental basis for human dignity and for our obligation to care for one another, the planet, and the diverse creatures on it.

The early portion of the encyclical is heavy with biblical reference, reminding us that the idea of interconnectedness is not new and, perhaps, not discretionary. St. Francis, the twelfth-century founder of the Franciscan order, patron saint of animals and the environment, and, of course, the pope's

namesake, was renowned for his reverence for nature. "Whenever he would gaze at the sun, the moon or the smallest of animals, he [would] burst into song, drawing all other creatures into his praise. He communed with all creation . . . [and] felt called to care for all that exists."

Nor was Francis idiosyncratic. "The Psalms frequently exhort us," Pope Francis reminds us, "to praise God the Creator, 'who spread out the earth on the waters' (*Ps* 136:6)." Leviticus not only instructs us regarding the familiar weekly Sabbath, on which—like the Lord—we should rest, but also the seven-year sabbatical for the land "when sowing was forbidden and one reaped only what was necessary to live on and to feed one's household (*Lev* 25:1-4)," as well as the Jubilee, celebrated after seven weeks of years (i.e., seven x seven, or forty-nine, years) as a year of general forgiveness and "liberty throughout the land for all its inhabitants." These various instructions all remind us to respect "the rhythms inscribed in nature by the hand of the Creator."

While the pope is critical of instrumentalism (more on that later) and underscores the need "for openness to categories which transcend the language of mathematics and biology, and take us to the heart of what it is to be human," he also invokes a theme that has been common in the history of science: that nature is "a magnificent book in which God speaks to us and grants us a glimpse of his infinite beauty and goodness. 'Through the greatness and the beauty of creatures one comes to know by analogy their maker' (*Wis* 13:5); indeed, 'his eternal power and divinity have been made known through his works since the creation of the world' (*Rom* 1:20)." In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it was a commonplace among

naturalists that scientific investigations were a means to come closer to God—to know him through his work as well as his word. As Handel put it in his famous oratorio, “The heavens are telling the glory of god, the wonder of his work displays the firmament.”

The core of the argument is that *because* human dignity finds its roots in our common Creation, caring for our fellow citizen and caring for our environment *are the same thing*. It is not a question of people versus the environment and choosing which is more important. It is a question of abandoning the notion of “versus” altogether. Respect for creation and respect for human dignity are two aspects of the same idea.

Pope Francis unreservedly rejects the claim that man has the right to use nature as he wills because of the biblical instruction to “have dominion over nature.” He characterizes this as an “inadequate presentation of Christian anthropology [that] gave rise to a wrong understanding of the relationship between human beings and the world.” He continues: “Often, what was handed on was a Promethean vision of mastery over the world, which gave the impression that the protection of nature was something that only the faint-hearted cared about. Instead, our ‘dominion’ over the universe should be understood more properly in the sense of responsible stewardship.”

The pope unequivocally rejects the accusation that Western theology sanctions—and therefore is to *blame* for—environmental despoliation. Because this view is so widespread—both among Christians (who use it as justification for “putting people first” or “caring about people more”) and by non-Christians (in a critique of such attitudes)—the pope’s rebuttal is worth citing at length:

We are not God. The earth was here before us and it has been given to us. This allows us to respond to the charge that Judaeo-Christian thinking, on the basis of the Genesis account which grants man “dominion” over the earth (cf. *Gen* 1:28), has encouraged the unbridled exploitation of nature by painting him as domineering and destructive by nature. This is not a correct interpretation of the Bible as understood by the Church. Although it is true that we Christians have at times incorrectly interpreted the Scriptures, nowadays we must forcefully reject the notion that our being created in God’s image and given dominion over the earth justifies absolute domination over other creatures. The biblical texts . . . tell us to “till and keep” the garden of the world (cf. *Gen* 2:15). “Tilling” refers to cultivating, ploughing or working, while “keeping” means caring, protecting, overseeing and preserving. This implies a relationship of mutual responsibility between human beings and nature. Each community can take from the bounty of the earth whatever it needs for subsistence, but it also has the duty to protect the earth and to ensure its fruitfulness for coming generations.

In numerous passages supported with Biblical reference, the pope insists that Scripture offers no warrant for misuse or destruction of nature. In each case, he returns to the theme of interconnection, stressing that “human life is grounded in three fundamental and closely intertwined relationships: with God, with our neighbour and with the earth itself.” The latter is not just the physical Earth, but all the living creatures on it, as we

are reminded that the Sabbath is not only for us, but also so "that your ox and your donkey may have rest" (*Ex* 23:12). Clearly "the Bible has no place for a tyrannical anthropocentrism unconcerned for other creatures."

To the extent that God has given man a special place, it is the place of "cooperator with God in the work of creation." But that is a responsibility as much as a right, "a splendid universal communion" that entails an obligation of care: "We do not understand our superiority as a reason for personal glory or irresponsible dominion, but rather as a different capacity which, in its turn, entails a serious responsibility stemming from our faith."

If this encyclical were only intended to reach the faithful, the pope might have ended his discussion there. But his intent to reach further becomes clear in the second part of his argument: that current attitudes and behaviors are not only wrong in a moral sense, they are also wrong in a practical sense. They have not *worked*. They have given us a world that is broken and unjust: where the wealthy worry about obesity while the extreme poor have next to nothing, and the whole planet (in what is destined to be the most quoted phrase of the letter) "is beginning to look more and more like an immense pile of filth." This is no accident, for when "nature is viewed solely as a source of profit and gain, this has serious consequences for society."

THE TECHNOCRATIC PARADIGM

It is hardly a surprise that the pope, head of one of the world's most conservative institutions, finds much to dislike in the

modern world. What is a surprise—and a serious challenge to our global political and business leadership—is his attention to the set of mentalities that he variously calls the myths of modernity, the myth of progress, and the technocratic paradigm.

Perhaps the most radical part of the letter (and the part that has already proved disturbing to some readers) is its powerful critique of our "models of production and consumption." The pope addresses head-on our prevailing economic practices and the modes of thought that insist—despite considerable evidence to the contrary—that we just need to let markets do their "magic."

While the word "capitalism" does not appear in the letter, the word "market" (or its variants) appears nineteen times, usually in a critical context. The pope is not advocating communism, but he is asking us to acknowledge that we live in a world where the ideology of the marketplace is so dominant that most of us can scarcely imagine an alternative, and where those who try are dismissed as unrealistic, irrational, naïve, faint-hearted, sentimental, romantic, out of step, or (if in America) communists.¹ He is asking us to reexamine the creed of "individualism, unlimited progress, competition, consumerism, the unregulated market."

Consistent with the complex connotations of the word "paradigm," the technocratic paradigm is not a single idea but a conceptual matrix that begins with an overreliance on scientific modes of thought, moves quickly through instrumentalism, and lodges in a worldview that denies both the idea of limits and the visible consequences of ignoring them:

The basic problem . . . is the way that humanity has taken up technology and its development *according to an undifferentiated and one-dimensional paradigm*. This paradigm exalts the concept of a subject who, using logical and rational procedures, progressively approaches and gains control over an external object . . . Men and women have constantly intervened in nature, but for a long time this meant being in tune with and respecting the possibilities offered by the things themselves. It was a matter of receiving what nature itself allowed, as if from its own hand. Now, by contrast, we are the ones to lay our hands on things, attempting to extract everything possible from them while frequently ignoring or forgetting the reality in front of us . . . This has made it easy to accept the idea of infinite or unlimited growth, which proves so attractive to economists, financiers and experts in technology. It is based on the lie that there is an infinite supply of the earth's goods, and this leads to the planet being squeezed dry beyond every limit. It is the false notion that "an infinite quantity of energy and resources are available, that it is possible to renew them quickly, and that the negative effects of the exploitation of the natural order can be easily absorbed."

While the pope labels the paradigm technocratic, the criticism is not of technology per se, but of an uncritical technofideism—a "blind confidence in technical solutions"—and of the market logic that harnesses it with a single-minded focus on profit, without thinking about the actual goals of human activity.

The economy accepts every advance in technology with a view to profit, without concern for its potentially negative impact on human beings. Finance overwhelms the real economy . . . Some circles maintain that current economics and technology will solve all environmental problems, and . . . that the problems of global hunger and poverty will be resolved simply by market growth . . . Yet by itself the market cannot guarantee integral human development and social inclusion. At the same time, we have "a sort of 'superdevelopment' of a wasteful and consumerist kind which forms an unacceptable contrast with the ongoing situations of dehumanizing deprivation," while we are all too slow in developing economic institutions and social initiatives which can give the poor regular access to basic resources. We fail to see the deepest roots of our present failures, which have to do with the direction, goals, meaning and social implications of technological and economic growth.

The problematic assumptions are thus three-fold: (1) that everything is here for our use, and whoever can find and market that use is warranted in doing so; (2) that the system that created these problems will somehow also solve them; and (3) that technology, enabled by science and fostered by the profit motive and consumerism, is the foundation of progress, prosperity, freedom, and even happiness.

The pope endorses "technological innovations which can bring about an improvement in the quality of life," and he makes clear that there is a place for properly regulated mar-

kets—indeed, he stresses that the poor need more access to them. What he rejects is the logic that sees the marketplace as the solution to all problems, that prioritizes profits to the exclusion of other considerations, and that privileges individual desire over the common good.

The pope also rejects the equating of technological advance with human advance “as if reality, goodness and truth automatically flow from technological and economic power as such,” as well as the myth of technological neutrality. In a sentence that might have been written by a historian of science and technology, he insists that we must “accept that technological products are not neutral, for they create a framework which ends up conditioning lifestyles and shaping social possibilities along the lines dictated by the interests of certain powerful groups. Decisions which may seem purely instrumental are in reality decisions about the kind of society we want to build.”ⁱⁱ

Economists and other “realists” insist that their worldview is nonideological: that capitalist liberal democracy is the inevitable end point of human development, and that attempts to direct the economic system towards more equitable outcomes at best gum up the works, and at worst are fatally counterproductive. The failures of communism are taken as total refutation of any attempted intervention in the marketplace, any attempt to guide technological development towards more humane ends. But theirs is the ideology of no ideology.ⁱⁱⁱ Thus it is significant that the pope’s critique is based not only on theological foundations, but on empirical ones as well. It is based on the simple fact that the system as it currently operates has failed in three important ways.

The first is a failure of equity. It is indisputable that there

are huge inequities in the world: some of us enjoying staggering wealth while others have almost nothing at all. Billions of people remain without the basic necessities of a good life—clean water, safe housing, sanitation, and the wherewithal to earn a living for themselves and their families.^{iv} Some of us have access to almost unimaginably advanced medical treatment; others have not even the rudiments of what we euphemistically call health care. Much of the world’s wealth has come from exploiting resources in the global south to “satisfy markets in the industrialized north,” and often this extraction has left a legacy of environmental damage. So there is an “ecological debt” that the wealthy owe to the poor, a debt that our current market-based policies and practices do not address.

To those who argue that the poor can best be served by expanding the reach of capitalism—that what we need is more unalloyed capitalism, not less—the pope insists that certain needs are not commodities to be bought and sold, but basic human rights.

Even as the quality of available water is constantly diminishing, in some places there is a growing tendency . . . to privatize this resource, turning it into a commodity subject to the laws of the market. Yet *access to safe drinkable water is a basic and universal human right, since it is essential to human survival and, as such, is a condition for the exercise of other human rights.* Our world has a grave social debt towards the poor who lack access to drinking water, because *they are denied the right to a life consistent with their inalienable dignity.*

If the poor lack access to safe drinking water, the solution is not to charge them for it.

The second failure is environmental damage. The champions of our current system often say its benefits have simply not yet reached the poor—and therefore we must continue (and even strengthen) the practices that have made the rich rich until they reach all. This argument might be persuasive were it not for the damage that we have wreaked on the environment.

It should always be kept in mind that “environmental protection cannot be assured solely on the basis of financial calculations of costs and benefits. The environment is one of those goods that cannot be adequately safeguarded or promoted by market forces.” Once more, we need to reject a magical conception of the market, which would suggest that problems can be solved simply by an increase in the profits of companies or individuals. Is it realistic to hope that those who are obsessed with maximizing profits will stop to reflect on the environmental damage which they will leave behind for future generations? Where profits alone count, there can be no thinking about the rhythms of nature, its phases of decay and regeneration, or the complexity of ecosystems which may be gravely upset by human intervention. Moreover, biodiversity is considered at most a deposit of economic resources available for exploitation, with no serious thought for the real value of things, their significance for persons and cultures, or the concerns and needs of the poor.

Carbon markets have been widely advocated as the solution to climate change, but the pope has grave concerns here as well.

The strategy of buying and selling “carbon credits” can lead to a new form of speculation which would not help reduce the emission of polluting gases worldwide. This system seems to provide . . . the guise of a certain commitment to the environment, but in no way does it allow for the radical change which present circumstances require. Rather, it may simply become a ploy which permits maintaining the excessive consumption of some countries and sectors.

Climate change, he suggests, is more than just the failure of markets to internalize the true cost of carbon. It is the failure of a system in which profit is “the sole criterion to be taken into account.” After all, if we make fossil fuels more expensive to discourage their use, what happens to the poor, who need energy as much or more than the rich? Without a mechanism to help them gain access to clean energy, putting a price on carbon will only make their plight worse. Mechanisms to help the poor of course exist, but they involve reaching outside of markets and thinking beyond the profit motive.

Moreover, a great deal of environmental wreckage has been inflicted by multinational corporations operating in developing nations in ways that would not be acceptable in the developed world. When these companies cease their operations, frequently they leave substantial damage in their wake, damage that is not an accident or oversight but the consequence of an ideology in which “whatever is fragile, like the environment,

is defenceless before the interests of a deified market, which become the only rule.”

The third failure is the spiritual impoverishment of the rich. The cheerleaders of capitalism insist that free markets are not just the best means of delivering goods and services, but the only means that protect our freedom.^v In the aftermath of the Cold War, this can be a hard argument to refute, but the pope is a brave man and he takes on the challenge: Our paradigm leads people to believe that they are free “as long as they have the supposed freedom to consume.” But the truly free are “the minority who wield economic and financial power.” And are we really happy? He suspects not:

Since the market tends to promote extreme consumerism in an effort to sell its products, people can easily get caught up in a whirlwind of needless buying and spending. Compulsive consumerism is one example of how the techno-economic paradigm affects individuals . . . Many people know that . . . the mere amassing of things and pleasures [is] not enough to give meaning and joy to the human heart, yet they feel unable to give up what the market sets before them.

The unhappiness of people in the wealthy west is perhaps the biggest indictment of our current system: even those of us who purportedly benefit from it do not seem very happy. Consider the bookstore shelves crammed with titles on happiness. A quick search on Amazon.com yields 409,429 results for “happiness,” with subtitles like “How to Develop Life’s Most Important Skill.”^{vi} How did we come to a place where we have

such material riches, yet we need experts to tell us how to be happy? The pope knows: “We have too many means and only a few insubstantial ends.”

The magic of the marketplace has turned out not to be so magical at all. Billions have not shared the wealth that markets have generated, those who have are not content, and meanwhile we have undermined the chances for happiness of future generations and even the chance for existence of many species. The “realism” of the status quo is one that denies the persistence and profundity of these failures. Thus the pope’s two themes are in fact one: our failure to care for creation is the result of a world-view that defines everything in consumerist terms and looks for solutions solely in things that can be bought and sold. The market economy and the culture of consumption are locked in a dance of death, leading to spiritual impoverishment for those who control it, material impoverishment for those who don’t, and environmental impoverishment across the globe.

THE ALTERNATIVE: AN INTEGRAL ECOLOGY

Some may shrug and say that environmental damage is the price of progress, but the pope refuses to accept that conclusion as *rational*. On the contrary, viewed dispassionately, it comes to look a bit insane. “The markets, which immediately benefit from sales, stimulate ever greater demand. An outsider looking at our world would be amazed at such behaviour, which at times appears self-destructive.” The pope does not go so far as to label the technological paradigm religion, but

his use of the phrase "deified market" certainly suggests that thought.

What is the alternative? This, of course, is the challenge—it is easy to see what is wrong with our system, harder to see how to fix it. The pope calls for an "integral ecology," by which he means a vision of the world founded fundamentally on respect for Creation, and a renewed emphasis on our mutual interconnection with one another and with nature in all its complexity. This ecology must necessarily include science and technology, but a science that moves past reductionism and a technology that is more focused on authentic needs. As the pope puts it: "We are faced not with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather with one complex crisis which is both social and environmental. Strategies for a solution demand an integrated approach to combating poverty, restoring dignity to the excluded, and at the same time protecting nature." It is not a question of development versus the environment, as was recognized at the Rio Earth Summit more than two decades ago, for the protection of the environment is "an integral part of the development process and cannot be considered in isolation from it."

An integral ecology must also include also good governance, including "the establishment of a legal framework which can set clear boundaries and ensure the protection of ecosystems." It must replace a culture of rampant individualism with a culture of care rooted in "love for society and commitment to the common good." And it must not only reclaim the idea of the common good, but also recognize it as the centerpiece of civil society, environmental protection, religious communion, and, finally, human dignity, happiness, and love.

Crucially, this culture of care must include not just those of us alive today, but also future generations—a point the pope makes more than once, in both economic and moral terms. Our current economic models literally dis-count the future, insofar as damage in the future is counted as costing less than damage today, but what sort of a calculus is it that concludes that our needs are greater than our children's? The notion of the common good, the pope concludes, also extends to future generations: "We can no longer speak of sustainable development apart from intergenerational solidarity . . . Intergenerational solidarity is not optional, but rather a basic question of justice, since the world we have received also belongs to those who will follow us."

Some readers will be dissatisfied with this ending, in part because the logic of the technocratic paradigm is to insist there is no functional alternative. So perhaps this is the pope's most important message: that we must move past the ideology of no ideology, the morality of amorality.

The idea of promoting a different cultural paradigm . . . is nowadays inconceivable. The technological paradigm has become so dominant that it would be difficult to do without its resources and even more difficult to utilize them without being dominated by their internal logic. It has become countercultural to choose a lifestyle whose goals are even partly independent of technology, of its costs and its power to globalize and make us all the same . . . Our capacity to make decisions, a more genuine freedom and the space for each one's alternative creativity are diminished.

Many people will of course misread this message. Already, conservatives are condemning the *Encyclical* for its failure to celebrate the rewards of capitalism and extol the virtues of carbon markets.^{vii} Others have misread the letter depriving “people of the [technological] tools humanity will need to prevent climatic upheaval.”^{viii} These reactions demonstrate why this *Encyclical* is so important.

The pope is not asking us to reject markets or technology. He is asking us to reject the (il)logic that insists that only markets can decide our future and that technology is politically and morally neutral. He is asking us to reject the creed of market fundamentalism, and to recognize that the system has levers. Individuals, institutions, and governments are all making choices, and we have the capacity to make different ones.

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