Francis' encyclical is a step in the right direction, those outside the church say

Vinnie Rotondaro  |  Jun. 18, 2015
Francis: The Environment Encyclical
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In the papal encyclical *Laudato Si’*, Pope Francis calls for a "new and universal solidarity" in response to threats facing the global environment. Humanity needs "a conversation which includes everyone, since the environmental challenge we are undergoing, and its human roots, concern and affect us all," he wrote.

In that spirit, *NCR* asked leaders outside the Catholic fold for their reaction to the encyclical.

Michael E. Mann, Distinguished Professor of Meteorology at Penn State University, wrote in an email that Francis "accurately reflects what the science has to say."

Mann, who authored a chapter of the third Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report, has been in touch with fellow climate scientists about the encyclical. He said the consensus is that Francis "got the science right."

In *Laudato Si’*, Francis states that "a very solid scientific consensus indicates that we are presently witnessing a disturbing warming of the climatic system." He writes that "a number of scientific studies indicate that most global warming in recent decades is due to the great concentration of greenhouse gases ... released mainly as a result of human activity."

If anything about the account presented in *Laudato Si’* is off, Mann wrote, it is that Francis takes an "overly conservative" approach. "Human activity is most likely responsible not just for 'most of global warming,'" he wrote, "but all of it."

Mann said it is critical that *Laudato Si’* layers scientific evidence with clear moral vision.

In *Laudato Si’*, Francis states that "human ecology is inseparable from the notion of the common good, a central and unifying principle of social ethics." He writes that "the notion of the common good also extends to future generations. The global economic crises have made painfully obvious the detrimental effects of disregarding our common destiny, which cannot exclude those who come after us."

"If we don't act now to do something, we will be leaving behind a fundamentally degraded world for our children and grandchildren," Mann wrote. "I think that is the key point, and I feel that Pope Francis very effectively conveys that message in the encyclical."
According to Rabbi Arthur Waskow, an author and political activist in the Jewish Renewal movement who helped bring about a historic rabbinic letter on the climate crisis, the authority the Laudato Si’ wields in making the moral case "is going to be very important."

In a telephone interview, Waskow said he believes the encyclical will have "an immense effect." It is "crucial that it have that effect," he said, "since scientists are saying there is still time to avert the worst conceivable disasters but that that time is shortening."

The connection Francis draws between worldwide ecological abuse and the abuse inflicted by economic poverty is also important, Waskow said.

Francis states in Laudato Si’ that the "worst impact" of climate change "will probably be felt by developing countries."

"Many of the poor live in areas particularly affected by phenomena related to warming," he writes, "and their means of subsistence are largely dependent on natural reserves and ecosystemic services such as agriculture, fishing and forestry.

"They have no other financial activities or resources which can enable them to adapt to climate change or to face natural disasters," Francis writes, "and their access to social services and protection is very limited. For example, changes in climate, to which animals and plants cannot adapt, lead them to migrate; this in turn affects the livelihood of the poor, who are then forced to leave their homes, with great uncertainty for their future and that of their children. There has been a tragic rise in the number of migrants seeking to flee from the growing poverty caused by environmental degradation."

The connection between poverty and the environment made in Laudato Si’ is "right on target," Waskow said.

"And I'm happy to say that the rabbinic letter says more or less the same thing," he said. "We say that the first and the worst damage is to the poor everywhere. The most powerful typhoon in recorded history hit the Philippines, and thousands of people who were living marginally, the poorest people in the Philippines, were those who died. A softer case was when Superstorm Sandy hit the northeast coast of the United States. The people who still have not been able to get their homes back and get the insurance to make themselves whole from the damage are the poor."

Daniel Wildcat, an expert in indigenous environmental knowledge at Haskell Indian Nations University, said he sees further connections between the concept and reality of poverty as it relates to ecology.

"Tying the whole issue of poverty to loss of life on the planet with these incredible threats we are seeing to biodiversity, I think it's naive to think that activity can be understood as anything other than impoverishing," said Wildcat, a Yuchi member of the Muscogee Nation and a convener of the Indigenous Peoples' Climate Change Working Group.

"Making that connection in indigenous intellectual traditions it is almost a given," he said. Destruction of the natural environment represents "not just a physical impoverishment, [but a] spiritual impoverishment," he said.
In *Laudato Si’*, Francis states that it is "not enough ... to think of different species merely as potential 'resources' to be exploited, while overlooking the fact that they have value in themselves. Each year sees the disappearance of thousands of plant and animal species which we will never know, which our children will never see, because they have been lost for ever. The great majority become extinct for reasons related to human activity. Because of us, thousands of species will no longer give glory to God by their very existence, nor convey their message to us."

"We have no such right," Francis writes.

Wildcat said in making that statement, Francis "speaks very directly to the issues that are most troubling for us."

In *Laudato Si’*, Francis states: "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."

Wildcat said stepping away from the anthropocentric attitude "that seems so much a part of the Western tradition" and that the church played a "pivotal" role in shaping is "huge."

"Any statement that suggests that we can separate ourselves above the rest of creation is a large part of the problem that we have created," he said.

Roy Speckhardt, executive director of the American Humanist Association, said the encyclical shows "the Catholic Church has taken a key step in the right direction."

"This is a great step forward in the thinking of the Catholic Church," he wrote in an email, "bringing it slowly in line with the consensus that exists in the scientific community that global climate change is significantly impacted by human events."

"Recognizing our ability to impact climate change," he wrote, "along with recognizing the seriousness of climate change and its very real potential to end the world as we know it, are prerequisites for doing something about it. We need to focus on sustainable living, better energy sources, and renewables to save our planet."

"Humanists, being naturally science oriented, are well positioned to be a leader in the efforts to address global climate change, but we need everyone to get on board, and the Catholic Church has taken a key step in the right direction."

Ultimately, "this shift in thinking needs to be followed through with action if it's to be of full benefit," Speckhardt wrote.

[Vinnie Rotondaro is NCR national correspondent. His email address is vrotondaro@ncronline.org]