Happiness, hope and gratitude greeted Pope Francis' long-awaited encyclical, "Laudato Si', on Care for Our Common Home," in the U.S. church after its official release Thursday afternoon in Rome.

"Very excited, very pleased," said Patrick Carolan, executive director of the Franciscan Action Network (FAN). "It's a wonderful, awesome, hopeful document."

Social Service Sr. Simone Campbell, executive director of NETWORK, a national Catholic social justice lobby, said her "heart is singing" because the encyclical shows how interconnected everything is.

"Pope Francis puts this in a holistic context," Campbell said. "It allows us to see the integration of issues of housing and cities and violence, all in the context of ecology and the environment."

For Dan DiLeo, project manager of the Catholic Climate Covenant, his hope and excitement for a global response to climate change peaked after reading the encyclical, he said in an op-ed piece.

"After finally reading Laudato Si', I am absolutely convinced that Francis will indeed inspire humanity to save ourselves from ourselves and avoid catastrophic climate change. And I am unexpectedly peaceful about it," he wrote.

In the 184-page document, Francis outlined his vision of the global environmental state, one in which climate change is a reality and where excessive behaviors in consumption, profit and growth require recalibration and reassessment. The encyclical is divided into six chapters: the current state of the planet; the Gospel of creation; human roots of the ecological crisis; integral ecology; approaches and actions; and ecological education and spirituality.

"The urgent challenge to protect our common home includes a concern to bring the whole human family together to seek a sustainable and integral development, for we know that things can change," Francis wrote. "... I urgently appeal, then, for a new dialogue about how we are shaping the future of our planet."
Boston Cardinal Sean O'Malley, one of the Francis' closest advisers, said he welcomed "with joy and gratitude" the encyclical, noting that as the first pope to take the name of St. Francis of Assisi, the pope carried the saint's spirit and wisdom throughout the document.

O'Malley, a Capuchin Franciscan, identified two ideas emanating throughout *Laudato Si*': the environment as a common home that "needs immediate protection and healing at the global, national and local levels of life"; and those most in danger of environmental degradation are those already poor and vulnerable.

"This constant linkage throughout the encyclical of the dual need to respect and protect 'Our Common Home' and the need to respect and protect the dignity and lives of the poor may be regarded as the distinctive characteristic of this powerful message of Pope Francis. Both of these themes have been evident since the beginning of Pope Francis's pontificate but this letter joins them with new depth and specificity," the cardinal said in a statement.

**Returns church to its roots**

Franciscan Sr. Dawn Nothwehr, a professor at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago and author of *Ecological Footprints: An Essential Franciscan Guide for Faith and Sustainable Living*, said the encyclical returns church thinking to its roots.

"In reality, this is nothing new in all of Christianity," Nothwehr said. "If you go back to our Jewish roots, that's a very holistic approach. Look at Leviticus ... in all those early mandates, the legal was not separate from the moral. We're deeply turning back to some of those themes."

Bishop Emeritus William Skylstad of Spokane, Wash., described the encyclical in a single word: "Marvelous!"

"Pope Francis shares with us in this encyclical how [church teaching on the environment] applies to us in the modern world. We live in an increasingly connected world, and *Laudato Si* shares in a remarkable way really how profound this connection should and must be," he told *NCR* in an email.

What especially resonated with Skylstad were aspects of *Laudato Si* that addressed relationships people have with and for one another (particularly the poor) and humans' relationship with and responsibility for the environment.

"One of the great challenges in our world community today is the need for a revolution in relationships. Pope Francis does a remarkable job in challenging all of us. No one is to be excluded," he said.

The bishop served as director of the 2001 Columbia River pastoral project, a joint endeavor of U.S. and Canadian bishops that examined a bevy of environmental issues in the Pacific Northwest. He said the encyclical addresses many of the same issues as that pastoral and reinforced the bishops' work in the Columbia watershed.

"In addition, our world community is becoming much more sensitive to environmental degradation and the urgent need to do something about it. The high degree of interest in
anticipating this document indicates a common concern about how we need to take care of the environment and the significant challenges we face in doing so," he said.

On the issue of climate change, Skylstad said the pope did not "shy away" from the expected controversy or in providing "recommendations to spur fresh political and economic thinking."

"In our polarized world, his teaching in this encyclical transcends the political controversy with a moral foundation for action, not a set of political prescriptions," he said.

Dan Misleh, executive director of the Catholic Climate Covenant, said it appeared the pope had the climate in mind throughout the encyclical, even outside the sections that addressed it directly.

"It seems like that was fairly prevalent even if it wasn't stated over and over again, although it appeared quite a bit," he told NCR.

**Conversation changing 'from fear to love'**

Maryann Cusimano Love, a fellow at the Institute for Policy Research & Catholic Studies at The Catholic University of America, said the pope is changing the climate conversation "from fear to love."

"Francis calls us home, to love our neighbors and our common home, our gift from God. Yes, he calls us to energy conversion, but from energies of despair and denial to God's sustainable energy of generous love and sharing," she said.

That Francis did not mince words in addressing climate change -- "It represents one of the principal challenges facing humanity in our day" -- didn't surprise Misleh given the pope has at his disposal one of the top scientific academies in the world in the Pontifical Academy of Sciences.

"That scientific information is easily accessible to him and to many others, and so he took it to heart and said, There is a limited amount of time to deal with this, we better hurry up," he said.

Misleh and several others who spoke to NCR saw as a central theme of *Laudato Si’* the emphasis on the interconnections among people across geography and generations and among the various environmental and societal issues Francis addressed.

In his discussion of "integral ecology," Francis links one of Catholic tradition's largest theological themes -- all are intimately one in God's being -- "with the nitty gritty of loving our neighbor and caring for the smallest and most vulnerable creatures," said Alex Mikulich, a research fellow at the Jesuit Social Research Institute at Loyola University New Orleans.

"We all share one life, one earth. One cannot and will not thrive unless all thrive in the interdependent and interconnected web of life," he said.
"[Francis] points to not just the environment in a silo of its own, but how the problems that we're having with the environment and the climate are affecting the people of the world. So not just the environment for the environment's sake, but really in how our fellow human beings are being affected by it," said Janine Walsh, FAN communications coordinator.

"He framed it the way the Franciscans do, so we're really happy about that, in that it's about all of creation," Carolan said.

Along those lines, Carolan said for him, one of the more powerful aspects of the encyclical addressed the connections between the largest emitters of greenhouse gases and those most impacted.

"The warming caused by huge consumption on the part of some rich countries has repercussions on the poorest areas of the world, especially Africa, where a rise in temperature, together with drought, has proved devastating for farming," Francis wrote.

The pope called not only for a scaling back of fossil fuel usage, but also for a cutback on consumption among developed countries.

"We all know that it is not possible to sustain the present level of consumption in developed countries and wealthier sectors of society, where the habit of wasting and discarding has reached unprecedented levels. The exploitation of the planet has already exceeded acceptable limits and we still have not solved the problem of poverty," he wrote.

That message is an important one for Americans to deeply consider, Misleh said, but also one that may be hard to digest. He said the pope appeared to be describing a richness in getting away at times from technology, which can distract from interpersonal connections with family, neighbors and the poor, but also distract from addressing real problems.

"We've got such a culture of waste, where very six, eight months there's a new cell phone on the market. And why? Why are we continuously grabbing that new cell phone when the old one is working just fine?" Walsh said.

**Nobility in little daily actions**

Conversations about actions have to address the global, community and individual levels, Carolan said. In *Laudato Si'*, Francis heralded the small steps as a piece of environmental solutions: "There is a nobility in the duty to care for creation through little daily actions."

Carolan noted that the simple acts common to scaling back energy usage -- turning off lights, choosing a bike or public transportation, eating local or occasionally abstaining from meat -- can reduce individuals' consumption and carbon footprints but also help change mindsets.

While she loved the encyclical, Franciscan Sr. Ilia Delio, visiting professor at Georgetown University, said she also fears it will produce little change in that it falls short of providing a model for how things should be.

"He's saying, Here's a negative, we are destroying ourselves, we are destroying our planet. But I've never seen anyone change because of a negative, except when they're children being disciplined by their parents," she said. "We change because of allure. So what's the attraction
to us? Without that, I think people are going to say, 'Great guy, great points,' but they're not going to change."

Looking ahead, events are already planned to ensure that the encyclical conversation doesn't end with its release. FAN has planned a Meatless Fridays campaign, while the Catholic Climate Covenant has mailed and emailed homily helps to each of the 17,000-plus parishes in the country to use during four Sundays this summer.

The covenant has also planned a series of programs -- including regional events in Florida, Iowa and New Mexico and a theology and ministry conference at CUA ahead of the bishops' annual meeting in November -- to carry the encyclical conversation through Francis' U.S. visit in September and the United Nations' climate negotiations in December in Paris.

"Keep the dialogue going, keep the encyclical in people's minds and talk about not only what the encyclical means but what the local impact or local solutions might be," Misleh said.

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