



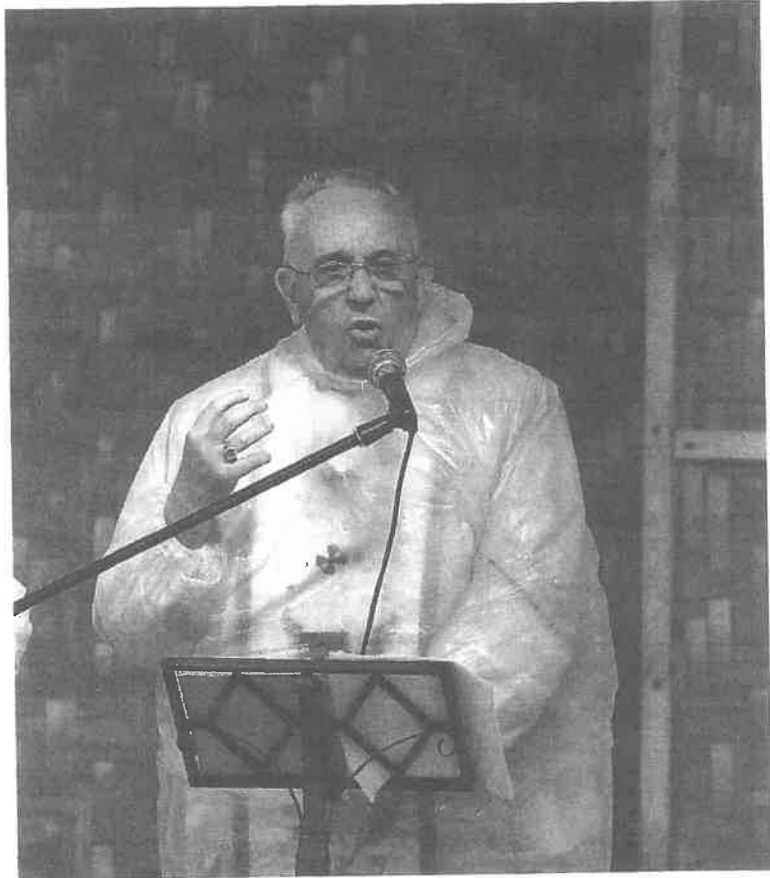
'WHY CALL IT PROGRESS?'

part of nature, included in it and thus in constant interaction with it. Recognizing the reasons why a given area is polluted requires a study of the workings of society, its economy, its behavior patterns, and the ways it grasps reality. Given the scale of change, it is no longer possible to find a specific, discrete answer for each part of the problem. It is essential to seek comprehensive solutions that consider the interactions within natural systems themselves and with social systems. We are faced not with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather with one complex crisis that 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.

A reinvigoration of the very purpose of statecraft was called for. Government could no longer be reduced to an ineffectual referee overseeing a Darwinian struggle of rivals, but must act to foster many "ecologies" in the face of the technocratic tide. That meant, for example, protecting the value and vocation of work by containing the power of corporations and creating jobs through small-scale businesses and producers; fostering the values and identity of peoples and cultures and their ancestral lands; bolstering urban spaces where communities can flourish; as well as ensuring decent housing, good public transport, clean air, and the integration of rundown urban areas.

In chapter five of *Laudato si'* Francis asked: If increased production and consumption lead to a deterioration in the quality of life of the poor and the degradation of the environment, why call it progress? If a company swells its profits at the expense of future resources or the health of the environment, should we consider this growth a success? Creativity was needed, along with an openness to new possibilities, to consider ways of investing that created jobs, made energy more efficient, and reduced consumption in the rich world to allow poorer places to develop. "We know how unsustainable is the behavior of those who constantly consume and destroy," he argued, "while others are not yet able to live in a way worthy of their human dignity."

The idea that decreased growth in rich parts of the world was necessary to allow poorer places to prosper went directly against the core dogma of trickle-down economics. Popes had long been skeptical of that dogma. As Francis pointed out in *Evangelii gaudium*, rather than the money trickling down, the glass of wealth usually just gets bigger. But *Laudato si'* did not enter into the complex question of wealth creation. Its role was to acknowledge the reality that the very poor were



staying poor while the rich got richer and to call for it to be addressed. But for many on the Catholic right in America, even that was intolerable.

Yet the evidence was clear: the shift in wealth from labor to capital, along with the stagnation of wages and spiraling corporate profits, the increase in inequality and the growing exclusion of the poor, showed that globalization had gone wrong. Coordinated global policies were needed that started from the planet as a whole. Developing countries were owed a great debt, the pope said in *Laudato si'*, because the countries where the most important reserves of the biosphere are found were fueling the development of richer countries at the cost of the former's present and future. Hence wealthy countries should pay their "ecological debt" to poor countries "by significantly limiting their consumption of nonrenewable energy and by assisting poorer countries to support policies and programs of sustainable development." Francis described the planet as a single "homeland" that called for "one world, with a common plan." For the economist Jeffrey Sachs, this was the most important phrase in a document he praises as "magnificent" and "breathtaking."

After listing all the areas in which not just

Pope Francis celebrating Mass in Tacloban, Philippines, during Tropical Storm Mekkhala, January 2015.

cooperation but “a global consensus” would be necessary, Francis called for a “true world political authority” capable of enforcing international agreements. The idea—greeted with derision in some quarters—was based on a longstanding principle of Catholic social teaching mooted by John XXIII and endorsed by Benedict XVI in *Caritas in veritate* in precisely the words Francis used. That principle was “subsidiarity”—namely, that governance should be at a level appropriate to the task. Usually this was a call for higher authorities to devolve down, but it could equally signal the need for new oversight bodies. It had long been axiomatic to the Vatican that only global rules implemented by transnational authorities were capable of meeting border-blind challenges, not just to police drug trafficking, tax evasion, and terrorism, but to coordinate policies of common human concern such as migration and the environment.

“Politics must not be subject to the economy, nor should the economy be subject to the dictates of an efficiency-driven paradigm of technocracy,” Francis declared as a general principle, adding that it was time to reject what he called “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.”

In the final chapter of the encyclical, Francis urged his readers to accept “that we have a shared responsibility for others and the world, and that being good and decent are worth it.” He went on to earn a standing ovation from religious and ethically committed people everywhere when he added: “We have had enough of immorality and the mockery of ethics, goodness, faith and honesty. It is time to acknowledge that lighthearted superficiality has done us no good.” Both the planet and the poor had suffered from an ego-centric culture of self-gratification. “The mindset that leaves no room for sincere concern for the environment is the same mindset that lacks concern for the inclusion of the most vulnerable members of society,” Francis wrote. The lack of concern was creating a state of lawlessness. Where the state failed to take responsibility, business groups or organized-crime syndicates stepped into the vacuum. Corporations concerned only with financial gain and a politics concerned merely with retaining or increasing power would fail to rescue humanity from the abyss it faced. Francis warned that “politics and the economy tend to blame each other when it comes to poverty and environmental degradation.” That was no longer good enough.

Having argued in *Laudato si'* that a lack of agreement on curbing global warming was a failure of technocratic politics, Francis invited the world's leaders to prove politics could raise its game. *Laudato si'* was the first papal document ever to be released with a view to influencing a specific political event: the weeklong meeting in early December 2015 of 190 world leaders in Paris.

It was known as COP21 because it was the twenty-first yearly session of the “Conference of the Parties” to the 1992 United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. Efforts to meet that convention's goals through global agreements had thus far stumbled, and the opportunity for action was fading fast. *Laudato si'* had put presidents and prime ministers on notice: humanity could not tolerate nations putting their own interests before the global common good. “Those who will have to suffer the consequences of what we are trying to hide,” Francis warned, “will not forget this failure of conscience and responsibility.”

He repeated this now-or-never, do-or-die message in one-on-one meetings with world leaders over the following months, as well as in a series of high-profile interventions on his trips. In addresses in Latin America, before the U.S. Congress, at the world headquarters of the United Nations, and finally in a speech at the UN's African base in Nairobi, Kenya, days before the summit opened, he held political leaders' feet to the fire, urging them, in effect, to examine their consciences before the tribune of history.

Failure to reach agreement would be “catastrophic,” he said in Nairobi, where he called for a new global energy system that made “little or no” use of carbon. He asked the world's leaders to deliver a threefold agreement that would lessen the impact of global warming, fight poverty, and ensure respect for human dignity. The presidents of the world's five continental associations of Catholic bishops meanwhile backed his call for “an enforceable agreement that protects our common home and all its inhabitants.” Ecclesio-logically, this was the first glimpse of a future of regional patriarchates.

By then the church's base was being mobilized by an unprecedented startup network of hundreds of organizations in the Global Catholic Climate Movement (GCCM), formed at the end of 2014 by Tomás Insua, a young Argentine studying climate-change policy at Harvard's Kennedy School. While working for Google Buenos Aires, Insua used to spend weekends in church projects among the poor. His ecological conversion came after the



tech giant sent him to its office in Singapore, from where he traveled with his wife to the Philippines. There they saw the aftermath of Typhoon Haiyan, which had slammed into the islands in Tacloban in late 2013, killing more than six thousand people and displacing 4.1 million. "It opened my eyes wide," he told me, "to see that climate change is about social justice."

Studying climate policy at Harvard the following year, Insua was thrilled at the news of the pope's forthcoming encyclical but dismayed to find that secular green groups and other faiths and denominations were far more excited about it than were the Catholics. Of the 1,500-odd organizations taking part in the global climate march in New York in September 2014, just two or three had anything to do with the Catholic Church, while on campus, he found the Protestants and Hindus far more engaged than his coreligionists. After meeting with Canziani in Buenos Aires that fall, Insua put together a network to leverage global parish-level pressure for a deal in Paris a year later.

The GCCM launched in January 2015 with the backing of the archbishop of Manila, Cardinal "Chito" Tagle, who presented Francis with the network's foundational statement as the pope arrived in the Filipino capital from Colombo, Sri Lanka. The cornerstone of the papal trip, which would set a new record for the largest-ever gathering—more than six million people at the closing Mass in Manila—was a visit to the typhoon-devastated area that had so moved Insua. Francis braved a tropical storm to reach Tacloban, cutting short his trip to avoid the worst of the weather from a new hurricane that tore down scaffolding at his Mass venue, killing a pilgrim. In the howling wind and rain he met the typhoon victims, whose pain, he said in a homily, had silenced his heart.

He made no mention of climate change, but he hardly needed to. The angry winds spoke for him. For a country averaging twenty-two typhoons a year, a future of more high-intensity storms from a warming planet was an appalling prospect. Ever since "What is happening to our beautiful land?"—the Filipino bishops' 1988 *cri de coeur* quoted in both *Evangelii gaudium* and *Laudato si'*—the church in the world's fourth-largest Catholic country had been at the forefront of the call to action on climate change. Now the Filipino bishops led the mobilization for the GCCM-organized global petition, which, by the time Insua presented it to President François Hollande in December, had gathered close to a million signatures.

A few weeks earlier, the global climate march

Stories circulated of Francis making urgent phone calls to break eleventh-hour deadlocks, urging whatever was needed—boldness, flexibility, or generosity—for the sake of the Paris Agreement.

had again taken place across the world. This time around 40,000 of the 800,000 taking part were Catholics mobilized by the church. The GCCM petition, along with Francis's pressure on COP21, were key to producing the Paris Agreement—particularly the more ambitious target of limiting the increase in global temperature in this century to 1.5 degrees Celsius, to be achieved mainly by polluting nations pledging to pull away from fossil fuels.

On the night of December 8, 2015, as the world's leaders in Paris haggled, a three-hour slideshow of stunning photos of the natural world was projected onto St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. It was the Feast of the Immaculate Conception. It was also the opening of the Jubilee of Mercy, a year called by Francis to celebrate God's loving embrace of His creation. As yawning lions and electric-blue fish slid over the venerable façade, the square filled with the squawking and clatter of birds and insects. There could be no doubt, now, where the Catholic Church stood on the great issue of the age.

Like a windhover, *Laudato si'* circled above the climate summit. Al Gore, the former vice president and Nobel Prize-winning activist, said later that the encyclical had been crucial in leading the world to commit to addressing the climate crisis ahead of the Paris Agreement. Lord Nicholas Stern, the World Bank economist, said it was "quite extraordinary in changing the weight of the argument." Stories circulated of Francis making

urgent phone calls to break eleventh-hour deadlines, urging whatever was needed—boldness, flexibility, or generosity—for the sake of the agreement. The pope had a “huge role to play” in the world coming together in Paris, says Jeffrey Sachs, who was stunned by how many country delegations mentioned the encyclical in Paris. The Philippine delegation in particular used the GCCM petition to help raise the ambition in Paris, persuading Catholic-majority nations that what had been seen as an unfeasible target the year before, the Holy See-backed target of 1.5 degrees, was now the benchmark. According to Tony Annett, a climate-change specialist who worked with Sachs at Columbia University’s Earth Institute, “The common wisdom is that, without *Laudato si’*, it is far from sure that the Paris agreement would have been signed.”

It wasn’t just the activists and the experts who were impressed. *Laudato si’* was by a long shot the most widely read papal document in history. Four years after its publication it remains the most quoted encyclical ever. Far outside the Catholic fold, people were blown away by its tone, at once tender and caustic, apocalyptic and hopeful, and by the way that it doesn’t just give a reading of the situation but spells out concrete actions, something unprecedented in the history of papal social teaching. According to Sachs, “it’s a papal encyclical, but it’s also a document you can teach in a sciences graduate course, in a public-policy course, in a theology course, in a moral philosophy course, in a diplomacy course—and every one would meet the standards of rigor. It is a most remarkable document, and an essential document for our time.”

Its impact on the church has been mixed so far—especially in the United States. A Yale University study a month before the Paris meeting showed a significant increase in the number of American Catholics who recognized global warming, and a Georgetown University poll revealed that Catholics were now more likely to be concerned about climate change than any other U.S. Christian group. There have been new shoots of activity across the U.S. church: talks in parishes and schools that led to “green teams,” religious orders disinvesting in fossil fuels, and solar panels replacing tiles on the roofs of diocesan buildings.

But while the organizers of the Yale study later said Francis had had a “significant impact on public opinion” on climate change during and after his September 2015 visit, six months afterward it was not clear how much more likely Catholics were

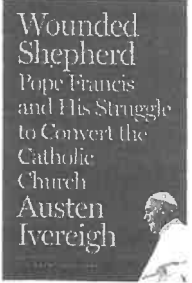
than other Americans to buy fewer presents, let alone recycle, compost, carpool, switch off lights or the air-conditioning. Such acts, *Laudato si’* had urged in its final chapter, were capable of changing the world, for “they call forth a goodness which, albeit unseen, inevitably tends to spread.” It wasn’t just the Americans who were slow to change their habits. In February 2019, the pope told moral theologians that it was rare, in the sacrament of reconciliation, to hear someone confess to an act of violence against nature and creation. “We do not yet have awareness of this sin,” he told them. “It is your task to do this.”

Yet it is now clear where the church stands. The decision by President Donald Trump in June 2017 to withdraw from the Paris Agreement was described as “deeply troubling” by the U.S. bishops, whose call for the U.S. government to recommit to combat climate change quickly gained the support of close to eight hundred major Catholic institutions, including dozens of dioceses, hundreds of parishes and religious communities. Worldwide, more than fifty major Catholic organizations, including banks with more than \$7.5 billion on their books, have stepped away from dirty energy. And the church played a key role at the December 2018 COP24 summit in Katowice in holding world leaders’ feet to the fire.

Francis, too, has kept up the pressure, speaking out on the blight of plastics in the seas and convening a major meeting at the Vatican of oil-company executives and investors, telling them that the world has to switch to clean energy if it is to avoid catastrophe. “Civilization requires energy,” he warned them, “but energy use must not destroy civilization.”

On April 16, 2019, Francis met a pigtailed Swedish teenager with Asperger Syndrome in St. Peter’s Square. The sixteen-year-old Greta Thunberg, inspiration of climate protest strikes across the world, had become the conscience of a new generation demanding from adults that they act. The old pope was beaming, and had just one message to her: “Go on, go on, continue,” he told her. Thunberg was overjoyed. “Thank you for standing up for the climate, for speaking the truth,” she told him. “It means a lot.” ☺

AUSTEN IVEREIGH is a Fellow of Contemporary Church History at Campion Hall, Oxford, and a frequent contributor to *Commonweal*. This article is adapted from his forthcoming book, *Wounded Shepherd: Pope Francis and His Struggle to Convert the Catholic Church*, which will be published in November by Henry Holt and Company. Used by permission. All rights reserved.



WOUNDED SHEPHERD

Pope Francis and His Struggle to Convert the Catholic Church

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