

# How religious leaders may influence climate change regulation: The success of the papal encyclical *Laudato Sii*

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Yesterday, the papal encyclical “*Laudato Sii*” was finally released. Environmentally engaged members of the Roman Catholic Church have awaited this day with cautious excitement since January 2014, when [it was first announced](#) that Pope Francis prepares such a document on “the ecology of mankind”. Over the last months, the event has also received remarkable attention in the wider public all over the globe.

The release of the encyclical exemplifies how religious actors can influence regulatory processes. Short-term, it may affect current political events with judgments about concrete political choices, influencing their (il) legitimacy. For instance, the papal encyclical calls the final document of the Conference of the United Nations on Sustainable Development in Rio de Janeiro in 2012, “ineffective”. Further,

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. [...] it may simply become a ploy which permits maintaining the excessive consumption of some countries and sectors ([Laudato Sii](#)).

The release may also create a new momentum of debate and hope in the year of the 21st Conference of the Parties (COP21) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the 11th session of the Meeting of the Parties (CMP11) to the 1997 Kyoto Protocol in Paris during which parties aim for a new, legally binding agreement.

Long-term, it is a significant theological document meant to give direction to contemporary Catholicism and 1.2 billion Catholics around the world. Even if we cannot know how it will be interpreted in thirty years from now, its effect is likely to last longer than the next international climate agreement. But despite or especially because of its character, it unfolds its dynamic only with its reception by an audience willing and eager to engage with it. At least three factors have helped to turn the publication of the encyclical into a widely received event which is likely to deserve all the hope that is attached to it.

Religious environmentalism is a multi-faceted movement which the Vatican can now draw on to make the encyclical known and relevant. Actors from inside the Roman Catholic Church (like the Jesuits, e.g. [here](#)) and outside of the Roman Catholic Church (e.g. the [Yale Forum on Religion & Ecology](#)) helped to disseminate both knowledge and hope, signifying the event as exciting moment embedded in a larger movement of religious environmentalism. The document had its followers even before its publication.

For Catholics concerned about the environment, the encyclical fills a gap. It offers theological guidance on the question how human beings and the environment relate to each other. Surprisingly, this question is comparatively underdeveloped in Catholic theology, leaving Catholics concerned about the environment, its devastation and the social consequences of those devastations with little clear leadership from the Vatican (one example for [struggles over interpretations](#)).

Pope Francis as well as his two predecessors had occasionally addressed environmental concerns, but the encyclical is the first extensive examination by the Holy See to address the question. To name just two of the past occasional statements and signals: In January 1990, Pope John Paul II spoke on “[peace with all of creation](#)”. 18 years later, 2,400 [solar panels were installed](#) at the Vatican under Benedict XVI. Pope Francis has also addressed the topic. His statements already foreshadowed the strong influence of the Second Vatican

Council, calling on his audience to care for creation as well as for the poor. As said in a general audience, he “would like us all to make a serious commitment to respect and protect creation, to be attentive to every person, to counter the culture of waste and disposable, to promote a culture of solidarity and of encounter” ([source](#)). In the encyclical itself, he introduces the concept of “integral ecology” which, in its meaning, follows those in the church which stress the relationship between environmental destruction and social inequality.

Next to the corresponding social movement, the second factor that can explain the prominence is a staging which is well thought-through and delivers a holistic story to the audience. The publication of the encyclical is just the peak of a series of related performances during which the leader of the Roman Catholic Church has staged his concern for the earth and its inhabitants. Early this year, Pope Francis [visited the typhoon-struck area](#) around Tacloban in the Philippines to see with his own eyes – and to show the world – the devastating effects of natural disasters which are expected to increase with global warming.



Pope Francis near the Tacloban Airport, Saturday, January 17, 2015, on his way to visit families of typhoon Yolanda victims  
(Photo by Benhur Arcayan/Malacanang Photo Bureau)

He also signaled to stand shoulder to shoulder with scientific and political leadership and with other religious leaders. In May last year, renowned environmental researchers came together in a Joint Workshop of the Pontifical Academy of Sciences and the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences on “[Sustainable Humanity, Sustainable Nature](#)”. In April this year, the two Pontifical Academies, together with the Sustainable Development Solutions Network and Religions for Peace, hosted the workshop “[Protect the Earth, Dignify Humanity: The Moral Dimensions of Climate Change and Sustainable Humanity](#)”. Attendants included many religious leaders, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, Ecuador President Rafael Correa, and many others. In September this year, Pope Francis is also [going to visit first the US Congress and then the United Nations General Assembly](#).

Those performances are a lobbying tour for international decisions to be made in 2015: lobbying for an engaged climate change agreement and sustainable development goals in which questions of environmental protection and needs of the poor weigh more heavily than those of economic growth and consumption of the wealthy. Will the engagement of the Pope be a game-changer in the struggles for a new climate change regime? Ban Ki-moon states:

The reason I’m coming to the pope, [... is that] I need the moral support and spiritual support of religious leaders ([source](#)).

In the context of the international negotiations, in which participants and observers have learned to be happy because of the smallest successes due to the continuous lack of big breakthroughs, the Pope’s engagement creates hope – and hope for the hope of others, the projection that it might create an energetic momentum for the negotiations. That is why many who urge to move forward in legally binding, international environmental regulation welcome this assistance from the Vatican. When the arguably most powerful political individual in the world, Barack Obama, is too weak or too unwilling to get things done, maybe spiritual leadership is the last resort.

And here is the third factor, why the encyclical has been so widely discussed even before its publication. Debates prior to its publication have been especially strong in the United States where it has posed pressure on prominent right-winged climate change deniers. They are the only well-heard, open source of criticism. Catholic Republican presidential candidate Jeb Bush, for example, has [declared](#) he is not willing to “get his

economic policy” from the Pope. Critics are further “worried the pope is straying beyond his spiritual role” ([Catholic News Service](#)).

It is probably futile to speculate how successful those statements are in convincing US population in a highly polarized debate. But it is clear that the criticism of the right-winged US actors was a predisposed defense. The papal encyclical praises the engagement of environmental movements, but is critical against “positions taken by countries which place their national interests above the global common good” ([Laudato Sii](#)).

Scandalizing an encyclical on the human-nature relationship in the contemporary world as economically invasive is very telling. One need not agree with the analysis of the papal encyclical to understand that environmental and related social concerns are not just economic, but highly normative, “moral” concerns.

It is true – with his clear statements and his timely performances, Pope Francis is not just a spiritual, but also a political figure. However, assuming he would *not* be seems awkward and old-fashioned the least, if not badly informed. In my [post](#) on the election of the current pope two years ago, I highlighted that the role of the pope has many dimensions – one of them utmost political. Because of the way Pope Francis has filled his role, this simple argument seems absolutely obvious today. However, encyclicals have been addressing economic and political affairs in the past. *Rerum Novarum* (1891), for instance, called for just wages as well as the establishment of worker unions. *Populorum progressio* (1967) can be seen as a milestone for liberation theology.

The encyclical’s moral guidance will probably stay contested and COP21 may still fail to deliver the commitments needed. Nevertheless, the “faction hope” can still belief in the effect that the encyclical may have longer term, influencing at least many members and institutions of the Roman Catholic Church in many parts of the world. The Vatican has finally “delivered” on the topic. It is now up to the wider community to make sense of the result – or not. It would not be the first opportunity lost in the history of environmental regulation, but it would be a different one in kind.

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