

Laudatio Si': What the Papal Document Means for European Politics and Social Movements

23.Nov 2015



Pope Francis and European Parliament president Martin Schulz. © European Union 2014 – Euro

by Jiska Gojowczyk

Traditionally, an encyclical is a letter from the Pope to bishops of the Roman Catholic Church. However, popes have also addressed larger audiences in the past, depending on the size of the problem, at their own discretion. Pope Francis' *Laudatio Si'*, released on June 18, 2015, is the first extensive attempt by a pope to address the question of how human beings and the environment relate to each other in an encyclical, and is broadly directed at "all people."^[1]

I have discussed elsewhere^[2] that the document has received great attention worldwide—both before and after its release, within the Roman Catholic Church and beyond—as one which is just as political as it is theological. In this commentary, I reflect on what *Laudatio Si'* means for European politics and social movements as it relates to politics and ethics, morality and power.

First, what is it about? The title *Laudatio Si'* refers to the beginning of the Canticum of the Sun of Saint Francis, the current pope's namesake, known for his engagement with the poor, his life in poverty, and his love of creation. In fact, the encyclical closely links social and ecological questions. "Sister earth" is considered one of the poor and is endangered "because of the harm we have inflicted on her by our irresponsible use and abuse of the goods with which God has endowed her."^[3]

Laudatio Si' is a global document meant as a wake-up call for individuals in their everyday lives and for national governments in international



Signs at a rally during Pope Francis' 2015 visit to Washington, D.C. Credit: Susan Melkisethian.

environmental negotiations. Individuals are asked to consume less and to waste less. In a large section on international relations ("Dialogue on the Environment in the International Community"), the letter denounces lip service with regard to such problems as climate change and pollution of the oceans. The encyclical takes a rights-based approach, declaring the need for a legal framework to protect "our

common home," and also argues for differentiated responsibilities of states. The establishment of a legal framework which can set clear boundaries and ensure the protection of ecosystems has become indispensable, otherwise the new power structures based on the techno-economic paradigm may overwhelm not only our politics but also freedom and justice. [4]

With preparations underway for the 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, taking place from November 30 to December 11 in Paris, it would seem that the Pope's concerns are timely and have some possibility of influencing policymakers as parties aim for a new, legally binding agreement on CO2 emissions to combat climate change.

So how is this specifically relevant for European politics and European society?

The Pope is clearly aligned with parties skeptical of technological solutions as well as market-based, green growth models (like Bolivia and others in the group of Like Minded Developing Countries (LMDC)), [5] which are criticized as unsuitable for overcoming poverty and economic inequality. However, the EU's position, in enabling "businesses to remain competitive and grow as we move to a low carbon future," [6] has been exactly on this course, garnering criticism from environmental groups as neither concrete nor ambitious enough.

With the Pope's stance on environmental issues clear in the encyclical, there is renewed interest in the problem of climate change and the upcoming COP21. For instance, following the Pope's lead, in October the continental Associations of Bishops' Conferences released an appeal to the negotiating parties. [7] Among the signatories were Cardinal Erdo, Archbishop of Esztergom, Budapest and President of Council of the Bishops' Conferences of Europe, and Cardinal Marx, Archbishop of Munich, Germany and President of the Commission of the Bishops' Conferences of the European Community. The latter is the Church's lobby organization targeting the EU's political processes, and is one of the largest civil society lobby groups in Brussels.

In fact, activists are now making use of the religious practice of pilgrimage to lobby within Europe for a strong agreement as result of COP21. It would seem that pilgrims like Yeb Sano, who is undertaking a 1,500 km walk from Rome to Paris in time for the meeting, have "a new weapon in Pope Francis," as the Guardian has written. [8] This is also true for European pilgrims starting from various points all over Europe and heading to Paris, and others, whose activities include prayers, fasts and conferences. Activists have acquired strengthened bargaining authority, since the Pope's *Laudatio Si'* explicitly acknowledges activists and ecological movements for their achievements and claims. [9]



Pope Francis in Washington, D.C. Credit: Stephen Melkisethian.

The effects this agenda-setting and additional authority of social movements is going to have on the outcomes of the negotiations is hard to say as hope is regularly mixed with frustration in preparatory meetings. As of now, the voluntary commitments of countries still fall short of those which would keep the global temperature rise below 2°C, the target the parties agreed to in prior negotiations.

Beyond the negotiations in Paris, the effects of *Laudatio Si'* are likely to be felt first in Catholic communities and organizations and, second, in social movements in Europe more broadly. Within the Roman Catholic Church, the encyclical challenges followers in Eastern Europe in

particular, where ecological concerns still tend to be viewed as illegitimate "leftie" themes. It also challenges those who consider religion and ecology to be separate matters, advocating for politics to stay out of the church and vice versa.

This encyclical strengthens the movement of religious environmentalism within the Roman Catholic Church and enriches its diverse, existing environmental initiatives in Europe. Local efforts such as the introduction of environmental management systems, deliberate changes in consumption and waste management, etc., have been the concern of few volunteers in church communities. The existing Catholic groups and individuals may now engage in those initiatives and problem areas with the explicit blessing of Pope Francis.

Furthermore, these shifts may increase the credibility of Catholic actors within social movements in Europe. It is one of several signs of an evolving, more responsive Vatican, whose religious leadership is becoming easier for progressive European Catholics to follow and defend against criticism.

Lastly, the encyclical is relevant for social movements within Europe because Christian organizations are often significant funders, supporters, and disseminators of environmental activism in campaigns such as in the Coalition Climate 21 or in the German Klimaallianz. Environmental protection and climate change have long been among the concerns of large Catholic relief organizations such as the German MISEREOR or the Swiss Fastenopfer. With this encyclical, it is very likely that environmental themes will stay on the agenda. Therefore, *Laudatio Si'* strengthens specific movements and topics within those movements: climate change, de-growth and the call for economic changes, and eco-justice highlight the relation between environmental degradation and poverty as well as migration. This encyclical helps environmental movements in Europe stay on a critical, global course.

Jiska Gojowczyk (http://www.mpifg.de/forschung/wissdetails_en.asp?MitarbID=612) is a doctoral researcher at the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Societies in Cologne (Germany). In her PhD, she investigates how members of religious organizations interpret and pursue the goal of assessing the members' practices with environmental criteria.

[1] Pope Francis, *Laudatio Si'*. (Vatican City: Vatican Press, 2015) § 3.

[2] Gojowczyk, Jiska: "How religious leaders may influence climate change regulation: The success of the papal encyclical *Laudatio Si'*", *Governance Across Borders*, (June 19, 2015); <http://governancexborders.com/2015/06/19/how-religious-leaders-may-influence-climate-change-regulation-the-success-of-the-papal-encyclical-laudatio-si/> (<http://governancexborders.com/2015/06/19/how-religious-leaders-may-influence-climate-change-regulation-the-success-of-the-papal-encyclical-laudatio-si/>)

[3] Pope Francis, *Laudatio Si'*, § 2.

[4] Pope Francis, *Laudatio Si'*, § 53.

[5] Cf. e.g. Francis, *Laudatio Si'*, § 14, § 109.

[6] Adam Vaughan and Isaac Atwal, "EU united for ambitious, binding agreement at Paris talks, says climate chief," *The Guardian*, September 18, 2015. <http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2015/sep/18/eu-united-for-ambitious-binding-agreement-at-paris-talks-says-climate-chief>.

[7] CIDSE, "Press release: Catholic Church worldwide calls for urgent climate action and for a major break-through at the COP 21 Paris Conference," doi: November 5, 2015. <http://www.cidse.org/newsroom/press-release-catholic-church-worldwide-calls-for-urgent-climate-action-and-for-a-major-break-through-at-the-cop-21-paris-conference.html>.

[8] Rosie Scammell, "Ex-climate negotiator hopes for 'miracle' on people's pilgrimage," *The Guardian*, September 30 2015. <http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2015/sep/30/ex-climate-negotiator-peoples-pilgrimage-pope-francis-yeb-sano-walk-rome-paris>.

[9] Pope Francis, *Laudatio Si'*, § 13, § 14.

 **Tags:** Catholicism (<http://councilforeuropeanstudies.org/critcom/tag/catholicism/>)
Environment (<http://councilforeuropeanstudies.org/critcom/tag/environment/>)
Social Movements (<http://councilforeuropeanstudies.org/critcom/tag/social-movements/>)