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# Pope Francis' new environmental message - will global leaders listen to him this time?



Pope Francis' most recent message on the environment and mitigating the causes of climate change showed great disappointment and criticism of world leaders.

Last Wednesday, Pope Francis issued a follow-up to his famous 2015 environmental encyclical. He used sharp words demanding decisive environmental action from global leaders before it was too late.

"The world in which we live is collapsing and may be nearing breaking point", said Pope Francis. His sharp warning from the message is much shorter (13 pages) than the previous one from 2015 (180 pages) and somewhat lower in rank than the encyclical, which is the highest level of the address in terms of significance.

With only a brief spiritual component, the Pope's "Laudate Deum" (Praise God) address was firmly based on statistical data and scientific analysis of climate change. It is more of a policy paper or agenda calling for action rather than the moral appeal that one might expect from a religious leader.

Pope Francis will be remembered as a great pope precisely because of the unconventionality of his mission, as he makes a significant effort to achieve results in the fight for a clean planet, which is undoubtedly one of the pillars of his pontificate.

## Fighting the relativisation of climate problems

In a new message, Pope Francis condemned all critics and those who relativise global warming even more harshly, saying that "signs of climate change are here and increasingly evident".

"It is no longer possible to doubt the human - "anthropic" - origin of climate change", wrote Pope Francis in the apostolic exhortation.

Pope Francis, as the head of the largest religious community in the world, will carry enormous credit for silencing those voices

who rejected the scientific evidence of severe climate change caused by human hands in the last 50 years, even if he does not witness progress in stopping global warming during his lifetime.

In his last message, he admitted he encountered "certain dismissive and scarcely reasonable opinions even within the Catholic Church".

## Perfect timing for the alarm

The Pope's message comes at the right time, just ahead of the annual global climate conference COP-28, in Dubai at the end of November. When Pope Francis sent his encyclical before the Paris climate meeting 8 years ago, he did the same thing, and dozens of world leaders cited his words.

Pope Francis expects a similar effect now. His message seems to be designed more for the ears of politicians and technocrats, who make decisions, than for millions of spiritual followers, who are as concerned about the environment as the Pope himself but not in a strong enough position to take action.

The Pope's message has one more significant timing. It came right after the UN General Assembly last September, which discussed the pace of meeting the Sustainable Development Goals exactly halfway - from 2015, when they were adopted, to 2030, when they should be achieved.

Those results are meagre. Only 15% of goals were fully achieved within the agreed time and quality. This is another reason for the rather sharp tone of the Pope's message, in which he calls for stronger and more united global action regarding the climate.

## Old multilateralism is not enough, but what is better?

The Pope is dissatisfied with the functioning of multilateralism and "old diplomacy", as he

described it. He is searching for a new model of global cooperation regarding the environment: "more than saving the old multilateralism, it appears that the current challenge is to reconfigure and recreate it, taking into account the new world situation".

However, he did not go further than that because he would perhaps step too far from his spiritual mission and enter global politics.

Pope Francis supported established international fora that considered the views of civil society, but he was hesitant to specify the path of the new multilateralism he was advocating.

The tone of his message would have been well suited if, for example, he mentioned the G20 forum as a place having both the potential and enough power, but also the greatest responsibility for damaging the climate, to accelerate global climate action.

G20 members account for 85% of global GDP and 75% of world trade and are responsible for 80% of global carbon dioxide emissions and 70% of plastic production. Two-thirds of the world's population and more than half of all the world's impoverished people live in them.

## Why did the Pope spare China?

Instead, he stuck to his earlier criticism of corporate interests and "Western irresponsibility", with a slightly controversial argument that cast the US in a negative light and spared China.

"If we consider that emissions per individual in the United States are about 2 times greater than those of individuals living in China, and about 7 times greater than the average of the poorest countries, we can state that a broad change in the irresponsible lifestyle connected with the Western model would have a significant long-term impact", wrote Pope Francis.

Even though this relationship between the US and China is undoubtedly correct, it absolves

China of the role of the largest global emitter of greenhouse gases by far (about 10,000 metric tons per year), which is twice as much as the US.

The number of inhabitants has no bearing regarding the detrimental effects on the climate. China is by far the biggest global cause of climate change due to the bad decisions of its national leadership in managing the economy. Therefore, China deserved an explicit reprimand, but it was absent in the Pope's message.

## Scope for action within the Catholic Church

The latest message of the "green pope" will once again impact global leaders and will no doubt be an incentive to move forward and be more committed to fulfilling the obligations they took on in Paris in 2015.

But the Roman Catholic Church and the Pope himself still have a lot of room for action on the "micro-level", including among their believers.

In anticipation of the Pope's new environmental message, the Pew Research Centre recently recalled its last year's survey on the attitude of Catholics in the US on climate issues, which gave a rather gloomy picture of the awareness of this group regarding the action that their leader persistently calls for.

There is a political division regarding this issue. Catholics in the US are concerned about the state of the climate if they support the Democratic Party (82%). Only 25% of Republican sympathisers consider climate disruption a significant issue.

Only one in 10 believers who attend church at least once a month reported that sermons address climate change. The Catholic Church should be even more concerned about this.

An equal number of Christians claimed to have

listened to sermons that assured them "they do not need to worry about climate change."