

Responding to the Invitation: Fostering a Bolder Response to *Laudato Si'*

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CLIMATE CHANGE IS A SERIOUS ISSUE FACING our global community and—thankfully—most Americans recognize this. According to a Yale study, 72 percent of Americans believe that global warming is happening, and 57 percent believe this warming is mostly caused by human activities.¹ Additionally, at least three-fourths of Americans support the funding of renewable energy sources, tax rebates for fuel-efficient vehicles and solar panels, and regulations on carbon dioxide emissions. Data from the Pew Research Center demonstrate that two-thirds of Americans think the federal government is not doing enough to reduce the effects of global climate change and three-fourths believe that it is more important to develop alternative energy than to expand our fossil fuel sources.² This is good news.

Here, I want to explore the impact of *Laudato Si'* on climate change attitudes and practices, to discover the lessons its release and the six years that follow bring us, so that we might learn from the ways its potential impact fell short and how we might embolden its impact going forward.

FOUR NEEDS....AND INVITATIONS

Laudato Si' made a difference. The Yale Program on Climate Change Communication and George Mason University administered two surveys seven months apart, the first in March 2015—two months

¹ Jennifer Marlon, Peter Howe, Matto Mildeberger, Anthony Leiserowitz, and Xinran Wang, "Yale Climate Opinion Maps 2020," *Yale Program on Climate Change Communication*, climatecommunication.yale.edu/visualizations-data/ycom-us.

² Cary Funk and Meg Hefferon, "U.S. Public Views on Climate and Energy," *Pew Research Center*, November 25, 2019, www.pewresearch.org/science/2019/11/25/u-s-public-views-on-climate-and-energy.

before the release of *Laudato Si'*—and the second in October 2015—five months after the release. These two waves of survey data allow us to see how people's views on climate change shifted with the publication of *Laudato Si'*. Generally, the findings show that *Laudato Si'* made a difference, with Catholics (35 percent) more likely to say that the encyclical shaped their thinking on the issue than Americans broadly (17 percent).³

One of the most obvious factors that allows Pope Francis to be such an influence is his popularity. Pope Francis's favorability among American Catholics was 82 percent according to the most recent Pew survey.⁴ His popularity extends beyond Catholics, too. Although he is perceived somewhat less favorably among white evangelicals (45 percent), roughly seven in ten white mainline Protestants and six in ten of those not affiliated with any religious tradition have a favorable view of Pope Francis. For a religious leader, favorability easily translates into moral trust and influence, and Pope Francis clearly enjoys this in the impact of *Laudato Si'*.

But a more pressing question is why didn't *Laudato Si'* have more of an impact? I want to draw our attention to four needs that, if met, would effect a bolder appropriation of *Laudato Si'* by American Catholics: 1) healing our polarization, 2) increased discussion of *Laudato Si'* by Church leaders, 3) a deeper appreciation of the ways civic engagement intersects with our faith, and 4) a more accurate and life-giving understanding of humanity's relationship to the rest of creation. I believe that if we can begin to meet these needs, American Catholics—as well as Americans generally—will more effectively respond to climate change.

Need One: Healing Our Polarization

Beginning with the first need, American Catholics, like Americans generally, are characterized by polarization.⁵ Data collected in 2017 by William D'Antonio's research team helps paint a quick picture of

³ Edward Maibach, Anthony Leiserowitz, Connie Roser-Renouf, Teresa Myers, Seth Rosenthal, and Geoff Feinberg, "The Francis Effect: How Pope Francis Changed the Conversation about Global Warming," *George Mason University Center for Climate Change Communication and Yale Program on Climate Change Communication*, 15, www.climatechangecommunication.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/2015-Nov-The_Francis_Effect.pdf.

⁴ Claire Gecewicz, "Americans, including Catholics, continue to have favorable views of Pope Francis," *Pew Research Center*, www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/06/25/americans-including-catholics-continue-to-have-favorable-views-of-pope-francis.

⁵ Mary Ellen Konieczny, Charles C. Camosy, and Tricia C. Bruce, eds., *Polarization in the US Catholic Church: Naming the Wounds, Beginning to Heal* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2016).

Catholic polarization.⁶ When we ask Catholics about their political ideology, 14 percent understand themselves as very conservative, 26 percent as moderately conservative, 31 percent as moderate, 19 percent as moderately liberal, and 9 percent as very liberal; so when it comes to ideology, Catholics lean conservative. But this lean goes the other way when asking about party, with 44 percent identifying as Democrat, 22 percent not identifying with a party, and 28 percent as Republican; Catholics lean conservative ideologically but lean Democrat when it comes to party affiliation. So, we are all over the political map, and I think this political diversity, when we're at our best, is a good thing.

The tricky thing about polarization when it comes to climate change is that political affiliation and ideology seem to be some of the strongest attitudinal predictors for the issue. The Pew Research Center found that there is a large gap between Democrats and Republicans in their belief that human activity contributes "a great deal" to climate change (Democrats 72 percent vs. Republicans 22 percent) and in their belief that the federal government is doing too little to reduce the effects of climate change (Democrats 89 percent vs. Republicans 35 percent).⁷ We need to ensure that Catholic political diversity does not lead to factionalism with regards to climate change.

There are many political issues that red and blue and purple Catholics could all grow from with some robust and charitable dialogue.⁸ I, for one, am thankful that Catholics are a politically diverse community and can have lively conversations on issues that affect the common good. We need politically different Catholics to pull us out of our political communities and back to our Catholic community where we can ask Catholic questions like: What does solidarity have to say to this issue? Does anything in this policy risk compromising the dignity of the human person? How are the poor and vulnerable going to be affected? Questions like these can mobilize more Republican Catholics to help curb climate change, and they are definitely open to it! Even with the political gap in attitudes about climate change, strong majorities of moderate Republicans support a variety of climate change efforts, including those that restrict industries and demand

⁶ William D'Antonio, Michele Dillon, and Mary Gautier, dataset from "The Sixth Nationwide Survey of American Catholics in a Changing Church," 2017.

⁷ Alec Tyson and Brian Kennedy, "Two-Thirds of Americans Think Government Should Do More on Climate," June 23, 2020, *Pew Research Center*, www.pewresearch.org/science/2020/06/23/two-thirds-of-americans-think-government-should-do-more-on-climate.

⁸ Maureen K. Day, "Why are We at Each Other's Throats? Healing Polarization in Our Church," *National Catholic Reporter*, November 30, 2018, www.ncronline.org/news/opinion/why-are-we-each-others-throats-healing-polarization-our-church.

green innovation.⁹ And progressive Catholics will be more successful if they use language that resonates with conservatives. Social psychologists have found that conservatives are more persuaded by climate change arguments when they are presented within a frame of purity, that is, a frame that keeps creation unpolluted, undefiled and prevents degradation.¹⁰ Gather around what is held in common and appeal to the deeply held convictions of one another. Politically different Catholics share more in common with one another than they think. Let's have new conversations.

Need Two: Increased Discussion of Laudato Si' by Church Leaders

The second need is more frequent discussion of *Laudato Si'*, especially from Catholic leaders. Substantial percentages of Catholics (56 percent) and Americans generally (45 percent) had heard about the encyclical five months after its release.¹¹ These media numbers are much higher than those remembering the encyclical being discussed in their place of worship, with only 26 percent of Catholics, 16 percent of evangelicals and 9 percent of mainline Protestants reporting hearing *Laudato Si'* discussed in church. And additional research shows that less than one percent of diocesan publication columns written by nearly all US Catholic bishops around the time of *Laudato Si'* mention the phrases "climate change" or "global warming."¹² Public media is doing a better job at spreading the good news than we Catholics are.

We need to make sure we get the word out because reading or hearing about *Laudato Si'* is associated with greater belief in the reality of climate change. A 2016 CARA study found that reading or hearing about *Laudato Si'* was correlated with believing that the earth is warming and that this warming is largely a result of human activity.¹³ The study also underscored the influence of Church leaders. Thirty-two percent of Catholics say that statements by Pope Francis led them to conclude or strengthened their belief that they have a moral responsibility to combat climate change. The percentages drop to the high teens when these respondents are asked about the influence of their bishop, pastor, or other Catholic minister. Given the other data, these

⁹ Tyson and Kennedy, "Two-Thirds of Americans."

¹⁰ Matthew Feinberg and Robb Willer, "Moral Reframing: A Technique for Effective and Persuasive Communication across Political Divides," *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* 13, no. 12 (2019): 5.

¹¹ Maibach, Leiserowitz, Roser-Renouf, Myers, Rosenthal, and Feinberg, "The Francis Effect," 5.

¹² Sabrina Danielsen, Daniel R. DiLeo, and Emily E. Burke, "U.S. Catholic Bishops' Silence and Denialism on Climate Change," *Environmental Research Letters* 16, no. 11 (2021): 114006.

¹³ Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, "CARA Catholic Poll (CCP) 2016: Attitudes about Climate Change," *Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate*, cara.georgetown.edu/climate%20summary.pdf.

lower numbers are likely not because these leaders are intrinsically without influence, but simply because many leaders have not raised the issue.

What prevents some of us from talking about *Laudato Si'*? It may be challenging for leaders to feel they have any influence at all when climate change has been made a partisan issue and few of us enjoy Pope Francis's popularity. The 2017 data collected by the D'Antonio team found that 84 percent of American Catholics were satisfied with Pope Francis's leadership.¹⁴ But only 69 percent are satisfied with the national bishops, and it rises a bit with 74 percent satisfied with their local bishop and 78 percent with their parish priest. Bishops, especially as a body, need to build public trust so that they, too, may be seen as legitimate partners in dialogue and for their pronouncements to be more readily accepted.

So how do Church leaders initiate these discussions? Before we dive into dialogue, it would help to understand how the Church's influence and efficacy has changed, which is carefully outlined in Michele Dillon's *Postsecular Catholicism*.¹⁵ A few decades ago, Catholic leaders only influenced Catholics. Our clergy were imagined to be moral authorities for Catholics but not beyond us. Further, their expertise was limited to the realm of theology, and other disciplines—like medicine, the economy, state governance—were left in the hands of their own experts. Now, we recognize that social concerns do not fit into a single discipline in a tidy way. Climate change, for instance, has biological, ecological, sociological, economic, ethical, religious, and other dimensions. We understand that a comprehensive solution will need experts from a variety of fields. This transition means that the Catholic hierarchy is no longer *the* voice of influence among Catholics, it is *one of many* influential voices. Despite this loss in exclusive authority, it is now a voice that is heard *beyond* Catholicism. This shift poses its challenges; no longer is office alone enough to claim moral authority. But this shift is also pregnant with opportunities. Catholic leaders, when they rely upon cogent and compelling arguments, become one among many authoritative voices in the public square, broadening the reach and influence of the Church.

Demonstrating this beyond-Catholicism influence, a CARA study found that among those of no religious affiliation, 95 percent who recall hearing about *Laudato Si'* believe society should be taking steps to combat climate change; only 77 percent of those unaffiliated who have not heard about *Laudato Si'* feel this way.¹⁶ We don't want to

¹⁴ D'Antonio, Dillon, and Gautier, "The Sixth Nationwide Survey."

¹⁵ Michele Dillon, *Postsecular Catholicism: Relevance and Renewal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

¹⁶ Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, "CARA Catholic Poll."

make causal leaps from correlations, yet these findings tell us something very important. They show that the Church is being heard by audiences beyond Catholics themselves; let's continue, and even increase, the dialogue.

We must also consider ways Church leaders might rebuild their trust. Yes, one of the reasons that *Laudato Si'* was able to have an impact was Pope Francis's favorability, a level that few Church leaders can match. But we should recognize that speaking courageously and acts of valor do not need to come *after* we have become popular; being virtuous is attractive and can actually increase popularity and influence. The Yale study reveals that American (from 53 percent to 60 percent) and American Catholic (75 percent to 88 percent) favorability toward the Pope increased after *Laudato Si'* and his visit to the United States.¹⁷ Likewise, a greater share of Americans (from 51 percent to 62 percent) and American Catholics (from 65 percent to 71 percent) trust the Pope as a source of climate change information after the publication, as well.¹⁸ In short, Pope Francis's popularity and trust as an authority on this issue grew after *Laudato Si'*. Bishops can do the same thing. They can talk to leaders and experts in their dioceses and beyond to have a better sense of the issue and how it will affect our country. Bishops need to talk to one other, especially the bishops who are more ambivalent or are unsure how to effectively speak on climate change. In becoming savvier on the issue, they can share the most inspiring aspects of *Laudato Si'* with the faithful, demonstrating the relevance of Catholicism in our public life and proclaiming the goodness of God's creation with confidence. In initiating a dialogue that many lay Catholics recognize is a pressing issue, the bishops are displaying shared concern and solidarity with their flock, truly smelling of their sheep. The bishops can then take what they've learned and more boldly proclaim—as a national body as well as individually—the urgency of climate change for American public life, supported by the hope of their people.

We should also note that women religious are seen as a legitimate moral voice for Catholics and their potential influence is virtually untapped. A 2012 Pew survey found that 83 percent of American Catholics are satisfied with the leadership of US sisters.¹⁹ Through their tenacity, efficiency, and devotion, they are a vivid reminder that virtuous living increases authority and moral status. Catholic sisters carry a tremendous amount of moral capital in American society. However,

¹⁷ Maibach, Leiserowitz, Roser-Renouf, Myers, Rosenthal, and Feinberg, "The Francis Effect," 7.

¹⁸ Maibach, Leiserowitz, Roser-Renouf, Myers, Rosenthal, and Feinberg, "The Francis Effect," 8.

¹⁹ Pew Research Center, "Catholics Share Bishops' Concerns about Religious Liberty," *Pew Research Center*, August 1, 2012, www.pewforum.org/2012/08/01/2012-catholic-voters-religious-liberty-issue/#leaders.

much of their work is away from the public eye. I want to invite sisters to consider the ways they might more publicly utilize the trust and moral capital they so obviously enjoy shaping the American imagination more robustly. Our society needs the wealth of your communities' experiences to have renewed conversations about climate change. Please help lead us in this. Finally, those who are ordained or professed, elevate the voices of lay experts and empower everyday lay people who have much to share on this. Too often Catholics turn to clergy and religious for moral guidance; know when to shift our attention to the laity. In short, leaders—whether ordained, professed, or lay—even while being sensitive and humble, consider the ways you might more boldly speak, dialogue and act in ways that will make manifest the vision articulated in *Laudato Si'*.

Need Three: Understanding the Relationship Between Civic Engagement and Faith

The third need for a bolder appropriation of *Laudato Si'* is a greater appreciation among Catholics for social reform. Several studies have found this aversion to political action when examining Americans and the way they view social problems and choose to engage (or not) in American public life; often citizens, including Catholics, opt for personal changes over social changes.²⁰ Sometimes even activists themselves employ personal language, such as protecting their families, to explain their activism.²¹ This political aversion is not unique to Americans.²² Although the publication of *Laudato Si'* saw a seven point increase in the number of Americans who believe that the United States should reduce greenhouse gas emissions regardless of what other countries plan to do, rising from 54 percent to 61 percent, far fewer changed in their perception of which political actors these responsibilities should fall to.²³ While many Americans identified corporations and industry (roughly two-thirds), citizens themselves (roughly two-thirds), Congress (just under six in ten) and President Obama (just under half) as political agents who should do “more” or “much more” to address global warming, these numbers were very stable before and after the publication of *Laudato Si'*. Similarly, although the majority

²⁰ Nina Eliasoph, *Avoiding Politics: How Americans Produce Apathy in Everyday Life* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998). Maureen K. Day, *Catholic Activism Today: Individual Transformation and the Struggle for Social Justice* (New York: New York University Press, 2020).

²¹ Paul Lichterman, *The Search for Political Community: American Activists Reinventing Commitment* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 87–88.

²² Bin Xu, *The Politics of Compassion: The Sichuan Earthquake and Civic Engagement in China* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2017), 137–142, 198–199.

²³ Maibach, Leiserowitz, Roser-Renouf, Myers, Rosenthal, and Feinberg, “The Francis Effect,” 36.

support the United States undertaking large or moderate efforts to curb global warming, *Laudato Si'* did not seem to affect people's responses; the encyclical changed our personal attitudes but not our political buy-in. We need to remember that public engagement and social reform is part of being Catholic.

An important aspect of my research, and troubling to my American Catholic sensibilities, is that Catholics have lost sight of the importance of participatory democracy. The bishops' document, *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, is clear that Catholics should be active citizens writing, "[R]esponsible citizenship is a virtue, and participation in political life is a moral obligation."²⁴ While we might more readily feel compassion, encounter, and kinship when we provide aid at the individual level, these feelings should propel us into long-term and larger-scale change.²⁵ St. Thomas recognized that a human person is a "civic and social animal" (ST I-II, q. 72, a. 4), but we are turning increasingly inward.²⁶ Let us remind one another of the ways our personal holiness is connected to visions of the common good and see ourselves as citizen-disciples.

Again, we need interdisciplinary conversations if we are going to solve this complicated and urgent issue in a timely and effective way. For most of us, to be active in climate justice does not require understanding all things political; rather it means bringing a Catholic voice to the table. *Laudato Si'* provides tremendous wisdom for the spiritual, moral and human dimensions of the climate change issue. We can bring good news of hope, liberation, compassion, fidelity, and justice as we call for a restraint of greed and a right relationship with our common home. We can help illuminate the issue, offering our piece and learning from others, expanding everyone's imaginations. Let's stoke an old fire and remember that social reform is a part of the American Catholic tradition.²⁷

We see some promising evidence that *Laudato Si'* did shift people's imaginations. Before *Laudato Si'*, 32 percent of Americans considered climate change to be a moral issue.²⁸ After *Laudato Si'*, just seven months after the first survey, that percentage jumped to 38 percent. Likewise, we saw an eight-point gain among those who viewed

²⁴ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship: A Call to Political Responsibility from the Catholic Bishops of the United States* (Washington DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2020), no. 13.

²⁵ Day, *Catholic Activism Today*, 197–198.

²⁶ Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000).

²⁷ Sharon Erickson Nepstad, *Catholic Social Activism: Progressive Movements in the United States* (New York: New York University Press, 2019). David J. O'Brien, *Public Catholicism*, 2nd ed. (New York: Orbis Books, 1996).

²⁸ Maibach, Leiserowitz, Roser-Renouf, Myers, Rosenthal, and Feinberg, "The Francis Effect," 6.

climate change as a social justice issue, and a four-point gain among those understanding it to be a spiritual and a religious issue.²⁹ *Laudato Si'* is slowly expanding people's imaginations, giving people more tools to think about and effectively respond to climate change. And, as experiences are one of the most powerful tools for seeing our reality in a new way, inviting Catholics into political engagement through parish and diocesan opportunities could be transformative. If you are not sure where to start, programs like those offered by JustFaith Ministries are excellent.³⁰ Talk to one another, see what is out there; we are in this together! Let us work to foster a greater understanding of the citizen-disciple for American Catholics.

Need Four: A More Robust Understanding of Humanity's Relationship to Creation

The final need is to totally dismantle false notions of humanity's relationship to creation in favor of what is articulated in *Laudato Si'*. Until very recently, environmental concerns were often framed as the environment versus people. Do you remember when it was the spotted owl versus loggers who needed to feed their families? Then it was reducing beef in our diet to curb methane versus ensuring that growing children got enough protein and iron. It was developing genetically modified corn to feed more people versus the survival of the monarch butterfly. This discursive frame was present not only in popular thinking but in Catholic discussion of the issue as well. Until recently, American Catholic media outlets framed these issues as a choice between the environment and human beings.³¹ The dominant way of thinking was that environment supplied jobs and resources to further human life, and streams might have to be polluted and animals might have to go extinct in the process. The bad effects were seen as unfortunate, but morally necessary given the alternative. While this view was certainly waning before *Laudato Si'*, the encyclical powerfully admonishes this false binary, condemning both a "tyrannical anthropocentrism" and the technocratic paradigm that allows modernization, technological developments, and the unbridled appropriation of resources to run its course with little ethical scrutiny (no. 68). The old paradigm is obviously destructive and *Laudato Si'* clearly spells out that humans are not to exploit creation, rather we exist as a part of creation. We need to help shift imaginations, to help us see that it is a gift to depend upon other creatures and to live humbly as human persons.

²⁹ Maibach, Leiserowitz, Roser-Renouf, Myers, Rosenthal, and Feinberg, "The Francis Effect," 6, 32.

³⁰ JustFaith Ministries, "Our Programs," *JustFaith Ministries*, 2021, www.justfaith.org/programs.

³¹ Nepstad, *Catholic Social Activism*, 151–154.

This is an invitation to plumb the resources of our tradition and amplify aspects that have always shown our connection to creation. I would argue that the Franciscan tradition has much to offer here. Pope Leo XIII's 1879 *Aeterni Patris* established St. Thomas Aquinas's thought as the dominant philosophical viewpoint in Roman Catholicism. However, we can still look beyond Thomas when other traditions offer us relevant insights. For instance, Thomas—a Dominican—and his contemporary St. Bonaventure—a Franciscan—emphasized different aspects of God. When Thomas discussed God, the vast majority of the time he emphasized the oneness of God; Bonaventure, on the other hand, leaned into the triune nature of God.³² That is, Bonaventure lifts up the qualities of distinction, particularity and relationship within the Trinity, and this triune understanding of God has been the core of Franciscan thought ever since.³³

How we view God must matter for everything and emphasizing God's oneness will illuminate some things while it obscures others. Consider solidarity. If we start with an image of God that amplifies God's oneness, our solidarity will rest on a universalism. We'll easily see the characteristics creation shares. But in only emphasizing what we universally hold in common, we risk missing what distinguishes us. The Franciscan approach highlights what sets each species apart, the special role each plays in its particular ecosystem and the relationships each shares with other creatures. It calls our attention to our shared interdependence. Of course, hang on to the universal commonalities we share that Thomas highlights, but hold these beside the realization that I need you, you need me, and we all need earthworms, streams, sharks, honeybees, fireflies, mushrooms, elephants, amoebas, glaciers, old growth forests and the whole rest of our earth. We all matter, and we each matter. Nothing is insignificant. The whole and the parts and the web of relationships connecting all of us are precious. Let's plumb the riches of the Catholic tradition and discover the depths of the invitation we are being offered.

In closing, I want to fully admit that some of the needs I have highlighted are great. Healing our polarization and revivifying the social reform tradition of Catholicism will take long-term, coordinated, cooperative efforts. Other needs, like hearing more on *Laudato Si'*, especially from our leaders, and plumbing our tradition to rediscover the resources it provides for understanding our relationship to creation, can start tonight. But large or small, a common thread to all these

³² Joseph Chinnici, Mary Beth Ingham, and Thomas Nairn, "Franciscan Moral Vision: Responding to God's Love," Presented at Franciscan Forum X, Colorado Springs, Colorado, March 27–29, 2014.

³³ Kenan B. Osborne, *The History of Franciscan Theology* (St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute Publications, 2007); Thomas A. Nairn, *The Franciscan Moral Vision: Responding to God's Love* (St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute Publications, 2013).

needs is an invitation to be more deeply, more intentionally, more authentically Catholic. Both as individuals and as Church, let us bring our faith to public life and work toward a more just, compassionate, and wondrous relationship with our common home. **M**

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