

# The Cry of the Climate and the Cry of the Poor:

## Pope Francis's Urgent Appeal for Climate Justice

by Tomás Insua

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*"I commend His Holiness [Pope Francis] and all faith leaders here, for raising awareness of the urgent need to promote sustainable development and address climate . . . Your influence is enormous. You speak to the heart of humanity's deepest hopes and needs."*

Ban Ki-moon, former UN secretary general, addressing an interfaith climate summit at the Vatican.<sup>1</sup>

### WHAT WOULD CATCH your attention?

A scientist explaining that "key components of the Earth's climate system could pass their tipping point this century,"<sup>2</sup> or Pope Francis stating that "we are at the limit! We are on the verge of suicide"<sup>3</sup> with regard to climate change? What strikes you as a plea for justice? A scientist explaining that "climate-related hazards exacerbate other stressors, often with negative outcomes for livelihoods, especially for people living in poverty"<sup>4</sup> or Pope Francis warning that "it is the poorest of the poor who suffer the consequences with the most difficulty!"<sup>5</sup>

Even though those statements describe the same phenomena, you probably found the pope's message communicating the urgency and injustice of the climate crisis to be more compelling. As an unexpected messenger who makes bold statements in down-to-earth language, Pope Francis is an enthralling climate communicator. The pope also has exceptionally high media visibility and moral authority as an advocate for the poor, making him a powerful icon in the fight for climate justice.

Pope Francis's climate advocacy reached its pinnacle in June 2015 with the release of his groundbreaking encyclical letter *Laudato Si': On Care for our*

*Common Home*. An encyclical is the most authoritative teaching document a pope can issue, and *Laudato Si'* was addressed not only to the world's 1.2 billion Catholics but "to all people of good will."<sup>\*</sup> The timing was significant as it was an intentional call for action to governments convening five months later for the Paris Climate Summit—the result of twenty-one years of stalled UN negotiations to sign a climate agreement.<sup>†</sup>

While scientists and policy makers usually dominate the debates on climate

mobilize global action.<sup>6</sup> The complexity of climate change and the politics surrounding it relegate the issue to a low priority for most citizens and policy makers, even if they are aware of the catastrophic implications.

When appealing to people's minds proves ineffective, speaking to their hearts can provide an alternative means for action. Considering that 84 percent of people globally have a religious affiliation, faith leaders have the potential to become influential allies to the scientific community and make a decisive con-

## POPE FRANCIS'S LEADERSHIP INDICATES THAT WORLD RELIGIONS COULD HAVE AN IMPORTANT ROLE IN THE JOURNEY AHEAD TO TACKLE THE CLIMATE CRISIS.

change, the pope's advocacy helped frame the issue in moral terms relatable to a lay audience. Pope Francis's leadership indicates that world religions could have an important role in the journey ahead to tackle the climate crisis.

### AN UNLIKELY PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN SCIENCE AND RELIGION

While the scientific community has compiled unequivocal evidence on how human activities disrupt the climate system, this has not been enough to

tribute in motivating humanity to change course.<sup>7</sup> Multiple conferences and publications on the intersection of science, religion, and ecology are testaments to the increased collaboration between the scientific and faith communities in the face of the environmental challenge.<sup>‡</sup>

Moreover, a commonality of religion and climate science is that they recognize no national boundaries and stress that interconnectedness is at the core of the climate crisis. Science unequivocally emphasizes that the causes and consequences of climate change

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\* This encyclical was particularly newsworthy because it was the first time in two thousand years that a pope devoted an encyclical exclusively to ecology. It is important to note that *Laudato Si'* is a comprehensive document that examines other socio-ecological issues beyond climate change and develops a holistic moral framework that covers other principles beyond justice toward the poor.

† As Francis explained, "The important thing is that there be a bit of time between the issuing of the encyclical and the meeting in Paris, so that it can make a contribution . . . Let's hope that in Paris the delegates will be courageous." See: <http://bit.ly/2iu7sWp>.

‡ For instance, the Forum on Religion and Ecology at Yale is a twenty-year-old international network that has convened interdisciplinary conferences, published books, and collected relevant statements. See [fore.yale.edu](http://fore.yale.edu)

are blind to country borders. One ton of CO<sub>2</sub> has the same warming effect on the global climate regardless of its country of origin, affecting all countries to a certain degree. Meanwhile, the world's major religions share a concern for the deep ties binding peoples, as illustrated by the writings of Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim.<sup>8</sup> "Our planet is a homeland and . . . humanity is one people living in a common home," said Pope Francis.<sup>9</sup>

Both perspectives are critical and must be given consideration, as national boundaries are at the heart of the thorny nature of the UN negotiations. Distrust between geopolitical competitors is a recurrent problem that impedes the cooperation needed to address climate change. Pope Francis has made a decisive contribution in stressing both the urgency and the injustice of the climate crisis.

## THE URGENCY: THE CRY OF THE CLIMATE

Pope Francis acknowledges the scientific facts of climate change early on in *Laudato Si'* and stresses the severe urgency of the crisis, which many in the scientific community in turn acknowledged. He begins by stating that "it is [his] hope that this Encyclical Letter . . . can help us to acknowledge the appeal, immensity and urgency of the challenge we face."<sup>10</sup> This urgent tone permeates the whole document. Pope Francis uses accessible vocabulary to bring attention to the planetary state of emergency that continues to worsen, with key climate metrics breaking records year after year:<sup>11</sup> "our common home is falling into serious disrepair . . . we can see signs that things are now reaching a breaking point."<sup>12</sup>

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# CLIMATE CHANGE IS ULTIMATELY A MORAL CRISIS

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The pope's emphasis on the urgency contrasts with the business-as-usual operating mode of many politicians. Despite significant progress in scaling up the deployment of renewable energy,

most countries continue to subsidize and build new fossil fuel infrastructure, guaranteeing new and sizable carbon emissions for the next few decades.<sup>13</sup> This is in stark contradiction with the extremely ambitious goal of the Paris Agreement to

"pursue efforts to limit the temperature increase to 1.5 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels," which requires countries to transition from fossil fuels to clean energy sources in a very short timeframe.<sup>14</sup>

All 197 countries agreed to the 1.5 degrees Celsius target because it is the threshold beyond which climate change will likely become catastrophic for many vulnerable communities while exacerbating the risk of crossing planetary "tipping points" that would unleash run-away climate disruption.<sup>15</sup> According to the conservative estimate by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), on a business-as-usual trajectory we would have a 50 percent probability of exceeding the "carbon budget" in just eight years, increasing global temperatures beyond the 1.5-degree threshold.<sup>16</sup> Changing course in time to avoid crossing this red line is a massive and urgent undertaking that cannot wait for new technological miracles to arrive in a few decades. The urgency, as Francis reminds us, could not be greater.

The head-in-the-sand attitude of many political and economic leaders becomes even more worrisome when we consider the scale of fossil fuel extraction operations. Mainstream data from the fossil fuel industry reveals that mines and wells currently in operation have 2.35 times more carbon than the

“carbon budget” to keep temperature increase below the 1.5-degree threshold.<sup>17</sup> In other words, the data suggests that the Paris temperature goal requires the shutdown of 58 percent of the current extraction operations in the fossil fuel industry. The magnitudes are even larger if the wider unexploited reserves are considered—to stay below the 1.5-degree limit, 85 percent of fossil fuel reserves must remain untouched.<sup>18</sup>

Given the conflicting priorities and incentives that limit policy makers’ ability to act, religious leaders have an important role to call for bold action in line with the ambitious aspirations of the Paris Agreement. Pope Francis calls us to embrace “the radical change which present circumstances require” and argues that “the effects of the present imbalance can only be reduced by our decisive action, here and now.”<sup>19</sup>

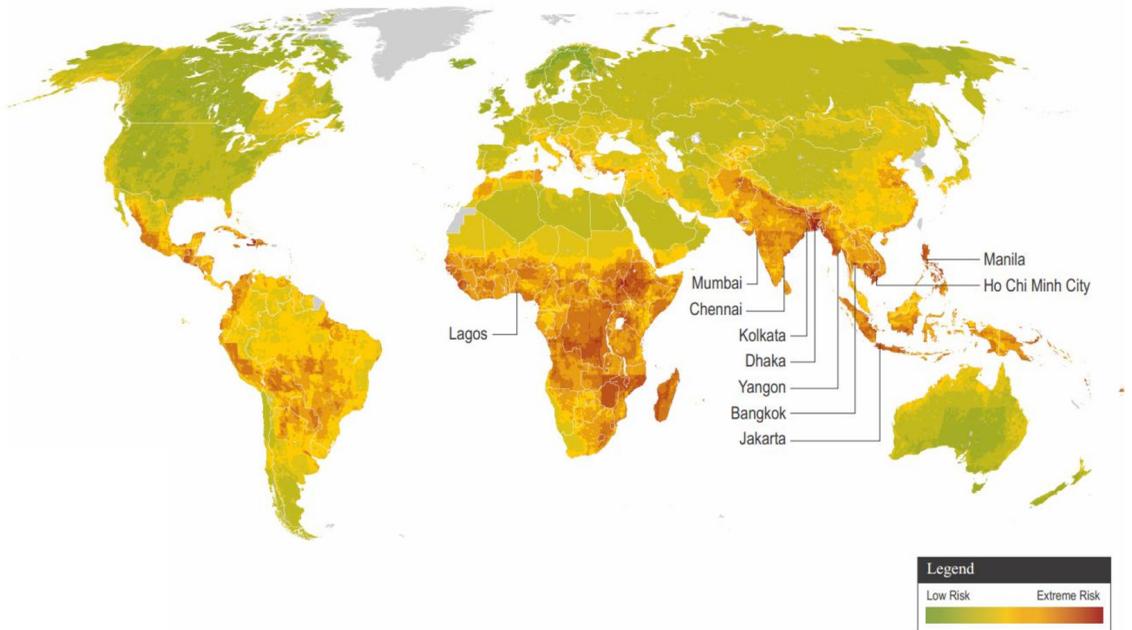
### THE INJUSTICE: THE CRY OF THE POOR

Pope Francis’s moral authority as an advocate for the poor is an im-

portant asset in addressing the social injustice of climate change. The first pope from the developing world, and an Argentine, Pope Francis has put the poor at the core of his agenda. His critique of social injustices and inequitable economic order has gained significant media coverage. As the former archbishop of Buenos Aires, he visited the city’s slums to minister marginalized communities.<sup>20</sup>

In his encyclical, Pope Francis depicts the ecological crisis as an injustice toward the poor in his widely cited call to “hear both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor.”<sup>21</sup> He went on to explain how social justice and the well-being of the planet are two sides of the same coin: “We are faced not with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather with one complex crisis which is both social and environmental.”<sup>22</sup>

Pope Francis has drawn attention to the “double injustice of climate change.”<sup>23</sup> The first injustice is that climate change has the largest impact on the poor, who suffer the most from



Climate Change Vulnerability Index mapping the most vulnerable regions and cities. Source: Maplecroft, 2013.<sup>24</sup>



Cumulative CO<sub>2</sub> emissions (1850–2011), shaded by CO<sub>2</sub> per capita (2013). Source: CarbonMap.org<sup>26</sup>

extreme weather events like floods and hurricanes, increasing water scarcity, reductions in crop yields, and rising sea levels that impact coastal cities. Tropical countries share the commonality of being among the world’s poorest while also being the most vulnerable to climate change, as illustrated in the map below.

The second injustice is that the poor are the least responsible for global greenhouse gas emissions that disrupt the climate system. The logic is straightforward: the fewer goods and services one consumes, the less greenhouse gas emissions one produces. As seen in the chart below, it is industrialized nations like the United States and Australia that have the highest contributions to the climate crisis. This is what Pope Francis calls the “ecological debt . . . between the global north and south.”<sup>25</sup>

## THE CONTRIBUTION TO THE PARIS AGREEMENT

Statements from Pope Francis and other religious groups—like the Islamic Foundation for Ecology and Environmental Sciences—sought to galvanize the faith community.<sup>27</sup> At the same time, sizable faith contingents participated in the global climate march of November 2015 and delivered nearly two million

petition signatures to COP21 political authorities.<sup>28</sup> “The Pope’s encyclical, along with mobilization by many other faith groups across the globe, provided a clear moral imperative for taking climate action, supporting the Paris Climate Change Agreement,” explained Christiana Figueres, the former United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) executive secretary.<sup>29</sup>

The Paris Agreement highlighted the “1.5°C victory,” through which the Climate Vulnerable Forum (CVF), the negotiating block of the forty-three most vulnerable countries, managed to enshrine an ambitious temperature goal. The Catholic Church played an important role in supporting this advocacy effort, through both the Holy See’s diplomatic channels at COP21 and through the mobilization of nearly one million Catholics who signed the 1.5-degree-Celsius petition of the Global Catholic Climate Movement.<sup>30</sup> James Fletcher, Saint Lucia’s former minister for sustainable development and a key CVF leader said, “Our cause was helped tremendously in June 2015, when Pope Francis released his *Laudato Si* encyclical . . . climate vulnerable countries now had a champion who cut across geographic, political and social divides.”<sup>31</sup>

## THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN THE JOURNEY AHEAD

As political momentum from COP21 may decline in upcoming rounds of the UN climate negotiations, world religions have an important role to play to demand more courageous action from governments and corporations. Given the exasperating business-as-usual attitude that continues to pervade the response of many governments—exacerbated by the rise of populist politicians like Donald Trump—the faith community must continue its urgent call for climate justice. Faith groups have already been coordinating their joint advocacy at the UN, for example with the 2016 Interfaith Climate Statements. The challenge that remains is coordinating the faith community at national and subnational levels to advocate for local climate action.<sup>32</sup>

Most importantly, faith communities must focus on their core strength: values. Climate change is ultimately a moral crisis requiring realignment of our values, and world religions have the potential to inspire billions of followers through their spiritual practices and their massive networks of houses of worship and educational institutions. Faith leaders can advance the values of simplicity, community, and the appreciation of nature. As scientists Veerabhadran Ramanathan and Partha Dasgupta argue, “The transformational step may well be a massive mobilization of public opinion by the Vatican and other religions. . . . Over and above institutional reforms and policy changes that are required, there is a need to reorient our attitude toward nature.”<sup>33</sup>

Beyond the inner transformation of humankind, in *Laudato Si'* we are called to question two paradigms that dominate public debate and constrain our collective ability to respond to the climate crisis. On one hand, it challenges the capitalist paradigm that champions a “deified market” and the “modern myth of unlimited material progress” that tramples the environment.<sup>34</sup> On the other hand, it disputes the technocratic

paradigm that trumpets an “irrational confidence in progress,” which makes us hope that illusory technical solutions will fix ecological imbalances.<sup>35</sup> The pope’s appeal is drastic: “Halfway measures simply delay the inevitable disaster. Put simply, [we ought to] redefin[e] our notion of progress.”<sup>36</sup>

Ultimately, the faith community needs to remind us about our inherent goodness and our capacity to collaborate as one human family to tackle the common climate challenge. As Pope Francis put it, “Humanity still has the ability to work together in building our common home. . . . Human beings, while capable of the worst, are also capable of rising above themselves, choosing again what is good and making a new start.”<sup>37</sup> In the end, world religions must be tasked with keeping climate hope alive.

Endnotes can be found online at <http://harvardkennedyschoolreview.com/>