



THE EDUCATION OF POPE FRANCIS

How an Opponent of Liberation Theology Became the Pontiff of Social Justice

By Paul Vallely

When Jorge Mario Bergoglio was elected the bishop of Rome in 2013, he took the name Francis. He was the first man to do so in the two-thousand-year history of the papacy. He was the first, it might be said, to dare to do so.

Shortly after his election, Pope Francis spoke to the press and gave a clear indication of the programmatic intent of his choice of name. People wondered which saint he might have had in mind: Francis Xavier? Francis de Sales? Francis of Assisi? He explained that during the election to choose a successor to Pope Benedict XVI, he was seated next to a good friend, Cardinal Cláudio Hummes, the Archbishop Emeritus of São Paulo and Prefect Emeritus of the Congregation for the Clergy. After the College of Cardinals provided the necessary two-thirds vote, Cardinal Hummes gave the new pope a hug and a kiss, and said: “Don’t forget the poor!” As Francis explained it to the press: “And those words came to me: the poor, the poor. Then, right away, thinking of the poor, I thought of Francis of Assisi. Then I thought of all the wars, as the votes were still being counted, till the end. Francis is also the man of peace. That is how the name came into my heart: Francis of Assisi.”

Few apart from Argentines knew the name Bergoglio, but the world seized upon his chosen name: Francis—the name of the great saint of the poor. For the institutional church it was a signal that the era of power and pageantry, scandal and silk-brocaded vestments, was over; instead a new era bearing the Franciscan virtues of poverty, simplicity, humility, charity, obedience, and wisdom was being ushered in. But this was the first non-European pope for a thousand years, the first pope ever from the southern hemisphere, and that had even wider implications for global justice.

There were two other ways in which the name Francis resonated. The saint from Assisi, who famously preached even

◁ Jorge Bergoglio, then archbishop of Buenos Aires, at a drug rehabilitation center, Buenos Aires, 2011. *Fernando Massobrio/GDA/Associated Press*

to the birds and spoke of the sun and moon as his brother and sister, had a particular attitude to the environment. In an anthropocentric epoch he valued something wider—seeing God at work not just in humankind but in animals, plants, and the whole planet set within a wider created universe. He was also, as the new pope noted, a singular advocate for reconciliation and peace. The ambitious missionary from Assisi had set off for Egypt in 1219 with the intention of converting the infidel to bring an end to the Crusades. But the thirteenth-century saint was changed by what his twenty-first-century name-sake repeatedly refers to as “the culture of encounter.” Entering into enemy territory, Francis was arrested and taken to Sultan Al-Malik Al-Kamil. The monarch, perceiving his captive to be a holy man, received him with courtesy. After three weeks of dialogue Francis left Egypt. Thereafter he was respectful of Muslims to the point that he encouraged Christians to emulate them in prayer and prostration, and to join Muslims—and others—in service to all, setting aside the differences in their religions. And the future saint specifically told his followers not to try to convert the followers of the Prophet.

Pope Francis was putting down a marker about poverty, the environment, and peace as the leitmotifs of his pontificate. Francis was a name to change history.

The Common Good

Catholic Social Teaching is a particular strand of church teaching, which has been developed over the last hundred years since Pope Leo XIII published *Rerum novarum* (*Of New Things*) in 1891 at the height of the Industrial Revolution. It set the church on a course of profound thinking about the relationship between people and profit, between labor and capital, between politics and economics. Over the last century, various popes have developed it into a recognizable philosophical platform.

Catholic Social Teaching sees achieving what it calls the “common good” as the overriding aim of politics—and by that it means rather more than achieving “the greatest happiness of the greatest number of people,” which might be said to be the more modest aim of most modern secular politics. For the individual it sees human dignity as the prime virtue to be respected in considering social policy. It has two tools to achieve this. The first is solidarity, which is people acting together, for the good of one another. The second is subsidiarity, a Catholic idea—recently borrowed by politics more generally, most particularly by the European Union—which means that decisions and action should take place in society at the lowest level possible. Central government should not seek to do what can be done by local government, the community, the family, or the individual.

Pope Francis has developed this Catholic Social Teaching in a particular way. It is part of a long journey of change in his own life and through it he is developing it in a manner that is distinct from his predecessors.

In his first interview as pope, Francis sent shock waves round the world with his pronouncement that the Catholic Church had been too “obsessed” (to use his word) with issues of sexual ethics like “abortion, gay marriage, and the use of contraceptive methods.” The church had to have “a sense of proportion.” Those issues were important. But there were other issues too. He said, “We have to find a new balance; otherwise even the moral edifice of the church is likely to fall like a house of cards, losing the freshness and fragrance of the Gospel.” Pope Francis has sought that new balance in a variety of ways. He has changed the tone of the church’s dominant message from one of judgment and condemnation to one of mercy and compassion. It is a church with its arms open to embrace rather than its finger out to wag. It is a church that, he says, must get out of the sacristy and onto the streets to meet people where they are. It is a church whose pastors must smell of their sheep rather than standing above their flock in a clerical or philosophical elite. And he has shifted the focus from sex to money.

Many rightwing Catholics, particularly in the United States, are unhappy with this. They have had decades, under deeply conservative U.S. bishops appointed by Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI, in setting battle lines between the church and the rest of society over hot-button culture war issues like gay relationships, women priests, and abortion. These became considered the distinctive Catholic markers of identity. Perhaps this was because, in a materialist consumerist free-market society, these were easier to seize upon than the altogether more challenging issues of economics, and the moral dimension of the growing gap between the rich and the poor. It lacked, in Pope Francis’s phrase, “a sense of proportion.” In the gospels, Jesus talks about money, riches, and poverty more than he talked about anything else except the Kingdom of God. In response, the right says that Pope Francis does not understand global capitalism—and the role it has played in lifting millions out of poverty in Asia, for example—because he has lived his life surrounded by a corrupt Latin American version they call crony capitalism. That is only partly true. But what is certainly the case is that the life experience of Jorge Mario Bergoglio has shaped his attitudes—and changed them, too.

It is undoubtedly the case that the pope’s view of economics has been shaped by the world in which he grew up, as well as by that century-long tradition of Catholic Social Teaching. Jorge Mario Bergoglio knew about hard times as a child.

His father had emigrated from Italy to join the family business in Argentina but after a few years recession hit and the business folded, leaving the Bergoglios with nothing. The future pope was not poor but his family had few luxuries, no car, and no holidays. He wore hand-me-downs. When he was 13 he was shocked to hear his father announce it was time for him to start work. School hours were from 8 a.m. to 1 p.m. so his father arranged for him to work from 2 p.m. to 8 p.m. in a hosiery factory, then as a cleaner, then doing clerical work, then in a food laboratory. It taught the young Bergoglio that work confers

dignity upon an individual, a theme to which he regularly returned as an archbishop and as pope. “Unemployed people are made to feel like they don’t really exist,” he has said. “It’s very important that governments cultivate a culture of work.” But his strong family background has placed that in a context. Work-life balance is important, too. One of the questions he would ask young parents during confession is whether or not they spend time playing with their children. “Many go to work before the children wake up and come home after they’ve gone to sleep,” he has said. “Too much work dehumanizes.”

As a young priest, Bergoglio was always in tune with those who were just getting by. When, at the age of 36, he became leader of Argentina’s Jesuits, he steered his seminarians toward work among the poor. He had a double motive in that. Unlike many intellectuals among the Jesuits, he saw a great example in the simpler faith of ordinary people with their love for statues and shrines, processions and medals, rosaries and novenas. He thought that as people became educated, there was a danger that they moved further away from God. He believed his seminarians had something to learn about faith from the poor. But he also cared about the physical as well as the spiritual needs of the poor. Bergoglio sent his students into poorer areas on Saturday afternoons. Their main task was to gather children for catechesis and mass. But the students also worked in soup kitchens and distributed medicine and blankets. At one point they were feeding four hundred children a day. Yet the lens through which Bergoglio saw all this was the lens of charity, not justice.

Those in the Jesuits fighting for the political empowerment of poor people embraced the movement called Liberation Theology sweeping through Latin America. One of the great fruits of Vatican II Liberation Theology was a movement that sought to combine the spiritual and material improvement of the poor. It came up with the notion “the preferential option for the poor” and said that poor people should be educated so they could read the Bible for themselves. This was during the Cold War, so its critics—which included the U.S. government as well as the Vatican—branded it as Marxist.

Bergoglio was put in as leader by conservative Argentine Jesuits to stamp out Liberation Theology because he did not approve of its notion that there was a conflict of interest between the poor and the rich. He banned Liberation Theology with its notions of class conflict and its bottom-up approach, which implicitly challenged the top-down authority of Rome. He wanted his seminarians to run soup kitchens. But he banned his priests from working with political organizations, unions, cooperatives, or even Catholic non-governmental organizations in the slums.

Some, like the British Jesuit Philip Endean, see this as a form of Liberation Theology. In his introduction to his translation of Bergoglio’s writings on spirituality from the 1970s and 1980s, Endean sees Bergoglio as one voice “within a diverse and complex school of thought on liberation theology rather than an opponent from the outside.”

But most of the young Jesuit's contemporaries to whom I spoke for my biography described him as conservative. Mario Aguilar, who is editor of the De Gruyter three-volume *Handbook of Liberation Theologies*, seems to strike the right balance when he describes Bergoglio's "pastoral openness to other people" as "enormous, warm, and empathetic" but concludes "his theology was traditional and conservative."

Theology of the People

In his early years, Bergoglio wanted to find an approach that helped the poor, but without priests becoming involved in politics. Moving from that position has been part of the pope's long journey. Poverty, he was to come to see, was not just material but relational. The poor are poor, in part at least, because of the behavior of the rich. The first step in his transformation came with his interest in *teología del pueblo* (Theology of the People), a form of thinking being developed by the senior Argentine Jesuit theologian Juan Carlos Scannone.

Teología del pueblo tried to take class conflict out of Liberation Theology. It kept the idea that the gospel displayed a "preferential option for the poor" but where Liberation Theology emphasized political activism for change, *teología del pueblo* prioritized the popular piety of the common people—the shrines, statues, processions, medals, and the rest of what intellectuals dismissed as "folk religion" which Bergoglio so valued from his upbringing by his Italian grandmother Rosa. And where Liberation Theology wanted to help the poor use politics to gain control over their own destiny, the *teología del pueblo* did not want to shake the political and economic status quo; instead it wanted to transform the culture of society. Scannone and his peers were fighting a view handed down from Argentina's colonial masters, which saw local culture as barbaric in contrast to European culture, which it presented as civilization.

But this first phase of the Theology of the People believed that social activism must be rooted in concrete acts of mercy. It insisted that cultural change would eventually bring about structural change. In practice, followers of Liberation Theology were more likely to teach poor people to read and write, to organize self-help. By contrast, adherents of the *teología del pueblo* in Argentina tended to insist on a great deal of government intervention. Liberation theologians were more likely to concentrate on raising the self-consciousness of the poor; the *teología del pueblo* was less likely to critique the visible complicity of the church with an unjust social order. Some observer-practitioners, like the Uruguayan Jesuit Father Juan Luis Segundo, a leading force in Liberation Theology, thought that the *teología del pueblo* was not just incapable of fostering real change but was actually an obstacle to it. All theologies are political, he argued; it is just that some are not sufficiently self-aware to understand what their political stance is.

If *teología del pueblo* was the first stage in Bergoglio's journey of change, it was gradual. The second stage was much more dramatic. Bergoglio was a charismatic and dynamic leader of the Argentine Jesuits. But he was incredibly divisive. Some biographers have made out that the deep split that occurred in the Jesuits under his leadership was the fault of leftwing Jesuits who objected to his attempts to hold a middle course between left and right during the military dictatorship that was murdering thousands in Argentina at the time. But in that first interview as pope, Francis acknowledged that his leadership style was the problem.

He admitted: "My authoritarian and quick manner of making decisions led me to have serious problems and to be accused of being ultra-conservative... but I have never been a rightwinger. It was my authoritarian way of making decisions that created problems." Whatever Bergoglio's private thinking, as the veteran Vatican reporter John L. Allen, Jr. has observed in his book *The Francis Miracle: Inside the Transformation of the Pope and the Church*, in his public positions Bergoglio felt forced on the conservative side of the debate over Liberation Theology.

But the world changed around him. In 1983 the military junta collapsed and democracy was restored to Argentina. The Cold War thawed. The changes of the Second Vatican Council, which had spread rapidly throughout the rest of Latin America, had begun to seep through even to conservative Argentina. The Jesuits there were still deeply split, but Bergoglio's critics began to outnumber his supporters. In 1990, the Jesuit leadership in Rome concluded that Bergoglio was part of the problem not part of the solution. They sent him into exile in the far-off city of Córdoba for two years, with no job beyond hearing private confessions in the local church.

In his first interview as pope, Francis revealed: "I lived a time of great interior crisis when I was in Córdoba." If the process was blurred, the outcome was not. Two years later Bergoglio effectively left the Jesuits when he was made an assistant bishop in Buenos Aires. The man who went to Córdoba as a strict conservative authoritarian emerged back in the city of his birth as an icon of radical humility. He had developed a new model of leadership, one that involved consultation, participation, collegiality, and listening. One of the pope's closet aides told me: "Córdoba was, for Bergoglio, a place of humility and humiliation."

Bergoglio went to the slums and spent long hours with the poorest of the poor, wandering the alleyways, chatting to the locals, blessing their paintings and their children, and drinking *mate* tea with them. This contact with a huge number of ordinary people in their everyday situations changed Bergoglio in other ways. Known as the Bishop of the Slums, he quadrupled the number of priests serving in the shantytowns. He became concerned not just with holy water, as one slum priest told me, but with the water pressure in the pipes. He learned about the impact of drugs and prostitution

on poor people—and he learned to see those involved in crimes not simply as the creators of problems but as their victims too. He learned more of the broken realities and frailties of human lives—and that broadened his understanding of the complexity of poverty and its structural causes. Now he backed self-help groups, cooperatives, and unions, exactly the kind of work he had tried to kill off among the Liberation Theology Jesuits twenty years earlier.

Something else was changing too. The church was developing its social teaching and incorporating elements of the Liberation Theology the Vatican had once tried to stamp out. Three major papal documents took significant steps. In 1987 Pope John Paul II published the encyclical *Sollicitudo rei socialis* (*The Social Concern of the Church*), which borrowed from Liberation Theology the terms “structures of sin” and “option of preference for the poor” in analyzing the widening gap between the rich and the poor under the emerging turbo-capitalism of the 1980s. In 1991, the same pope in *Centesimus annus* (*The One Hundredth Year*—to mark the centenary of *Rerum novarum*) condemned the excesses of capitalism speaking of the “idolatry of the market” and the “insanity of the arms race.” Then in 2009, Pope Benedict XVI in *Caritas in veritate* (*Charity in Truth*), writing after the global economic and banking crisis of 2008, tackled issues of global poverty and the arms race but also introduced strong environmental concerns and the concept of “intergenerational justice.” All of these documents were to modify Bergoglio’s thinking on questions of social justice and shift the balance for him on the relationship between the Theology of the People and Liberation Theology. As he grew in confidence over his first decade as a bishop and then archbishop, Bergoglio became increasingly outspoken.

Structural Sin

Yet another step on Bergoglio’s journey came with the massive economic crisis in 2001, which forced Argentina into the biggest debt default in banking history. A period of Washington-led free-market economics ended in a spectacular and devastating crisis when Argentina announced it could not pay the interest on almost a hundred billion dollars worth of debt it owed to foreign banks. The country’s economy spiraled out of control. The International Monetary Fund arrived from Washington to police a period of extreme austerity and cuts. Bank accounts were frozen. Half the population was plunged below the poverty line. There were riots on the streets, destitution, and institutional breakdown. Bergoglio witnessed terrible hardship among the ordinary people; he castigated the rich for “rapacity” in attempting to maintain their privileged position as the rest of the nation descended into an economic maelstrom. The conflict between the economic classes was clear. The ax of austerity fell most cruelly upon the poorest people in the land. Bergoglio began to be highly critical of the economic formulae of

modern capitalism; he was particularly critical of how it creates speculative financial markets that damage the real economy. He attacked the way that the debt-restructuring process was being paid for by cutting off services on which the poor depended.

He began to make use of the insights of Liberation Theology with regard to economic structures which were so corrupt that they constituted structures of oppression that were themselves sinful. He attacked “unbridled capitalism [which] fragments economic and social life.” What was needed instead, he said, was a solidarity that brought people together. The “unjust distribution of goods,” he lamented, was creating “a situation of social sin that cries out to heaven and limits the possibilities of a fuller life for so many of our brothers.” That was not all. “Unjust economic structures,” he thundered, were violations of human rights. The buildup of debt on restructured debt was “immoral, unjust, and illegitimate.” Homelessness he described as “structural slavery.” A year after the crisis he declared: “We are tired of systems that produce poor people for the church to look after.” Bergoglio was beginning to sound like a liberation theologian.

His time in Latin America climaxed with a conference of all the bishops across the continent at Aparecida in Brazil in 2007. The meeting ended with a concluding document drawn up by a committee chaired by Bergoglio. Nobody who has read it would be surprised at the initiatives Francis has undertaken as pope. It said the church needed to take the message of the gospel back to the streets. It said the piety of ordinary people—*teología del pueblo*, the Theology of the People—was a “precious treasure” of the church. But it also endorsed four key principles from Liberation Theology: the preferential option for the poor, the concept of “structural sin,” the need for small Christian communities led by the laity, and the “see-judge-act” method (of moving from social analysis through biblical reflection to political action) which was fundamental to Liberation Theology’s way of working.

It was small wonder that when he became pope one of Francis’s early priorities was to forge a reconciliation between Rome and Liberation Theology. The man who coined the phrase “Liberation Theology,” Father Gustavo Gutiérrez, and the head of the body which is the guardian of Rome’s doctrinal orthodoxy, Archbishop Gerhard Ludwig Müller, Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, held a public meeting at which Müller said Liberation Theology should “be included among the most important currents in twentieth century Catholic theology.” After three decades of hostility from the conservative pontificates of John Paul II and Benedict XVI, this was an extraordinary turnaround. Francis and Gutiérrez said mass together in the Vatican and then had breakfast. Not long afterwards, it was announced that the canonization process for Oscar Romero—the archbishop of San Salvador assassinated by a right-wing death squad in 1980 while celebrating Mass—had been unblocked.

The trajectory of Bergoglio's thinking continues now that he is pope. That was clear within a few weeks of his election. Within the first two months he had raised the issue of the growing chasm between the rich and poor throughout the world, warning new ambassadors to the Vatican that "while the income of a minority is increasing exponentially, that of the majority is crumbling." The following week, visiting a soup kitchen run by Mother Teresa's Missionaries of Charity, he denounced our modern "savage capitalism" which seeks "profit at all cost: without looking at the people it exploits or discards." The month after, on United Nations World Environment Day, he attacked the rich world's "culture of waste" which consumerism had come to make feel normal. Then he told the UN Food and Agriculture Organization: The hungry "ask for dignity, not for charity. Poverty is the flesh of the poor Jesus, in that child who is hungry, in the one who is sick, in those unjust social structures."

Joy of the Gospel

The development of the pope's thinking was made clear in 2013 when he published the apostolic exhortation *Evangelii gaudium* (*The Joy of the Gospel*), which set out what was effectively the manifesto for his papacy, his Magna Carta for changing the church so that it spreads the gospel more effectively. This spiritual renewal cannot be delayed, he said. And integral to it was that the world's economy should be made more just. Humanity could "no longer trust in the unseen forces and the invisible hand of the market." Welfare was only a temporary solution. Society needed to reject "the absolute autonomy of markets and financial speculation." We need to be "attacking the structural causes of inequality."

The language of *Evangelii gaudium* was not philosophical or theological. It was plain and forceful. "A generation of young people is being thrown away," he said in a withering condemnation of global capitalism. It was an idolatrous ideology promoting the "economics of exclusion," which kept the young without jobs and neglected the elderly. "In this context we can understand Jesus's command to his disciples: 'You yourselves give them something to eat!': it means working to eliminate the structural causes of poverty and to promote the integral development of the poor." That means "small daily acts of solidarity in meeting the real needs which we encounter." Solidarity "refers to something more than a few sporadic acts of generosity. It presumes the creation of a new mindset which thinks in terms of community and the priority of the life of all over the appropriation of goods by a few." Solidarity must be lived as the decision "to restore to the poor what belongs to them."

"Inequality is the root of social ills," Francis proclaimed. Unless opportunities are provided for the poor, violence and conflict will inevitably result. This is true not just because inequality provokes violence, "but because the socioeconomic system is

unjust at its root. ... An evil embedded in the structures of a society has a constant potential for disintegration and death. It is evil crystallized in unjust social structures, which cannot be the basis of hope for a better future.” Most forcefully, he later said in summary: “This economic system kills.”

Conservative political commentators were outraged. They attacked *Evangelii gaudium* as Marxist. “Pope Francis should stick to doctrine, and stay away from economic ‘redistribution,’” said one Fox News headline. Pope Francis was untroubled. He responded: “The Marxist ideology is wrong. But I have met many Marxists in my life who are good people, so I don’t feel offended.” And he said: “There is nothing in the Exhortation that cannot be found in the social Doctrine of the Church.”

But was that true? Certainly previous popes had said similar things and received similar criticisms. A 1967 encyclical of Pope Paul VI, *Populorum progressio* (*On the Progress of Peoples*), had been described by the *Wall Street Journal* as “warmed-over Marxism.” Pope John Paul II had criticized “savage capitalism.” Benedict XVI had attacked both capitalism and communism as “systems that marginalize God.” But Francis does go beyond those general philosophical critiques. He attacks specific economic approaches. For instance, the idea that wealth automatically trickles down from the rich to the poor is bogus, he says.

In this context, some people continue to defend trickle-down theories which assume that economic growth, encouraged by a free market, will inevitably succeed in bringing about greater justice and inclusiveness in the world. This opinion, which has never been confirmed by the facts, expresses a crude and naïve trust in the goodness of those wielding economic power and in the sacralized workings of the prevailing economic system. Meanwhile, the excluded are still waiting (*Evangelii gaudium* 54).

Or, as he put it later, the hope that free-market growth will lead to greater social justice in the end invariably disappoints. “The promise was that when the glass was full, it would overflow, benefiting the poor. But what happens, instead, is that when the glass is full, it magically gets bigger and nothing ever comes out for the poor.”

Again he mines down to a deeper policy level than have previous popes. In *Evangelii gaudium* he writes: “Growth in justice ... requires decisions, programs, mechanisms and processes specifically geared to a better distribution of income, the creation of sources of employment, and an integral promotion of the poor which goes beyond a simple welfare mentality. I am far from proposing an irresponsible populism, but the economy can no longer turn to remedies that are a new poison.” This criticism of particular remedies or approaches breaks new ground.

His approach on the environment is another example of Catholic Social Teaching being inched forward into new areas. Both John Paul II and Benedict XVI had spoken out strongly on the Christian duty to protect the environment. But Pope Francis is the first pope to devote an entire encyclical to the subject. The pope took the name of his 2015 eco-encyclical, *Laudato Si'*, from a thirteenth century prayer attributed to Francis of Assisi, *The Canticle of the Sun*. It was the first non-country specific papal encyclical not to have a title in Latin—another Francis innovation. The title, like the subtitle, *On the Care of Our Common Home*, was in Italian.

Even before *Laudato Si'* appeared Francis had spoken more frequently and forcefully than his predecessors. “Man ... has slapped nature in the face,” he said in January 2015. A month later, he said “a Christian who does not protect creation ... is a Christian who does not care about the work of God.” Ahead of the publication of his eco-encyclical, one of those involved in the production of the document—Francis’s close associate, Argentine Bishop Marcelo Sánchez Sorondo, the chancellor of the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences—said: “Today solid scientific evidence exists that global climate is changing and that human activity based on the use of fossil materials contributes decisively to this trend.” Francis had been disappointed in the previous round of international negotiations to reduce greenhouse gases, and wanted *Laudato Si'* to influence the UN Climate Change Conference in Paris in late 2015.

Conservatives were even more outraged. They were so anxious to get their retaliation in first they coined the term “prebuttal” for their advance responses. One leading free-market economist in *Forbes* wrote: “Pope Francis—and I say this as a Catholic—is a complete disaster when it comes to his public policy pronouncements. On the economy, and even more so on the environment, the Pope has allied himself with the far left and has embraced an ideology that would make people poorer and less free.”

The alarm only increased when Francis issued *Laudato Si'* in May; to the horror of climate change deniers, it endorsed the worldwide scientific consensus that global warming is largely human-created. But the document was concerned with more than climate change. It dealt with wider environmental issues—pollution, the acidification of the oceans, deforestation and desertification, monocultures in farming, the loss of biodiversity, the extinction of species, the lack of access to clean water for poor people. It went wider than the environment too.

On the day it was published, the pope privately told his closest advisors in Rome that the encyclical was not really an environmental document at all. Global warming is merely a symptom of a deeper malaise. The real problem, he insists, is the myopic mentality that failed to address climate change. The rich world’s indifference to the despoliation of the environment in pursuit of short-term economic gain is rooted in

a wider problem. Market economics has taught us that the world is a resource to be manipulated for our gain. Capitalism may maximize our choices, he observes, but it offers no guidance on how we should choose. Insatiable consumerism has blinkered our vision and left us unable to distinguish between what we need and what we merely want.

To Pope Francis, capitalism has created “an unjust and unsustainable global economy” which puts profit before people. It has led us into what he calls “a throwaway culture” which treats not just unwanted things but also unwanted people—the poor, the elderly, and the unborn—as waste. Most baldly he once more asserted: “This economy kills.” He argues that what we need instead is to understand that the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor are one and the same thing. *Laudato Si’* sets out as its core ideal an “integral ecology” that reconnects the earth and its people to the transcendent.

Advocates of an untrammelled free market right saw all this as a full frontal attack on American-style capitalism. They roared with horror. But Francis had learned a lesson from the reaction of some American conservatives who branded *Evangelii gaudium* as Marxist. He put in place a raft of defenses against his eco-encyclical being dismissed as the work of some kind of leftwing maverick.

His eco-encyclical takes its inspiration, like its name, from the writings of Francis of Assisi. The thirteenth century saint, like his twenty-first century namesake, combined a love for the poor, for peace, and for nature. But if the saint’s theology was new the pope’s is traditional. Moreover, he has taken care to locate his text firmly in the substantial body of teaching set out by previous popes, including two beloved by American conservatives, John Paul II and Benedict XVI. Francis also made a point, highly unusually, of referencing the pioneering eco-theology of the Orthodox Church as well as citing no fewer than eighteen teaching documents from Catholic bishops’ conferences around the world. And, after being told by rightwingers that he should leave science to the scientists, Pope Francis did precisely that: he accepted the view of the 97 percent of actively publishing climate scientists who say human activity is a major contributor to global warming.

Again he got into detail. Technological solutions fail to address the root problem. They often just change the problem without truly solving it, the pope said. His critics have countered that gas from fracking is less polluting than burning coal. But that is like advocating dieting by eating reduced-fat crisps. Carbon trading, Francis says, may just encourage speculation—and continued over-consumption by the rich.

And when his conservative critics said that capitalism has lifted millions out of poverty in Asia, he points out that it has done so at huge cost. That is shown by the catastrophic air pollution in China, which has seen that country oust the United

States from the unenviable position as the world's biggest emitter of greenhouse gases. Worse than that, poorly regulated capitalism in the global south has left behind millions more—the weakest and poorest.

Population is likewise a red herring, he insists. Poor people make hardly any contribution to global warming, according to one of the pope's chief advisers, the atheist professor John Schellnhuber of the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact. A 10 percent cut in emissions by rich nations, he says, would be far more effective in combating global warming than any birth control program.

All this demonstrated Francis's acute awareness of the importance of skillful alliance-building on such a major issue. You are not, he was telling critics, dealing with just one man here.

Dung of the Devil

In Bolivia last July, Pope Francis delivered his fiercest condemnation to date of contemporary capitalism's indifference to the poor and the planet. He said:

The earth, entire peoples and individual persons are being brutally punished. And behind all this pain, death and destruction there is the stench of what Basil of Caesarea called 'the dung of the devil.' An unfettered pursuit of money rules. The service of the common good is left behind. Once capital becomes an idol and guides people's decisions, once greed for money presides over the entire socioeconomic system, it ruins society, it condemns and enslaves men and women, it destroys human fraternity, it sets people against one another and, as we clearly see, it even puts at risk our common home.

In this "subtle dictatorship" the "mentality of profit at any price" that "sets people against one another" puts the very planet at risk.

More than that, addressing an assembly of political and community activists, he said: "The future of humanity is in great measure in your own hands, through your ability to organize and carry out creative alternatives." And he added: "Let us not be afraid to say it: We want change, real change, structural change. This system is by now intolerable." Land, lodging, and labor were "sacred rights." Calling for change no fewer than thirty-two times in the speech, he said: "Working for a just distribution of the fruits of the earth and human labor is not mere philanthropy. It is a moral obligation. For Christians... it is a commandment. It is about giving to the poor and to peoples what is theirs by right."

What so irks conservatives about this pope? John Paul and Benedict made the same kind of statements, but economic issues did not seem to be a high priority for

them. Their main focus was elsewhere. But a pope who says he wants “a poor church for the poor” will not let the rich off the hook on economics. As one leading U.S. religion commentator, David Gibson of Religion News Service, said: “What they don’t like about Francis is that he takes this stuff seriously.” They think he means it. “Benedict was an ivory-tower academic,” said another commentator, Charles J. Reid, Jr., a professor at the University of St. Thomas School of Law. “He wrote books and hoped they would persuade by reason. But Pope Francis knows how to sell his ideas. He is engaged in the marketplace.”

There are six key ways in which Pope Francis is changing Catholic Social Teaching. I have mentioned two: the vehemence, almost ferocity, with which he speaks; and the specificity of his criticisms of current public policy.

A third way is the context into which he is speaking. Globalized capitalism has succeeded in taking millions of people out of poverty, particularly in Asia. The World Bank says that China has succeeded in lifting four hundred million people out of absolute poverty in just two decades using free-market policies (from 1981 to 2001). But many have been left behind, particularly the poorest people, and particularly in Africa and the pope’s native Latin America. And even in big economies like the United States, the gap between rich and poor is worse now than it was in the late 1920s. As President Barack Obama has said: “Whereas in the past, the average chief executive made about twenty to thirty times the income of average workers, today’s CEO makes 273 times more.” The rich are getting richer. Britain’s superwealthy have doubled their money—from £258 billion to £547 billion—since the global financial crash five years ago, according to the 2015 *Sunday Times* rich list. The rest of us, statistics show, are just about struggling back to where we were before the 2008 financial meltdown. The dramatic growth in superrich wealth is largely down to a booming stock market, which gives added poignancy to Pope Francis’s remark: “How can it be that it is not a news item when an elderly homeless person dies of exposure, but it is news when the stock market loses two points?” Invoking the Fifth Commandment, he thunders that we must “say ‘thou shalt not’ to an economy of exclusion and inequality.” And again: “Such an economy kills.”

The fourth way is the impact his personal style has on the political landscape. The personality of Pope Francis—now an icon of simplicity and humility—is a factor. He strikes the world as full of a genuine authenticity and integrity and pastoral warmth. He connects very directly with people. His lifestyle is seen as embodying the message he preaches. All of this gives even greater credence to his words. As Pat Perriello, a professor at Johns Hopkins University, puts it: “Pope Francis’s writing and speaking style is clear and unambiguous. Everyone knows exactly what he is saying, and it is very difficult to pretend that he really means something else.”

A fifth way—and this is very Latin American—is his insistence on speaking from lived experience rather than philosophical theory. He takes as his starting point real-life experience rather than philosophical or theological ideas. The new Archbishop of Chicago, Blase Cupich, put his finger on this highlighting a phrase from *Evangelii gaudium*: “Reality is greater than ideas.” Cupich adds: “Instead of approaching life from the thirty thousand feet level of ideas, he challenges policy makers and elected officials—indeed all of us—to experience the life of everyday and real people.”

The final shift comes with a new concept in Pope Francis’s analysis. One of the cardinals to whom Pope Francis is closest is Cardinal Oscar Rodríguez Maradiaga of Honduras, a fellow Latin American. Cardinal Rodríguez is the coordinator of the pioneering Council of Cardinal Advisers Francis has created. Speaking about *Evangelii gaudium*, the pope’s right-hand man offered this analysis:

As a pastor in a very poor country I know how much of daily insecurity is connected with this situation of poverty—insecurity for the children in particular, but also big worries for mothers and fathers that do not know how to get drinking water, food, medical care or school education for their children. Global economy under the conditions of libertarianism excludes such people. Since their point of view a human being is a consumer. If she or he is incapable of consuming, this type of economy does not need her or him, can do away with her or him.

From this, Francis concludes: “It is no longer simply about exploitation and oppression, but something new. Exclusion ultimately has to do with what it means to be a part of the society in which we live; those excluded are no longer society’s underclass or its fringes or its disenfranchised—they are no longer even a part of it. The excluded are not the ‘exploited’ but waste, ‘rubbish.’”

What he suggests lies behind this is something deeper. The rejection of large numbers of people from participation in the global economy is an unstated rejection of ethics, and an unarticulated rejection of God.

After a philosopher pope, John Paul II, and a theologian, Benedict XVI, we now have a pastor. Archbishop Cupich put it this way: “John Paul II told us what to do; Benedict XVI told us why we should do it; Francis is telling us ‘do it.’” That is not all. One of the reformers appointed by the pope to clean up the Vatican finances went to Francis early on and reported that he was encountering huge resistance from the self-interested old guard within the Roman bureaucracy which did not want to see change. What should he do, the reformer asked. Pope Francis, an old man in a hurry, responded with a single Italian word: *fretta*. It means faster, stronger, more. It sums up Pope Francis’s journey on social justice.