

Why the papal encyclical matters

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Just before [the papal encyclical on the environment](#) was released, the hype in environmental circles matched that for Taylor Swift's latest music video. (To be clear: "[Bad Blood](#)" deserves the hype.) Who will *Laudato Si'* affect the most? What will its rationale be? What sort of reception will it get? Most importantly: will it matter?

With [international climate talks again looming](#) and [considerable activist pressure on President Obama](#), the pope's timing couldn't be better. While some may dismiss his office as more pomp than power, Francis has been throwing his weight around where he can—and for good.

The moral imperative of climate change is real. The encyclical makes this clear, bringing the conversation out of academic and religious circles. The world is hungry for some righteous anger about climate change, because right now all America has is vague dread about graphs. When we do hear any sort of moral injunction, it tends to be about our moral duty to unknown others a hemisphere away.

Pope Francis overturns this perspective. He turns over the tables in the capitalist market square, hitting us where it hurts. And it's not the mere fact of moral imperative.

The encyclical matters because of *who* it comes from: a scientist from the global South. Along with being the first non-European pope in more than 1,200 years, Pope Francis is trained in chemistry. He is an educated man from the global South, standing and claiming that things cannot continue as they are.

Too often, voices from this part of the world are clamoring sounds to European and North American ears. They are pleading, hungry voices of the suffering. To be sure, the suffering from climate change is real, and these voices deserve to be heard. Drought, floods, entire islands and homelands disappearing—it is catastrophic and wrong. But it's an incomplete story. Voices from science, sounding moral responsibility, can come from South America as well. They exist there. Francis is

reminding us that passion for change is not borne solely from suffering.

The encyclical also highlights the reverse truth: if the science and force of argument can come from the South, the suffering can come from the North. Americans in particular tend to fail to connect singular events to larger patterns, from Hurricane Katrina to the drought in California. We fail to see ourselves as suffering from climate change. We are Americans after all, and if we have money then we do not suffer—at least not for long. We have long been sold the lie that our affluence leaves us immune from such things.

And we are so accustomed to the role of helping people in less civilized places. In *Laudato Si'*, we are the uncivilized ones. We are called out, and our eyes are turned down toward our feet.

Perhaps eating our humble pie, served up by this Argentinian Franciscan chemist, will leave us freer to express our own suffering. When people from elsewhere take up the tasks of scientific study and moral injunction—as Pope Francis, [Vandana Shiva](#), and [Wangari Maathai](#) have done—maybe here in America we can find the voice for something else. The voice that expresses our fears, our utter dread of what our landscapes will be like, our confusion about what *any* landscape will look. Can we cry out of our own disbelief and sadness that it has gotten as bad as it has?

The encyclical's arguments have been made before, and they are good ones. They deserve repetition. But the situation of the planet is bad all over the damn place, not just in the developing world. In the words of Paul to the Romans, creation groans. As for those of us who are oh so used to being the voice of reason and logical argumentation, well, two can play at that game. Checkmate, America. Try being the voice of lament, confusion, and despair for a change. It may do your soul some good.