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Change the Game

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CHANG E

THE GAME

Pope Francis speaks about our common home. Here is what a theologian, an engineer, and an environmentalist hear.

BY JOHN S. FARNSWORTH
ILLUSTRATIONS BY EMILIANO PONZI

NOT ONLY WAS it a wild idea, it was someone else's wild idea.

Having spent the three previous summers working feverishly on a book, I'd decided that I was due for a more restful interlude between spring and fall quarters. My summer was to be heavy on contemplation as I scratched together a prospectus for a new book. There was to be ample time for grant writing. In my spare time I would work on a sabbatical proposal. There was the pile of books I was eager to get to, heavy on obscure nature writers.

Then came an email from Santa Clara President **Michael Engh, S.J.**, in early June announcing that a papal encyclical on the environment was on its way. He was inviting me to serve on a committee to host an academic conference in early November about this encyclical. Fr. Engh wanted to invite the cardinal who'd consulted closely with the pope during the encyclical's composition. One of my colleagues, **David DeCosse**, came up with the wild idea that three of us from the new committee should awaken early in the morning on Thursday, June 18—the date scheduled for the encyclical's release—download it from the Vatican website, read it carefully but quickly, and then collaborate on an op-ed that we'd publish that afternoon.

David is a theologian and directs campus ethics programs for the Markkula Center for Applied Ethics. Our third collaborator, **Ed Maurer**, is a professor of civil engineering with expertise in water issues. Together we could do this. The encyclical was scheduled to be released at noon in Rome, which would be 3 a.m. Santa Clara time. I figured I'd be able to sleep in until 5 a.m. After all, how long can an encyclical be?

As it turned out, I woke up earlier than I'd intended. I'd spent the night on my sailboat in Sausalito and, since we were only three days away from the summer solstice, the dawn's first rays snuck through our deck hatches early. I arose, feeling like a worthy druid, and then put on the kettle before accessing papalencyclicals.net.

Downloading the document to my tablet took a while. I assumed that the Vatican's encyclical server must be slow. It wasn't. The encyclical's English translation was 184 pages long. There had been a great deal, apparently, on the Holy Father's mind.

NO SUCH RIGHT

Our deadline was to have a finished article to the editor by 3 p.m., although 2 p.m. would be better if we wanted to make the Sunday print edition. So there we were, three colleagues—the theologian, the engineer, the environmental studies guy—sweating away in separate venues on what should have been a cool Thursday morning in June.

For me, such mornings usually entail a placid, 6-to-8-mile paddle in my sapphire-blue sea kayak. But David had come up with a more productive way for us to spend the day. The thought flashed through my mind that one should always be wary about befriending a theologian. The kettle whistled, and while I brewed a steaming cup of oolong, I banished any theological negativity from my head. After taking a cautious first sip, I sat down at the navigation station to read.

Chapter one, paragraph two, is when I first realized: *He's talking to me.* The pope used the term “rapidification,” which describes my life (and too many of our lives) perfectly. He wrote about the acceleration of changes affecting humanity. He wrote about the intensified pace of life. He wrote, “Change is something desirable, yet it becomes a source of anxiety when it causes harm to the world and to the quality of life of much of humanity.” Had I not been reading on an iPad I would have penciled a quiet “Amen” into the margins.

A couple more turns of the electronic page, and I knew that this wasn't the old stuff that I'd been listening to since my days as an altar boy. This guy Francis was inviting me to take a critical approach toward progress itself, and he seemed to be joining me, like a fellow environmentalist, in questioning our throwaway culture. This was an encyclical about lifestyle—written by a man who'd decided not to reside in the luxurious papal apartments of his predecessors—to a man who lives as an advisor in Swig Hall, a dormitory he shares with 400+ Ruff Riders.

My colleagues, working at home in the South Bay and on the Santa Cruz coast, experienced a similar sense of papal solidarity. As a data-driven engineer, Ed Maurer was excited to read such a clear summary of climate science coupled with a profound call to personal and societal transformation. When the pope wrote about the phenomenon of “water poverty,” he was describing a major issue that Ed has devoted his career to, trying to resolve humanity's water crisis drip by drip. When the Bishop of Rome described access to safe drinkable water as a universal human right, he was gazing directly into Dr. Maurer's eyes.

David DeCosse was making similar discoveries as he read the text. He called the encyclical “a game changer.” He found that in addition to offering a comprehensive critique of the climate crisis, Pope Francis had provided a compelling vision of how to move ahead. He also noted the challenges that the pope had laid out for his followers,

especially in terms of working toward a framework that links economic prosperity with both social inclusion and protection of the natural world.

There we were, reading through the viewpoints of three distinct disciplinary lenses, all amazed at the radical lines that had been laid down by the papal pen.

Despite our looming deadline, I had to put the encyclical down for a moment when I got to paragraph 33. Now the pope was talking about extinction, a topic dear to me ever since I started spending time with California condors. He wrote, “Because of us, thousands of species will no longer give glory to God by their very existence, nor convey their message to us. We have no such right.”

No such right. I've had a long flirtation with Deep Ecology, an environmental philosophy that advocates for biodiversity out of a deep respect for the inherent worth of all life. Was it possible, I found myself asking, that the Holy Father was one of us?

In the fourth chapter, about integral ecology, the pontiff wrote,

“It cannot be emphasized enough how everything is interconnected. Time and space are not independent of one another, and not even atoms or subatomic particles can be considered in isolation. Just as the different aspects of the planet—physical, chemical, and biological—are interrelated, so too living species are part of a network which we will never fully explore and understand.”

I already felt like writing, since I often do my thinking with my pen. But I didn't want to start forming a scholarly opinion about this encyclical until I'd read the whole thing. Though the morning was no longer young, the only sensible solution was to take a short walk. Before I did that, I reread a section that had struck me as particularly poignant: “We have to realize that a true ecological approach *always* becomes a social approach; it must integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment, so as to hear *both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor*” (emphasis original).

I grabbed my binoculars, which are always close at hand on the sailboat, and climbed the companionway into the cockpit. The breeze was already up but still just a hint of what was to come in the afternoon. One of my neighbors was swabbing his deck, and he greeted me with the grumbled observation, “The starlings are back.” This was old news to me, but I waved cheerfully anyway and made my way up to the boardwalk, reminding myself that I could only spare 15 minutes before heading back to the boat to finish *Laudato Si*.

The pope's words buzzed in my head. *The cry of the earth.*

I stopped walking and listened. Within moments I could hear the wheezy chatter of a pair of oystercatchers—they sound like squeeze toys on the wing. These are among my favorite shorebirds, as students in my Baja class quickly learn. Whenever you see oystercatchers they will be close to where the land and the sea come together, and they seldom move along the water's edge without their characteristic chatter. They are loudest during the morning hours, and they're inevitably the first birds my students learn to identify by sound.

SOME FRESH AIR

I had done well to head outside, following my instincts. Something was bothering me about the text I'd been reading all morning. Out in the breeze, I realized that what I was experiencing while reading *Laudato Si* was my own

When the Bishop of Rome described access to safe drinkable water as a universal human right, he was gazing directly into Dr. Maurer's eyes.





estrangement from Catholicism. I'd been fairly devout, earlier on, attending seminary during my collegiate years then working for the Church for 14 years prior to when I took up teaching. But at some point I stopped calling myself "Catholic," at least with a capital C, and started considering myself a Former Catholic. Capital F.

I never felt that I'd left the Church, not really. I more or less felt as if the Church left me. I'd been in the seminary during the decade following the Second Vatican Council, at a time when the Church was experiencing what Pope John XXIII called an *aggiornamento*, a period of modernization where the windows were opened to let in fresh air. But the shutters were slammed shut, over time, and the church I loved so dearly in the 1970s seemed no longer to exist, at least not for me.

Now, what I was feeling was a bit of that old love while reading about a new sort of love—new at least for modern Catholics—expressed not only for the planet but for its inhabitants as well. All of its inhabitants.

I walked back to the boat to finish the encyclical and started making connections. I was still coming across new-to-me concepts, such as "ecological conversion." Reflecting on this, I realized that when the pope chronicled an exploited and impoverished Earth, he implied a sense of solidarity in the relationship between the Church and the planet. Just as the prophetic church advocates a preferential option for the poor, it now recommends ecological conversion for all humanity. These were new teachings, and this was a new sort of environmentalism.

Replacing older teachings that emphasized environmental relationships of dominion and stewardship with a theology that values ecological solidarity is nothing short of a paradigm shift. Or, as David, my theologian friend, called it, a game changer.

Paradigm shifts are seldom as all-encompassing as the literature seems to suggest. There were still a few elements of that old, stale church haunting *Laudato Si*. For example, I took issue with the pope's insistence in paragraph 50 that "extreme and selective consumerism" was the root of the problem rather than population growth. Yes, consumerism is problematic, but so is population growth. As an environmental scholar, I must insist that our planet can no longer afford the Catholic Church's naïveté about this problem.

Such concerns, however, don't diminish the fabulous contributions *Laudato Si* is making to environmental thought. Pope Francis, in addressing this encyclical to all of humanity, seems to understand that how we label ourselves in terms of religious affiliation is less important to Planet Earth than how we understand our collective environmental citizenship.

In our op-ed, we posed a few questions: How well do the motives and values behind the technological ingenuity of Silicon Valley align with the challenge of our climate crisis? How do we ensure that those suffering from the consequences of global-warming pollution, and who had little to do with causing it, can develop sustainable systems of energy and food production?

The piece was posted by 5 p.m. and picked up by a number of papers around the country. One of the places you can read it is in the digital edition of this magazine. And, if you haven't yet, read the encyclical. Game changer, yes. The alternative is game over.

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WHY CHANGE?

A little context on theology and papal teaching style

BY SALLY VANCE-TREMBATH

We live in a time of strategic planning. We create metrics to assess our progress. In the life of the Catholic Church, think of Vatican II as a rich strategic plan—in which, half a century ago, the Church explicitly articulated its response to the world's changing needs. But by most metrics, Vatican II has not been implemented, the called-for new Church not built.

John XXIII and the council members poured the foundation, and Paul VI started to frame in the scaffold. For the most part, construction was called off under John Paul II and Benedict XVI. Both exercised the papal office in other creative and constructive ways, but they displayed great confidence in the capacity of pre-Vatican II teachings to circumscribe the entire truth about human experience.

The Church's central mission is to proclaim the Good News of God's care for the human community. Through Vatican II, John XXIII intended to decouple the relationship between that mission and existing Roman cultural forms—which had become more important than the Good News they were carrying. The mission required truly new thought forms, new "construction" techniques drawn from the rich developments of the modern world.

In Pope John's watershed 1963 document, *Pacem in Terris*, the method was even more important than the content. He made the simple but dramatic gesture of addressing all people of good will. Previous encyclicals, using a hierarchical and conceptual approach, were addressed to the bishops. Peace on Earth expanded the audience, took them seriously as conversation partners, and showed confidence and trust in the Catholic faithful and the entire human community. It indicated that the Church's mission is not just to Catholics but all God's people.

Second, Pope John's letter begins with human experience. This heralded a new way of crafting Catholic teaching and practice. The "ancient deposit of the faith" was one thing, he wrote—but its "expressions" were another. Expressions emerge from experience, and new experiences demand new expressions.

INDUCTIVE, HUMBLE, LOCAL

Pope Francis uses the same methods in *Laudato Si*. From this scholar's perspective, he has retrieved the plans for the new Church and has been managing construction from his first smile on the balcony in St. Peter's Square. Here are three examples that I've observed.

First, the robust use of the inductive method: Starting with human experience displays confidence that that the human community can be trusted to solve new challenges. Second, his response to the "charge that Judeo-Christian thinking" authorized humanity's "dominion" over nature is direct, aggressive, and definitive: "This is not a correct interpretation of the Bible as understood by the Church." Finally, he makes use of global bishops' conferences—but with much greater emphasis on the local Church, where the bishops are not functionaries of a centralized bureaucracy but authoritative teachers.

Carrying on the conversation, it's important to recognize that the human community has changing needs. Our global situation is distinctly different from the previous situations that the Church inhabited; a retrofit is not sufficient.

Sally Vance-Trembath lectures in the Graduate Program in Pastoral Ministries at SCU.

What does Silicon Valley have to say about the pope's message on the environment?

Santa Clara hosted a conference Nov. 3-4, "Our Future on a Shared Planet: Silicon Valley in Conversation with the Environmental Teachings of Pope Francis." Watch video at scu.edu/ourcommonhome.