

CLIMATE TALK

David Saetre
Mason

Galileo's conclusion that the earth revolves around the sun was condemned by the Inquisition almost 400 years ago. The Inquisition, representing the Roman Catholic Church and Pope Paul VI, saw Galileo's scientific observations as a threat to the special interests and power of those institutions. The Inquisition dismissed Galileo's science, declaring, "heliocentrism is foolish and absurd". Those powerful special interests even resisted the publication of Galileo's work for more than 100 years, and it wasn't until 1992 that Pope John Paul II expressed regret for the Church's condemnations and lifted the bans against Galileo.



This history helps us understand the significance of the current Pope Francis and his recent encyclical on the science and moral perils behind climate change and the grave threats global warming poses to the whole human family. In his document, the Pope affirmed the overwhelming science that confirms climate change as the result of human activity. He writes, "*A very solid scientific consensus indicates that we are presently witnessing a disturbing warming of the climatic system*". This time, the largest religious institution on earth stands on the side of science, and adds the force of moral and spiritual appeal to the challenge we all must face. Francis notes, "*Climate change is a global problem with grave implications: environmental, social, economic, political and for the distribution of goods. It represents one of the principal challenges facing humanity in our day. Its worst impact will probably be felt by developing countries in coming decades.*"

The title of the encyclical, "*On Care for our Common Home*," lays out the metaphor of "home" to describe our relationship and duty to the earth and to one another. He also boldly reclaims a sense of "the commons" that has often gone missing from contemporary political and economic practice. Throughout the document Pope Francis argues that all the people of the world are of one family, and that the earth is our common home, belonging to no one group or set of special interests. As one family, we should care for each other and take responsibility for each other. A home is something we all depend on, physically and emotionally. A home is something inherently worth maintaining and protecting. His letter appeals to the whole human family, not just Catholics. He writes, "*We require a new and universal solidarity.*" And, he worries about the role religion has played in maintaining the status quo. *Obstructionist attitudes, even on the part of believers, can range from denial of the problem to indifference, nonchalant resignation or blind confidence in technical solutions.* And, he states his purpose for offering the statement now: "*It is my hope that this Encyclical Letter, which is now added to the body of the Church's social teaching, can help us to acknowledge the appeal, immensity and urgency of the challenge we face.*"

Climate change and global warming have become common “hot-button” political issues in our own country. The debates have often been framed around political and economic interests, while the science behind the debates sometimes distorted by other interests. What has been largely missing is the moral dimension of the problem we all face, whether we want to admit this or not. That is why the Pope’s letter is so significant, including those outside the Catholic faith. Let me explain. First an “encyclical” is binding on practicing Catholics – still the largest religious group in the United States (and in the world). This letter has the same force on Catholic teaching and practice as, for example, Catholic teaching on abortion. It will be interesting to see if Catholic politicians and religious activists organize as vigilantly about the moral perils of climate change as they do around other social issues. That’s significant.

But, the letter also addresses the common concerns of the human family outside the Catholic faith. The letter lays out a concern for one another along the lines of the “Golden Rule”, and argues that climate change demands a response from all of us. The letter argues that the consequences of global warming disproportionately affect the poor, and that this is morally unacceptable. *“Human ecology is inseparable from the notion of the common good, a central and unifying principle of social ethics. Society as a whole, and the state in particular, are obliged to defend and promote the common good.”* And, *“Human beings too are creatures of this world, enjoying a right to life and happiness, and endowed with unique dignity. So we cannot fail to consider the effects on people’s lives of environmental deterioration, current models of development and the throwaway culture.”*

The challenge of climate change may seem daunting, even depressing, evoking feelings of helplessness. What can one person do when the issue is “global”? Maybe that’s what I admire most about the Pope’s extraordinary letter – we do not face this challenge alone. We do need each other, and we must act collectively. We must organize and lobby. But those are things we can and indeed must do together. We really aren’t alone. We share a common challenge, face a common destiny, and thus discover a common solidarity. The earth is our home – all of us. And we can begin to care for it in new ways together. That is the most compelling reason to participate in groups like Citizens Climate Lobby. Collective action for collective change. In the words of that organization’s mission statement, “We’re creating the political will for a livable world by empowering individuals to experience breakthroughs in exercising their personal and political power.” The science is clear. The moral imperative has now been claimed. The time to act is now.

David W. Saetre
60995 Pike River Rd.
Mason, WI 54856

David Saetre is Visiting Professor of Humanities and Religion at Northland College in Ashland, WI.