

ARTICLE

God is Green: The Catholic Church's Re-Imagination of Environmental Norms

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Abstract

International discussions regarding the environment have too narrowly focused on contributions by secular actors. The Catholic Church, recognized for its influential role in the democratization processes of the 1990s, also has a long-standing position regarding climate change, yet remains understudied. How can the Church contribute to the international community's debates regarding the environment and climate change? Using the framework of constructivism and Jurgen Habermas' concept of institutional translation, I argue that the Church is a norm entrepreneur that promotes a foreign policy of human/integral ecology. The most recent articulation of this foreign policy is Pope Francis' encyclical *Laudato Si'*, which was referenced by the Holy See at the 26th UN Climate Change Conference (COP26) in 2021. The Church's participation at COP26 was the latest animation and application of the Church's foreign policy; I examine the Church's efforts to change the narrative on the environment toward a shared, global responsibility.

Keywords: Catholic Church; Environment; Pope Francis; Norm Entrepreneur; Jurgen Habermas

Introduction

It has been nearly three decades since the Catholic Church (hereafter, the Church) was hailed as one of the major driving forces behind the third wave of democratization movements that occurred in the 1990s in Central and Eastern Europe. Since that time, the Church has undergone two changes in papal leadership, with the most recent election of Jorge Mario Bergoglio in 2013 following the retirement of Pope Benedict XVI. Taking the name of Pope Francis, Bergoglio's ascension to the papacy symbolically marked a new path for the Church. In addition to being the first pope to hail from the Global South, choosing St. Francis of Assisi as his namesake was

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indicative of the Pope's desire to revitalize the Church's focus on the poor and marginalized.

It is imperative, however, to grasp this focus broadly. Issues of poverty correlate with other global issues, such as economic and environmental sustainability. In the case of environmental degradation and climate change, the Church's concern for the poor and marginalized has served as the basis for its point of entry into these issues. In a February 2022 report, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)—a panel composed of 270 researchers from 67 countries—detailed the impact of climate change on the poor. United Nations Secretary General Antonio Guterres described the report as “an atlas of human suffering and a damning indictment of failed climate leadership” (quoted in Brad and Zhong 2022). In addition, Ani Dasgupta, president of the environmental group World Resources Institute stated, “Climate change is the ultimate injustice...People with the fewest resources, those least responsible for the climate crisis, bear the brunt of climate impacts” (Ibid.).

The sentiments of the 2022 IPCC Report come at the heels of the 2021 United Nations' 26th Conference on Climate Change (COP26), which took place in Glasgow, Scotland. Bringing together 200 countries, the conference's goal was to finalize the Paris Rulebook and, most importantly, have countries commit to limiting the rise in global temperature to 1.5°C.¹ Among the delegates at COP26 was the Holy See; its presence signaled its commitment bringing the voices of the poor and marginalized communities to the global stage to “promote their inclusion in the climate justice negotiations” (Wambui 2021).

Debates over how to handle climate change, however, have mainly involved policymakers and secular activists citing the natural sciences. The Church's influence in this arena, therefore, seems limited or misplaced since its focus is traditionally understood to be limited to the sacred and spiritual. Hans Joachim Schellnhuber, founder and chairman of the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research stated, “Within the scientific community, there is almost a code of honor that you will never transgress the red line between pure analysis and moral issues” (Yardley and Goodstein 2015). Along similar lines, political scientist Alynna Lyon states, “The policy debate over environmental issues is often presented as the environmentalists versus industry, or at the personal level, one's job versus animals and trees, and freedom versus government regulation....[T]he problem of environmental stewardship is often viewed as technocratic” (Lyon 2018, 125). Nevertheless, the re-orienting of discussions regarding the environment to include religion is transforming the narrative to include concerns beyond the mere science of the matter (e.g., Lyon 2018). How, then, can the Church contribute to the international community's debates regarding the environment and help confront the deleterious effects of climate change?

Utilizing a constructivist framework, I argue that the Church is a norm entrepreneur that promotes a foreign policy informed by the concepts and norms of a human and integral ecology.² These concepts are discussed in Catholic Social Teaching dating as far back as Pope Leo XIII's 1891 encyclical *Rerum Novarum* and its most recent articulation occurs with Pope Francis' 2015 encyclical *Laudato Si'*.³ In this encyclical, Pope Francis reiterated how an “integral ecology” mean[s] going beyond a parochial view of understanding our experiences in the world and “take[s] us to the heart of

what it is to be human” (Pope Francis 2015). Although *Laudato Si’* is part of a longer tradition of Catholic Social Teaching, the manner in which its message as a foreign policy was framed was innovative. As described by environmentalist Bill McKibben, *Laudato Si’* went beyond “a narrow and focused contribution to the climate debate” and turned “out to be nothing less than a sweeping, radical, and highly persuasive critique of how we inhabit this planet—an ecological critique, yes, but also a moral, social, economic, and spiritual commentary” (McKibben 2015). The diplomatic activities of the Holy See at COP26 demonstrate how the Church is a norm entrepreneur and challenged participants to re-imagine environmental norms in Glasgow.

By contextualizing the Church as a norm entrepreneur with a foreign policy, two things are achieved. First, the study of the Church is further embedded within the constructivist literature of international relations.⁴ Historically, religion has been understudied in international relations. When it was included, it was considered a threat to state practices and global stability, or alternately it was considered epiphenomenal (e.g., Wald and Wilcox 2006; Huntington 2011). In both cases, state behavior generally was a result of the structure of the international system. The new millennium only seemed to confirm these biases, with violent acts of terrorism and radical religious movements, narrowly focusing the scholarship on politicized religious violence.⁵ Nonetheless, there are a group of scholars who have advocated for a more systematic, rigorous analysis of religions contributing to novel theory building (e.g., Fox and Sandler 2004; Kubáľková 2006; Snyder 2011; Sandal and Fox 2013; Haynes 2016). In doing so, religions’ other influencing capabilities, beyond violence, are gaining recognition and contributing to a more balanced understanding of religions’ influence.

Second, by using concepts applied to nation-states and other international entities, it brings recognition to the impact the Church has on the international community beyond its ecclesiastic community.⁶ As Philip McDonagh, director of the Centre for Religion, Human Values, and International Relations at Dublin City University noted, “We need frameworks to find unresolved situations in our time so that we don’t ignore the issue” (McDonagh 2021). This analysis offers a corrective to how religion has been understudied, undertheorized, and misunderstood in international relations (e.g., Fox and Sandler 2004; Bellin 2008; Toft et al. 2011; Sandal and Fox 2013) by recasting the Church’s approach to understanding the problems of climate change and its strategies to solve them.

Foreign policy and diplomacy

Unlike the foreign policy of nation-states, the Church’s foreign policy speaks broadly, dialectically, and promotes a shared global responsibility. While the Church is not immune to the notion of self-interest⁷ that mainly guides nation-states, it nonetheless publicly leads, prioritizes, and consistently promotes this idea of an integral ecology. Because of its religious character, furthermore, its mission and goals are inextricably tied to a spiritual salvation that transcends the temporal world.⁸ In doing so, it ensures the presence of a moral voice within and on behalf of the international community.

Even though it is not formally stated as a foreign policy, it should be of no surprise that the Church has one.⁹ Grounded in a long tradition of Catholic Social Teaching, it was with the Second Vatican Council (Vatican II: 1962–1965), that the Church further entrenched its diplomatic position by adopting language for broader engagement with the international community. As a result of these Vatican II proceedings, the Church more consciously linked its messages of faith with a call to political leaders to consider people and their world more holistically. The Church found itself speaking more forcefully and broadly about human rights—that is, human rights that were socially, politically, and economically oriented.

These rights, bound together by the respect for human dignity is what provided the Church with the basis to be more politically vocal during the third wave of democratization and is what brings it into the current international conversations on the environment and climate change. The Church was able to do this because, enduring far longer than any other institution, its doctrinal and institutional resources have made it a long-standing influential player in international relations (Byrnes 2017). Although not a nation-state (in fact, it operates out of the Vatican City State—the smallest country in the world), it has had a disproportionate effect on the international community. Furthermore, it is the Holy See, the governing body of the Church which, unlike any other religious organization, has international legal recognition and diplomatic missions in nearly every country of the world (Troy 2008, 67).

More recently, some scholars have examined Pope Francis' role in the Church's foreign policy (see Lyon 2018; McCormick 2021). They identified his promotion of the Church's "political theology of the people," which included shifting the Church's gaze from the Global North to the Global South and urging the international community to be more people-oriented (McCormick 2021, 165). Crespo and Gregory present Pope Francis' foreign policy as being ideologically grounded by what they refer to as a "Doctrine of Mercy," which influences how he approaches global issues such as the environment (Crespo and Gregory 2020, 117). They note, "this ideology is what motivates his use of soft power to influence the action, behaviors, and beliefs, of individuals," particularly that of political leaders (Ibid., 121–22). An examination of the Church's participation at COP26 will demonstrate the Church's practice of this political theology at the global level.

Constructivism and the Catholic Church as norm entrepreneur

In an effort to incorporate religion into theories of international relations, some scholars found constructivism to be the most amenable (e.g., Hasenclever and Rittberger 2000; Snyder 2011; Haynes 2013). This was because constructivism recognized how identity, ideational factors, norms, and culture can have a significant impact on global politics (e.g. Adler 1997; Finnemore and Sikkink 2001; Snyder 2011; Maoz and Henderson 2020). Jack Snyder noted that while Alexander Wendt's canonical text on constructivism (1999) did not once mention religion, its categories provided a way for religion to be considered in international politics (Snyder 2011, 14). In effect, "[m]any constructivist studies have emphasized the ways in which ideas and norms run counter to or undermine conventional

conceptions of strong state interests. Human rights norms, the preference of the weak, has been shown to triumph over strong actors and strong states; environmental norms prevail over powerful corporate business preferences” (Finnemore and Sikkink 2001, 398). This paper examines how the Church as a norm entrepreneur, utilizing the preferential option for the poor, has challenged states to think more carefully about the environment.

Finnemore and Sikkink also have noted

...IR research has been divorced from political theory on the grounds (implicitly, if not explicitly, articulated) that what “is” in the world and what “ought to be” are very different and must be kept separate, both intellectually and in policy. However, contemporary empirical research on norms is aimed precisely at showing how the “ought” becomes the “is” (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998, 916).

To address this concern, political philosopher Jurgen Habermas’ concept of institutional translation helps explain how the Church, as a norm entrepreneur, attempts to socialize states to follow the norm of a global human ecology. Institutional translation also serves as a mechanism by which the Church can participate in other political discussions of international importance (i.e., conflict, migration). Framing this normative process alongside Habermas’ work will help further highlight the Church’s role in international discussions on the environment and climate change, and addresses a point not covered in Crespo and Gregory’s work on the foreign policy of Pope Francis.¹⁰

While Finnemore and Sikkink emphasized the significance of norms and the normative process, they did not specifically identify any religious organizations in their works. When considering constructivism’s norm life cycle (norm emergence, acceptance/cascade, and internalization), however, the Church fits within this framework. Furthermore, the Church’s sensitivity to the “signs of the times”¹¹ and its ability to draw from its own doctrinal resources facilitates its recognition as a norm entrepreneur. The Church’s practice of subsidiarity (to be explained later) allows for its effortless integration into the norm acceptance/cascade and internalization phases. Whether leading or complementing the work of state and other non-state actors, the Church is an integral part of this normative process. Finally, when considering the concept of norm entrepreneurs, it becomes more evident that Habermas’ approach fits with constructivism since, “Norm entrepreneurs must speak to aspects of belief systems or lifeworlds that transcend a specific cultural or political context” (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998, 907).

The Church’s ability to draw from belief systems or such lifeworlds that go beyond specific cultural and political context has occurred before; it has had a long history of attempting to promote various norms. In the case of the third wave of democratization movements of the 1990s, one can see how the Church was able to help effect a norm tipping point and norm cascade. At that time, the Church positioned itself to more forcefully speak against human rights violations committed by non-democratic societies. The last major discussion of and support of such values occurred during Vatican II, which was convened by Pope John XXIII to discuss the Church’s relationship to the modern world. Thus, the promotion of such values during the third wave

was not new as they had long been a part of the Church's social teachings. Yet, it was during the third wave that scholars such as Samuel Huntington recognized the Church as one of the five variables that helped usher the collapse of communism throughout Central and Eastern Europe (Huntington 2011). It was perhaps even more symbolic that during that time, the Church was helmed by Pope John Paul II, the first Polish pope who had personal experience with both fascism and communism.

Similarly, Pope Francis' personal experiences would play a role in his papacy. His first single authored¹² papal encyclical, *Laudato Si'*, set the tone and agenda for the Church's relationship to and role in the international community. Issued on May 24, 2015, *Laudato Si'*, meaning "praise to you," was taken from the work of Pope Francis' namesake, St. Francis of Assisi, who also is the patron saint of ecology. *Laudato Si'* was recognized because it recast the mainly scientific discussion of the environment and climate change with a moral narrative, and was aimed at universal reach (believers and non-believers). It also did not go unnoticed that the release of the encyclical dovetailed with the release of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals and the Paris Climate Change Conference (Lyon 2018, 130). The effect of different actors, motives, and mechanisms of influence that Finnemore and Sikkink discuss, therefore, is evident.

While the norm of highlighting the relationship between climate change and its harmful effects on society is not new, the moral framework the Church uses for analyzing these effects seems to have been largely ignored. However, the symbolism surrounding the election Pope Francis has brought greater attention to the broader issues affected by climate change. In her piece titled, "The Emergence and Cascading of Pope Francis' Norm of Social Justice" Marianne Rozario discussed how Catholic Social Teaching has contributed to the development of global norms. Using constructivism as her framework as well, Rozario explained how Pope Francis could be identified as a norm entrepreneur or norm enabler because of the manner in which he is promoting social justice.¹³ Rather than identify a single representative of the Church, I argue it is the institutional Church, with its practice of a foreign policy grounded on the key themes of Catholic Social Teaching, which allows us to conceptually identify it as a norm entrepreneur. Reframing the Church as a norm entrepreneur rather than just a civil society actor helps scholars to more rigorously incorporate the Church into studies of political development, change, and global agenda setting.

Institutional translation: theory and practice

With the existence of many thought traditions, both religious and non-religious, Habermas believed a political discussion regarding the public good could not be devoid of values springing from religious and secular thought. Furthermore, he recognized the significant role religion plays in a person's world view. In a 2004 debate titled "Pre-political moral foundations of the liberal state," between Habermas and then Cardinal Josef Ratzinger (later, Pope Benedict XVI), the two found common ground in their views regarding religion and public life.

Habermas respected the work of religious communities claiming that they have "preserved intact something which has elsewhere been lost" while Ratzinger granted

a central role to the “divine light of reason” in controlling the “pathologies of religion” (Skidelsky 2005). In his 2006 titled, “Religion in Public Life,” Habermas recognized that “A devout person pursues her daily rounds by drawing on belief. Put differently, true belief is not only a doctrine, believed content, but a source of energy that the person who has a faith taps performatively and thus nurtures his or her entire life” (Habermas 2006, 8). Habermas’ approach, therefore, parallels the Church’s view of an integral ecology and underscores the significance of religion’s presence in political life. Religion, he maintains, is a “key [resource] for the creation of meaning and identity” and in public dialogue, it is possible that secular individuals and groups will recognize their ideas and values overlap with those of the religious group. That is, they may “recognize in the normative truth content of a religious utterance hidden intuitions of their own” (Habermas 2006, 10). Separating religion into distinct spheres of public and private, therefore, would be unreasonable and unjust (Calhoun 2008, 16).

To bridge this conceptual and practical divide, Habermas uses the “institutional translation proviso,” which is a cooperative process of translation that occurs between the religious and non-religious groups. He states:

Whereas citizens of faith may make public contributions in their own religious language only subject to the proviso that these get translated, the secular citizens must open their minds to the possible truth content of those presentations and even enter into dialogues from which religious reasons then might well emerge in the transformed guise of generally accessible arguments (Habermas 2006, 11).

Although Habermas is referring to a liberal state, which is not reflective of the entire international community, his point regarding the risk of ignoring alternative resources of meaning and identity is valid. This is because:

Religious traditions have a special power to articulate moral intuitions, especially with regard to vulnerable forms of communal life. In the event of the corresponding political debates, this potential next religious speech is serious candidate to transporting possible true contents, which can then be translated from the vocabulary of a particular religious community into a generally accessible language (Habermas 2006, 10).

Habermas’ institutional translation places a responsibility on secular state actors as well. As noted by Craig Calhoun, non-religious actors must translate religious arguments into ways that make sense to them. “In this way, [nonreligious actors] will help to make ideas, norms, and insights to deriving from religious sources accessible to all, and to the more rigorously secular internal discursive processes of the state itself” (Calhoun 2008, 16).

Habermas’ allowance of religious language in the public sphere in order to enrich public life complements the aims articulated during Vatican II. The 16 documents drafted during the Council commented on the value of human dignity, the relationship between reason and responsibility, the role of the Church in a modern, plural society, the significance of dialogue, and the duty of civility. It was in its Pastoral Constitution for the Modern World (*Gaudium et spes*) that the Church

encouraged “all men, believers and unbelievers alike, ought to work for the rightful betterment of this world in which all alike live. Such an ideal cannot be realized, however, apart from sincere and prudent dialogue” (*Gaudium et spes*, 219). Articles 75 (“Political Participation”) and 76 (“Politics and the Church”) of *Gaudium et spes* further went on to instruct readers to recognize and respect difference.

Both Habermas and the Church, therefore, recognize that dialogue and engagement, rather than a separation between religion and secular, are needed in today’s world. In *Dignitatis Humanae*, the Council upheld the right to religious freedom because it is founded, “not in the subjective disposition of the person, but in his very nature. In consequence, *the right to this immunity continues to exist even in those who do not live up to their obligation of seeking the truth and adhering to it*” (emphasis added, Second Vatican Council 1965a). The recognition that all have the right to be free from state coercion regarding religious beliefs is evidence of the Church doing its part to make an institutional translation possible. Furthermore, the statement reflects the Church’s recognition of human dignity in Catholics and non-Catholics. While expressing this openness, the Church also instructs its own adherents: “[The] doctrine of religious freedom has roots in divine revelation, and for this reason Christians are bound to respect it all the more conscientiously” (Second Vatican Council 1965a). As will be shown, the Church has translated its concerns into reasonably accessible language resulting in a strong overlap between its values and those of the international community.

Yet, institutional translation may not work for all institutions. Sociologist Kristina Stoeckl has previously written on norm entrepreneurship, Habermas, and the Russian Orthodox Church (Stoeckl 2016). In her examination of the Russian Orthodox Church, she found that it acted as a “moral conservative norm promoter” in its promotion of “traditional values” in the arena of human rights.¹⁴ While the Russian Orthodox used conservative traditional values as the basis for its relationship with the global community (i.e., international organizations, state actors, and non-governmental organizations), there were limits to its ability to affect a norm cascade. It was their promotion of specific values that placed this particular institution at odds with other global actors. The Russian Orthodox Church failed to gain international support because its particularist normative agenda was at odds with the universalism of the international community (in this case, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights supported by the United Nations Human Rights Council). While Stoeckl persuasively argues that religious institutions can contribute to public discussions of the common good and thereby serve as moral norm entrepreneurs, she concludes that there are limits to which types of institutions can use Habermas’ conceptual framework (Stoeckl 2016, 2017).

To the contrary, George Tyler argued that institutional translation did not push secular actors far enough and proposed instead “the reciprocal translation proviso” (RTP) (Tyler 2018). This approach would have secular officials, i.e., those responsible for creating policy, “translate their public reasons into non-public reason.” In effect, barriers to participation and the asymmetric burden usually placed on the religious groups would be reduced. “Thus, religious citizens should be willing to translate their reasons into public reasons with the knowledge that their secular fellows will simultaneously undertake a similar task” (Tyler 2018, 734–35). Thus, paired with the Church’s diplomatic

efforts on the international stage, Tyler's recommendation would make the Church's political theology and Habermasian institutional translation a practical possibility.¹⁵

In a similar vein, Gregorio Bettiza and Filippo Dionigi argued that scholarship on norms and constructivism has focused heavily on Western actors leading them to focus on ways in which norm diffusion can occur from non-Western norm-makers to Western norm-takers (Bettiza and Dionigi 2015). Unlike Stoeckl, however, they argue that Habermas' concept of institutional translation can be useful in demonstrating how this norm diffusion can occur. They treat the concept both as a normative requirement and an analytical causal mechanism (Bettiza and Dionigi 2015, 3). In doing so,

By highlighting the mechanism of *institutional translation*, we seek to open up the study of norm dynamics beyond centre-periphery diffusion, still present in notions such as vernacularization or localization for instance. Translation subsumes localization, but also includes de-localization...Moreover, compared to unidirectional processes of persuasion, institutional translation opens up the study of dynamics by considering the active role of western and non-western culturally situated agency in dialogical dynamics of norm contestation (Bettiza and Dionigi 2015, 3–4).

While Bettiza and Dionigi's work focuses mainly on the effect of non-Western norm makers (i.e., the Organization of Islamic Conference), their explanation for why institutional translation is the mechanism by which religion can bring together actors with differing interests is important.

Subsidiarity as a function of institutional translation

As noted earlier, norm entrepreneurs focus on offering new cognitive frames in order to promote innovative ways of approaching and understanding an issue. What then, is the new cognitive frame offered by the Church and *how* does it propagate this new frame? Guided by the "signs of the times" and subsidiarity, the Church's position on issues takes into account changing social circumstances and recognizes the freedom and responsibility accorded to individuals and groups to handle such circumstances. Thus, to overcome the geographical and analytical divide between the Holy See and the national Catholic Churches worldwide, the Church's principle of subsidiarity mediates the dialogical dynamics referred to by Bettiza and Dionigi. Subsidiarity attempts to achieve this on two levels: between the national Churches and the Holy See (which represents the universal church) and between the Holy See and the international community.

Subsidiarity recognizes decision making involves all of society and the consequences of those decisions are interrelated. So as international conferences and organizations bring together political leaders, environmental experts, and specialized civil society groups, the Church's use of subsidiarity does not "absolve individuals, families, and local associations of their responsibilities for decisions they can make and actions they can take to mitigate the effects of human-forced changes in the global climate" (Schaefer 2011, 412–18). According to Finnemore and Sikkink, norms

promoted by global norm entrepreneurs are then filtered by the domestic levels (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998, 893).

Laudato Si': a foreign policy statement

Over the course of its long institutional life, the Church's effect on politics has evolved from direct influence to recognizing that its moral essence and obligations limit its political role, particularly in the realm of policy making. This limited political role has not hindered the Church in speaking in favor of moral values associated with social, political, and economic issues.

While *Laudato Si'* is regarded as the Church's most significant contribution to the discussion on climate change, it has not been its first and certainly will not be its last. Similar to Pope Francis, prior popes have built on the ecological teachings of St. Francis of Assisi (1225). Major works include Pope Paul VI's *Octogesima Adveniens* (1971), Pope John Paul II's *Redemptor Hominis* (1979), *Centesimus Annus* (1991), *Evangelium Vitae* (1995), "Common Declaration on Environmental Ethics [with Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I]," and Pope Benedict XVI's *Caritas In Veritate* (2009). In his encyclical *Centesimus Annus*, Pope John Paul II wrote:

In addition to the irrational destruction of the natural environment, we must also mention the more serious destruction of the *human environment*, something which is by no means receiving the attention it deserves. Although people are rightly worried — though much less than they should be — about preserving the natural habitats of the various animal species threatened with extinction, because they realize that each of these species makes its particular contribution to the balance of nature in general, too little effort is made to *safeguard the moral conditions for an authentic "human ecology"*. [Man] must respect the natural and moral structure with which he has been endowed (Pope John Paul II 1991).

This holistic attitude and commitment translates easily into other normative structures and policy concerns.

Where *Laudato Si'* differs from prior statements, however, is that it directly engages with science and assesses the effects of today's political and economic culture on the environment. Yet, Pope Francis' humanistic approach to understanding and tackling climate change has been dismissed or even met with contempt. In his work *The Age of the Crisis of Man* (2015), cultural critic Mark Grief stated: "Anytime your inquiries lead you to say, 'At this moment we must ask and decide *who we fundamentally are ...*' just stop. You have begun asking the wrong analytic questions for your moment Answer, rather, the practical matters ... and find the immediate actions necessary to achieve an aim" (quoted in McKibben 2015). Such a sentiment would indicate that the Church's approach is perhaps too abstract to have any practical value or widespread appeal. A similar critique was echoed by 2015 presidential hopeful Jeb Bush who stated this in response to the release of *Laudato Si'*:

I hope I'm not going to get castigated for saying this by my priest back home, but I don't get economic policy from my bishops or my cardinals or my pope...And I'd like to see what he says as it relates to climate change and how that connects to these broader, deeper issue before I pass judgment. But I think religion ought to be about making us better as people and less about things that end up getting in the political realm (Terrell 2015).

Grief and Bush's views clearly miss the significance of taking the vantage point of a human/integral ecology, which results in religion being pushed back into the private sphere and thereby limiting the contributions Habermas recognized to be integral to political life.

The lead line of *Laudato Si'* set the tone of the encyclical by pointing out how the environment is just one part that affects human ecology. Thus, Pope Francis' goal with *Laudato Si'* was to

Point to the intimate relationship between the poor and the fragility of the planet, the conviction that everything in the world is connected, the critique of new paradigms and forms of power derived from technology, the call to seek other ways of understanding the economy and progress, the value proper to each creature, the human meaning of ecology, the need for forthright and honest debate, the serious responsibility of international and local policy, the throwaway culture and the proposal of a new lifestyle. These questions will not be dealt with once and for all, but reframed and enriched again and again (Pope Francis 2015).

Taking an interdisciplinary approach, Pope Francis outlined the broader problems of which climate change is only a part. He pointed out how today's culture has mainly served to reinforce the irresponsible manner in which individuals treat each other, how states treat their citizens, and how the international community has become less and less communal. Rather than globalization ushering in a multicultural community, we are faced instead with a "globalization of indifference," "excessive anthropocentrism," and a "culture of relativism" (Pope Francis 2015).

Pope Francis further points out the lack of political will and the near-sighted politics that hinders us from recognizing intergenerational solidarity, which must be considered as "a basic question of justice, since the world we have received also belongs to those who follow us" (Pope Francis 2015). Rather than focus only on politics and policymaking, he promotes instead environmental education aimed at creating an "ecological citizenship," which leads to the cultivation of specific values that contribute to long-lasting rather than short-term political, social, and economic gains. Such language is exactly what Finnemore and Sikkink identify with norm entrepreneurs.

Alyna Lyon's work, on the other hand, focuses specifically on the symbolic moral role of Pope Francis, referring to him as an example of an "unusual case of moral authority" because he "framed the global climate change debate in a new way – creating a moral narrative surrounding environmental neglect and the need for human stewardship" (Lyon 2018, 120). In political science terms, she argues, Pope Francis would qualify as a "global policy entrepreneur" because of his ability to bring to the fore new ways of thinking about climate change, advocate for certain actions,

and interact with relevant stakeholders and political leaders to move forward a policy that is not limited to self-interest (Lyon 2018, 122–23). Lyon uses this concept of global policy entrepreneur to underscore the significance of Francis' contributions to conversations surrounding climate change policy. This, however, is incomplete; Francis' papacy is an aspect of his institution and so the Church is better conceived as a norm entrepreneur rather than a policy one. From the ontological basis in eternal law to the ethics of the institution put into practice, a foreign policy emerges that places care for human beings and their world at the center of the Church's mission. The pope may be an agent, but this agency issues from firm institutional directives to eschew mere anthropocentrism in favor of a holistic concern for a harmonious and just ecologism, understood expansively.

Yet, a significant distinction should be reiterated. While Pope Francis' contributions in the realm of climate change policy are visionary, framing his role as a policy entrepreneur leaves room for a possible overstatement of the Church's effects and intentions on formal policy making. When postulating that Francis was influential in policy making, Lyon notes that she draws mostly from anecdotal evidence (Lyon 2018, 134). When examining the relationship between religion and politics, we should be cautious about what we attribute to whom—sometimes it is appropriate to draw finer lines and subtler distinctions. Conceptualized as a *norm* rather than *policy* entrepreneur more appropriately captures the Church's efforts to alter the culture and perceptions on climate change rather than advocating for a specific global policy. The latter of which, it is hardly in a position to formally execute. In the capacity of normative entrepreneurship, however, the Church can symbolically lead, inspiring states to communicate about issues of poverty and climate through the medium of this normative language. Thus, Lyon correctly points out that “the issue is not about reduction of hard commerce, shipping channels, and animal habitats, but instead about the reduction of great human suffering” (Lyon 2018, 136). She merely focused too closely on the agent, somewhat negating the supportive structure.

As a norm entrepreneur, there is evidence to suggest that the Church's framing of climate change is having some effect at both the global and domestic levels. In two separate studies of U.S. public opinion, scholars found a positive relationship between the Pope's global presence, his encyclical *Laudato Si'*, and respondents' views on the environment. Respondents reported they were more likely to view the environment as a moral issue and felt an increase in public engagement and personal responsibility (Maibach et al. 2015; Schuldt et al. 2017). Maibach et al. outlined the various actions taken by the Church following the release of *Laudato Si'*, which demonstrates how as a norm entrepreneur, the Church's structure aids in the dissemination of its spiritual message to cultivate discussion and reflection.¹⁶ Schuldt et al. found that even brief exposure to Pope Francis' message had an effect, particularly among those who had prior awareness of the pope's message.

Notably, these effects were found more than 7 months after the pope's 2015 visit to the United States and more than 11 months after the encyclical's release, suggesting an enduring effect of the Vatican's messaging on public opinion, over-and-above other potential extraneous influences (e.g., heightened media attention to climate change surrounding the pope's visit). ...The pope's

prominence as a global spiritual leader and popularity across religious and non-religious groups alike may well have contributed to the similar pattern of effects observed for those groups here... (Schuldt et al. 2017, 174–75).

Paired with its role as a moral authority, the Church's messages of human/integral ecology are influencing how the domestic levels think about the environment. In its role as a diplomatic actor, the Church delivers its moral message and influence to states and the global community at venues such as COP26.

COP26: re-imagining environmental norms

In recent years, the connections between the condition of the environment and the conditions of the poor have been gaining salience. In July 2021, Germany experienced the worst flooding it has had in possibly 1,000 years; as noted by physicist Friederike Otto, "I say this as a German: The idea that you could possibly die from weather is completely alien" (McKinley et al. 2021; Sengupta 2021). This was but one instance of irregularly extreme weather conditions occurring globally. Given recent dramatic climate changes, activists on the ground have already engaged in new approaches to reinvigorate the discussion on climate. As reported by *Time* magazine climate correspondent Justin Worland, "[A]ctivists think they've figured out how best to talk about climate in tangible terms...[one activist group has] embraced political messaging that links a warming planet to unemployment and poverty and that frames climate solutions as a way to create jobs and clean up communities."⁴ There are, however, antecedents to this line of thinking when one considers the Church.

Nearly a year before COP26, the Holy See was one among 75 leaders in government, business, and civil society who participated in the December 2020 Climate Ambition Summit hosted by the United Nations, the United Kingdom, and France. There, as Pope Francis would later reiterate in his COP26 opening message, the Holy See "adopted a strategy of net-zero emissions operating on two levels: 1) the commitment of *Vatican City State* to achieve this goal by 2050 and 2) the commitment of the *Holy See* promote education in integral ecology...These commitments have given rise to thousands of initiatives worldwide" (italics added, Pope Francis 2021b).¹⁷ By differentiating between the Vatican City State (the Holy See's territorial property) and the Holy See (which oversees that territorial property and the entire Catholic Church as a religious organization), the Church was highlighting its dual role. As a precursor to COP26, the Church was building on the momentum of *Laudato Si'*, whose words had already moved people to reorient their approach to the environment, to now inspire states on the global level with its deeds.

In another high level meeting months prior to COP26, the Holy See once again used its global diplomatic position to support the environment. On April 10, 2021, the Holy See, the embassies of Great Britain and Italy to the Holy See, and 40 participants representing various religious faiths and scientists convened at the Vatican for a meeting on "Faith and Science: Towards COP26." There, Pope Francis urged that change was possible by "example and action, and education." Informed by one's religious and spiritual traditions, he argued that disparate groups can collaborate in order to "change the narrative of development" since "governments

cannot handle such ambitious change alone ... This is where we, religious leaders and institutions can make an important contribution...Raising public awareness is indispensable to the change of course that is needed” (Pope Francis 2021a).

In terms of action, Pope Francis called upon participants to advance an educational and cultural transformation, which involves a more conscious practice of ecological sensitivity, strengthening integral ecological education in educational and cultural institutions, and “participating actively and appropriately in the public and political discourse on environmental issues” to raise the voices of “those too often ignored, such as Indigenous Peoples” (Ibid.). The second tier of action would be to lead by example and to take “*far-reaching environmental action* within our own institutions and communities, informed by science and based on religious wisdom.” Such action includes partnering with local communities, achieving full sustainability in all of their operations, and aligning their financial investments, goods purchased, and services hired “with the same ethical lens being applied to the business sector and to the rest of social life” (Ibid.). Guided by its principle of subsidiarity, the Church is encouraging action that has consequences across all levels of society.

Five months after this April 2021 meeting, Europe announced its ambitious plans to reduce emissions 55% by 2030 and become the first carbon neutral continent by 2050 (Erlanger and Sengupta 2021). In its announcement, the EU made it clear that by tackling climate change, it would be given the opportunity to adopt a new economic model, one that would simultaneously address the environment, economic growth, inequality, and overall public health. Perhaps yet another outcome of these earlier meetings was the symbolic announcement made by the Church and 70+ other faith institutions, just five days before COP26. Uniting “for the largest-ever joint divestment announcement...72 faith institutions from six continents with more than \$4.2 billion of combined assets under management announced their commitment to divest from fossil fuels” (Braden 2021).

As COP26 began its proceedings in late October 2021, Pope Francis used his opening message challenge the political will of states to do their part for the environment on behalf of the international community. Specifically, he referred to the “ecological debt” owed by the developed countries to the developing ones, which could come in the form of debt forgiveness and assistance (Pope Francis 2021b). He reminded delegates of how the Church—through its dual role as a global diplomatic actor and a religious transnational institution—is doing its part in terms of care for the common home. As a global, diplomatic actor, the Church was present in COP26’s UN managed “Blue Zone”; there it engaged with participants accredited by the UNFCCC (the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change), which includes delegations from observer organizations and official representatives from more than 190 countries. In the “Green Zone,” it engaged with non-state actors such as civil society organizations and business leaders to encourage dialogue and education.

There is some indication that a norm cascade leading to norm internalization is perhaps on the horizon. Finalized as the Glasgow Climate Pact, the participants agreed to four action areas: mitigation, adaptation and loss and damage, finance, and collaboration. Briefly summarized, this included an aim to mitigate the effects

of climate change with new 2030 emission targets, increase preparedness to climate risks by improving access (including to Indigenous Peoples) to finance for adaptation, commitments by developed and developing countries to fund or realign their finance goals in order to achieve global net-zero, and a commitment to accelerate collaboration between governments and non-state actors (2021 UN Climate Change Conference 2021, 5). Of the four action areas, the issue of loss and damage is particularly important to the Global South as it is meant to provide them with funding and compensation for land affected by climate change. According to Alistair Dutton, a Holy See COP26 delegate, most funding to protect the environment has focused on “mitigation and technologies aimed at reducing emissions,” which translates mainly into new technology for the rich while the poor remain as they are (Catholic News Service 2021).

The developed countries also renewed their commitment to raise \$100 billion annually in climate finance and to have their progress toward such a goal reported under the UNFCCC. Per the Pact, this would ensure “developing countries have a voice and further cementing trust,” which is particularly important since that goal was not met in 2020 (2021 UN Climate Change Conference 2021, 19; Wambui 2021). Furthermore, with regard to adaptation, loss, and damage, the Glasgow Compact increased its financial commitment:

Over \$350 million has been committed to the UNFCCC Adaptation Fund: nearly triple the previous highest collective mobilization. Over \$600 million was pledged to the Least Developed Countries Fund, the highest collective mobilization the fund has seen. These record breaking contributions are building the resilience of vulnerable communities, safeguarding livelihoods and lives (2021 UN Climate Change Conference 2021, 17).

Paired with the efforts of the Church as expressed in its foreign policy, the global norm of politically, economically, and socially treating the environment not in isolation but in relation to an integral ecology will have a better chance of achieving global norm internalization.

Conclusion

Elements of Catholic Social Teaching found in *Laudato Si'*, which includes an appeal for a human ecology based on holistic stewardship, ecological citizens, and a harmony between people and nature, set the framework for the Church's foreign policy. This foreign policy is promoted by an institutional translation aimed at helping re-orient the international community's approach to treating and understanding the environment and the effects of climate change. As a norm entrepreneur, through its doctrinal and symbolic leadership, the Church manages to articulate its position, but does so in a language that is not exclusive or exclusionary, meeting the criteria of Habermas' institutional translation.

Casting Pope Francis as one who aims at inspiring policy draws attention away from the manner in which the Church as an institution engages in politics as a norm entrepreneur. Moral institutions such as the Church lend a level of depth to conversations on the environment, and such depth is reached by the Church's insistence on *recognition* of the human community, particularly the poor. Prayer and

reflection may be central to the Church's approach to addressing the consequences of the political, social, and economic activities, but an integral ecology brings to the fore possibly forgotten communities and modes of thinking. Thoughtfulness and recognition of an integral ecology requires formal political actors to go beyond themselves, beyond the present moment, and to more directly engage in the consequences of their policies.

With regard to the debates on climate change, the Church stands outside of, but not necessarily always in conflict with, the scientific community. The Church is in the position to raise normative questions and moral concerns in the common language of public ethics that science and economics sometimes avoid. It has the ability to walk this line between private and public institution, and challenge political actors who prioritize legal, political, and economic calculations to the detriment of the environment. To this end, the Church can emphasize the fallaciousness of a political calculus concerned with political stability and economic growth that fails to factor in conscientious environmental stewardship.

As noted by McCormick, one of the focal points of Pope Francis' political theology is centering the Church in time rather than space. That is, the Church is focused on "initiating processes rather than possessing spaces" and the "the pope urges us 'to work slowly but surely' in ways that engender 'processes of people-building'" (McCormick 2021, 169). This would suggest that the Church has a long-term commitment to the environment and its success does not hinge solely on COP26 outcomes. Historically, the practice of a foreign policy by the institutional Church had contributed to the development of particular global norms (e.g., democracy and human rights), which reached a norm tipping point and norm cascade, as evidenced in the third wave of democratization. It is not outside the realm of possibility, therefore, that as a norm entrepreneur, the Catholic Church can support international interest and activism with regard to the environment and climate change.

Notes

1. The Paris Rulebook refers to agreements to rules and procedures made in 2018 to implement the 2015 Paris Agreement. For more see Huang (2019).
2. According to Finnemore and Sikkink, norm entrepreneurs are actors who attempt to "convince a critical mass of states (norm leaders) to embrace new norms" and then through imitation, attempt to socialize other states to follow (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998, 895).
3. Key themes of Catholic Social Teaching are drawn from Church documents such as papal encyclicals. Major themes include Life and Dignity of the Human Person, Call to Family, Community, and Participation, Rights and Responsibilities, Option for the Poor and Vulnerable, The Dignity of Work and the Rights of Workers, Solidarity, and Care for God's Creation (see [United States Conference of Catholic Bishops n.d.](#)). For a list of foundational documents on Catholic Social Teaching, see [United States Conference of Catholic Bishops \(2022\)](#).
4. This is important because as Wald and Wilcox note, a "current events" perspective in motivating the research and study of religion and politics has resulted in a failure to broadly engage with the discipline (Wald and Wilcox 2006, 523–529).
5. Daniel Philpott and Gerard Powers have argued that religious actors "are all but ignored in most current thinking on peacebuilding" (Philpott and Powers 2010, 4).
6. Byrnes noted that while the direct influence of the Catholic Church has not been rigorously measured, it is important to note that as an institution, it has always been there. Furthermore, the language of encyclicals, written nearly 150 years ago, remains present and we are still talking about it (Byrnes 2021).

7. Using a religious economy model, Anthony Gill examines the relationship between interests and religious institutions (Gill 2001).
8. As quoted in Corwin Smidt's work, "Religion's emphasis on transcendence relative biases and limiting the political sphere of activity in that it points to some sovereignty beyond that of the state (Cochran 1990, 150–152). State power may all too easily be exercised on the basis of pragmatic considerations, but religion, with its consideration of moral and ethical frameworks, provides an alternative basis for decision making" (Smidt 2013, 21).
9. As political scientist Timothy Byrnes noted, "Even Apple has a foreign policy" (Byrnes 2021); see also Kurth (1993).
10. Crespo and Gregory noted, "The mechanisms of how [Pope Francis'] message is spread and the success in terms of changing individual people and governments behavior, are interesting and important but beyond the scope of this paper" (Crespo and Gregory 2020, 117)
11. According to *Gaudium et spes*, "the Church has always had the duty of scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel. Thus, in language intelligible to each generation, she can respond to the perennial questions which men ask about this present life and the life to come, and about the relationship of the one to the other. We must therefore recognize and understand the world in which we live, its explanations, its longings, and its often dramatic characteristics" (Second Vatican Council 1965b).
12. *Lumen Fidei*, issued four months into Pope Francis' papacy, was initially written by Pope Benedict XVI and completed by Francis. As noted by Francis, the encyclical was written by "four hands" (Speciale 2013).
13. She also recognizes that he is constrained by how far and to what extent he can interpret such norms since they were established prior to his papacy (Rozario (2014), 12).
14. According to Stoeckl, examples of traditional values include "visibility of Christian symbols in the public sphere, opposition to all forms of lesbian-gay-bisexual-transgender rights, restrictions on the breadth of women's and children's rights, opposition to abortion, euthanasia, reproductive and stem cell research..." (Stoeckl 2016, 136). Based on her research, she concludes traditional values can also be considered "a label given to practices and ideas that have...not been names...as normatively relevant, but have become normatively relevant because of the liberal and egalitarian evolution of the international human rights system and its impact on domestic politics. Therefore, the traditional values agenda is the conservative flipside of the progressive human rights system" (Stoeckl 2016, 143).
15. According to Toft et al., a religious actor's political theology (the ideas it holds about political authority and justice) and level of differentiation (the degree and kind of independence from political authority) affects its ability to shape world politics (Toft et al. 2011). William McCormick notes Pope Francis utilizes a "political theology of the people" (McCormick 2021).
16. Maibach et al. noted that following the release of *Laudato Si'* Pope Francis traveled for a five-day visit to the United States, which included a meeting with U.S. President Barack Obama, an address to a joint session of Congress and the UN General Assembly, along with celebrating mass with the American people. "Between the encyclical release and Pope's visit, the Catholic Climate Covenant and the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops widely disseminated the message of *Laudato Si'*. They held two press conferences at the National Press Club, and five diocesan press events, which generated more than 3,000 news stories and more than 500 downloads of a free parish program" (Maibach et al. 2015, 3).
17. As noted by Mariano Barbato, "The Holy See's diplomatic status in the world of territorial states is underlined with this symbolic territory but it derives from the person of the pope, who is only additional the monarch of a small city state" (Barbato 2013, 39)

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