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## On Earth, as it is

by William Bole

A CONFERENCE TO PARSE THE POPE'S CLIMATE MESSAGE



*Cardinal Turkson: Laudato Si' "is not an encyclical on climate change" but a "social encyclical—about the well-being of the Earth, and of the human person."*

*Photograph: Lee Pellegrini*

Greeted by thousands of well-wishers on the White House lawn this past September, Pope Francis described climate change as “a problem which can no longer be left to a future generation.” During the week following the pope’s five-day visit to the United States, an estimated 2,000 Boston College students, alumni, faculty, and others turned out for various sessions of a conference titled “Our Common Home: An Ethical Summons to Tackle Climate Change.”

The September 28–October 1 conference drilled down into the incipient tradition of Catholic social teaching on the environment, and especially Francis’s May 2015 encyclical letter, *Laudato Si'* (Praise Be to You), subtitled “On Care for Our Common Home.” (An encyclical is a papal letter concerning Catholic teaching, circulated among bishops, the Catholic faithful, or the public at large, and *Laudato Si'* is the first one dedicated to issues of ecological responsibility, although recent popes have increasingly addressed the theme.)

Months before the anticipated release of the encyclical, a group of faculty and students led by Associate Professor Noah P. Snyder, director of the environmental studies program, began planning a panel discussion on the document. That idea bloomed into the nearly weeklong conference sponsored principally by the Institute for the Liberal Arts and the Jesuit Institute at Boston College.

On the first afternoon of the gathering, an overflow crowd packed into Robsham Theater to hear a lecture by Cardinal Peter K.A. Turkson, who led the team that helped draft Francis's encyclical. Turkson, president of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, and a Ghanaian universally mentioned among those who might one day succeed Francis as pope, wanted to make one thing clear at the outset of his 90-minute lecture. "His encyclical is not an encyclical on climate change," said the 67-year-old prelate, alluding to the news media's focus on that aspect of the document. It is, rather, a "social encyclical—about the well-being of the Earth, and of the human person."

Turkson, who has salt-and-pepper hair, an avuncular manner, and a melodic accent, explained that the encyclical builds on a favorite theme of the first Jesuit pope, "the longing of people to be cared for and in turn to exercise caring." The cardinal added: "He brings the basic message of Jesus—love one another as I have loved you—into the very heart of the world's greatest challenges: to care for the poor and to care for the planet."

On that note, Turkson delved into Francis's choice of language. He pointed out that the prosaic "stewardship"—a keyword of religious environmental discourse—appears only twice in the nearly 41,000-word encyclical. Instead, the pope speaks of "care for creation." The papal advisor elaborated: "Anybody can exercise stewardship. It can be a duty. It can be a task. But when one cares, it's always with passion, it's always with attention."

The Vatican official parsed other messages of the encyclical, including the pope's view that human beings, having "endangered the Earth," can also begin to heal "our common home"; that the challenges call for "an ecological conversion"; and that climate-change science is both terrifying and "unfortunately true."

After the formal remarks, index cards were collected on which audience members had written questions for the cardinal. University Provost David Quigley, who had introduced Turkson, read aloud the questions, which touched on such matters as traditional African reverence for creation (Turkson said it is real but at times borders on "fetishism" and nature-worship); and population growth, with its diminishment of natural resources (the cardinal suggested that the bigger problem might be "an excessive accumulation of these same resources in the hands of a few"). The provost made no editorial comment as he related another question that managed to fit on a 3-x-5 card: "By and large, the Boston College community is part of the problem in that it is made up of a high percentage of affluent individuals who create huge carbon footprints, particularly in contrast to the poor in the global South, who are most vulnerable and will continue to suffer more of the negative effects of our overly consumptive lifestyles. What does Pope Francis want and expect Boston College, particularly its leaders, to do to rectify this inequality?"

The question was met with a lively mix of laughter and applause. In response, the cardinal made a show of hemming and hawing, scratching his forehead and affecting a pained look on his face, before saying, "Pope Francis expects from Boston College . . . what he expects from all of us . . . ecological conversion—a certain amount of sensitivity to the well-being of creation."

The lecture was one of nine events and panels offered during the four-day conference spanning Monday through Thursday and bringing together some 30 speakers. These included many notables, such as Massachusetts U.S. Senator Edward J. Markey '68, JD'72; Andrew C. Revkin, who writes the Dot Earth environmental blog for the *New York Times*; and Tufts University professor Julian Agyeman, who originated the concept of “just sustainabilities,” which integrates social justice with ecological concerns.

On Wednesday of that week, a noon panel with the straightforward title, “Discussion of the Implications of the Encyclical,” was especially geared to students and those unversed in Catholic Church developments.

Leading off the panel, held in the Yawkey Center’s Murray Function Room, was Boston College associate professor of theology Mary Ann Hinsdale, IHM, who unpacked such questions as what a papal encyclical is—“First of all, it’s not infallible. It’s authoritative. Catholics are expected to form their own consciences in light of the encyclical.” Her colleague on the theology faculty, Kristin Heyer, pointed out that according to Francis “how we eat, waste, adjust our thermostat, commute—these are all moral concerns.” The third panelist was Dan Misleh, executive director of the Washington, D.C.-based Catholic Climate Covenant, which for nine years has been trying to get Catholic laity and leadership interested in the issue. Misleh noted that when the Vatican announced that an encyclical touching on climate change was forthcoming, “It was like Christmas and my birthday all rolled into one.”

Undergraduate students with their bulky backpacks and T-shirts were a clear presence among the approximately 125 members of that audience, and two of them—one selected by student Democrats and the other by a Republican group—stepped up to the lectern to add their voices to the discussion.

Christie Merino '16, who came by way of the Democrats and who majors in political science with a minor in geological sciences, aimed her remarks at press coverage of the encyclical. She said media interest revolved too much around climate change and whether Francis would be able to convince conservative Catholics that it is indeed an urgent global challenge. She interpreted the encyclical less politically, as “a reframing of truly foundational Catholic social teaching, as a reaffirmation of how we must treat one another as members of this common home, as a reminder of the delicate relationships we must nurture between this Earth, God, and one another, and a call to build bridges instead of barriers.” Merino, who is managing editor of the *Gavel*, which describes itself as “the progressive student voice of Boston College,” added, “The encyclical serves as a reminder that discussions about climate change should not be sequestered to the classroom or be bogged down in political punditry.” She is setting her sights on a career in environmental public interest work.



Amanda King (left) and Robert Pion, directors of sustainability at Bentley University and Boston College, respectively, at the “What Can I Do?” fair. Photograph: Lee Pellegrini

The second respondent was William Musserian '16, an economics major who has interned for the Federal Reserve Bank in Boston as well as for Republican political campaigns including Romney for President. Musserian built his presentation around “what I’ve learned” from Francis’s encyclical. One lesson has to do with what the document identifies as the “throwaway culture.” Musserian said that after reading the encyclical he found himself more sensitive than he might have been to a scene he observed in a Boston College restroom, where a student cranked out a half-dozen or so paper towels after washing his hands. “It’s completely unnecessary, but from the perspective of the student, it doesn’t cost anything,” said Musserian, who is planning a career in finance. The college Republican added that he has also gained from his encyclical reading a deeper grasp of a theological principle. “We don’t have absolute dominion. Only God has ownership of the Earth. We are part of nature. We can’t dictate to nature.” He added, “Just because animals and plants can’t talk back to us doesn’t mean we’re not responsible to them.”

The conversation was opened to the larger audience, and three of the four questioners were Boston College alumni. Generally sporting tan chinos and boat shoes, they pressed the issue of why the U.S. Catholic leadership was (in their estimation) lagging behind the Roman pontiff on environmental matters.

Joseph Chisholm '52, a financial services provider who traveled from Long Island to attend the conference with his wife, Joan, spoke first. “I haven’t heard much from my pastor yet, on *Laudato Si’*,” he said, clearly disappointed.

“It’s uneven,” Misleh acknowledged, referring to the response by pastors to the encyclical. But he added, “It’s the responsibility of all of us to give them the tools—help them feel more comfortable talking about this, because of the political overtones.” Misleh directed Chisholm to Catholic Climate Covenant’s website for materials intended to help clergy discuss the encyclical with parishioners.

Vincent Maraventano, JD'77, who is executive director of Massachusetts Interfaith Power and Light, a religious environmental organization, aimed a little higher—at the U.S. bishops. He asserted that the bishops “are not communicating with the priests or with each other,” on the subject of *Laudato Si'*. “It’s another example of how, in the U.S., we’re missing the boat,” he remarked.

Misleh was more upbeat. “A lot of bishops will move once they hear from the grassroots, if you invite them in with a smile rather than a frown,” he advised. “But we certainly need to push from below.”

On Thursday, October 1, the closing day of the conference, one of the highlights was a “What Can I Do?” fair held in a large white tent on the Campus Green. It featured some 16 organizations that had set up tables with their literature, and a vegetarian buffet open to all comers.

Among those organizations was Climate Justice @ Boston College, an officially recognized student group that is asking the University to disinvest in fossil fuels. Three undergraduates around that table were handing out leaflets with a headshot of Pope Francis imposed on the Uncle Sam image and the message—“I WANT YOU to turn your passion into action!” On another table was a sign, “BCEEAN,” which stands for Boston College Energy and Environment Alumni Network. The group claims 650 active alumni members. “We’re trying to create community among BC people who prioritize energy and the environment,” said Liz Delaney '00, an organizer of the six-year-old network whose day job is with the Environmental Defense Fund in Boston. That means sponsoring on-campus events for alumni, such as a coffee-and-tea reception held after Senator Markey’s talk; publishing a three-times-a-year e-newsletter; and posting notices of jobs, internships, awards, and other opportunities related to environmental action, Delaney explained.

Aiden Clarke '19, of Bethel, Maine, was browsing the tables, holding a veggie burger in one hand with literature under his arm and a backpack hanging off the opposite shoulder. He said he had attended a few conference events at the suggestion of his professors Brian J. Gareau (sociology) and Tara Pisani Gareau (earth and environmental sciences), who helped organize the conference and are co-teaching an interdisciplinary freshman seminar titled “Global Implications of Climate Change,” offered as part of a piloted revision of Boston College’s undergraduate core curriculum. Clark added that he signed up for the seminar and turned up for the conference mainly out of an interest in the science of climate change, but that he has been drawn into other dimensions of the issue as well.

“I’m not a religious person whatsoever,” he avowed, “but I’m learning about the morality of Pope Francis and his take on climate change. I’m learning that it’s not just about science. It’s about society.”

Read more by [William Bole](#)

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Watch the entire conference (videos): <http://www.bc.edu/centers/ila/our-common-home/watch.html>