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Pope Francis waves to the Boy Scouts gathered in St. Peter's Square on Saturday in Vatican City. Getty Images

Pope Francis, in sweeping encyclical, calls for swift action on climate change

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VATICAN CITY - Pope Francis on Thursday called for a radical transformation of politics, economics and individual lifestyles to confront environmental degradation and climate change, as his much-awaited papal encyclical blended a biting critique of consumerism and irresponsible development with a plea for swift and unified global action.

The vision that Francis outlined in the 184-page encyclical is sweeping in ambition and scope: He described a relentless exploitation and destruction of the environment, for which he blamed apathy, the reckless pursuit of profits, excessive faith in technology and political shortsightedness. The most vulnerable victims are the world's poorest people, he declared, who are being dislocated and disregarded.

The first pope from the developing world, Francis, an Argentine, used the encyclical - titled "Laudato Si'," or "Praise Be to You" - to highlight the crisis posed by climate change. He placed most of the blame on fossil fuels and human activity while warning of an "unprecedented destruction of ecosystems, with serious consequence for all of us" if swift action is not taken. Developed, industrialized countries were mostly responsible, he said, and were obligated to help poorer nations confront the crisis.

"Climate change is a global problem with grave implications: environmental, social, economic, political and for the distribution of goods," he wrote. "It represents one of the principal challenges facing humanity in our day."

The Vatican released the encyclical at noon on Thursday, following a heavily attended news conference and amid widespread global interest. Vatican officials were infuriated after an Italian magazine on Monday posted a leaked draft of the encyclical online - one that almost exactly matched the final

document. The breach led to speculation that opponents of Francis inside the Vatican wanted to embarrass him by undermining the planned rollout.

But on Thursday, religious figures, environmentalists, scientists, elected officials and corporate executives around the world were awaiting the official release of the encyclical, with many of them scheduling later news conferences or preparing statements to discuss it. Media interest was enormous, partly because of Francis' global popularity, but also because this was the first time that a pope had written an encyclical about environmental damage - and because of the intriguing coalition he is proposing between faith and science.

"Humanity is faced with a crucial challenge that requires the development of adequate policies, which, moreover, are currently being discussed on the global agenda," Cardinal Peter Turkson said during the morning news conference at the Vatican. "Certainly, 'Laudato Si' can and must have an impact on important and urgent decisions to be made in this area."

In the news conference, Turkson said Francis had already noted that humanity had played a role in climate change. He said that there was "heated debate" on the topic and that Francis was not trying to intervene in that.

Francis has made clear that he hopes the encyclical will influence energy and economic policy and stir a global movement. He calls on ordinary people to pressure politicians for change. Bishops and priests around the world are expected to lead discussions on the encyclical in services Sunday. But Francis is also reaching for a wider audience when in the first pages of the document he asks "to address every person living on this planet."

Even before the release, Francis' unflinching stance against environmental destruction, and his demand for global action, had already thrilled many scientists. In recent weeks, advocates of policies to combat climate change have expressed hope that Francis could lend a "moral dimension" to the debate, because winning scientific arguments was different from moving people to action.

"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," said Hans Joachim Schellnhuber, founder and chairman of the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research and a leading European climate scientist. "But we are now in a situation where we have to think about the consequences of our insight for society."

Yet Francis has also been sharply criticized by those who question or deny the established science of human-caused climate change and also by some conservative Roman Catholics, who have interpreted the document as an attack on capitalism and as unwanted political meddling at a moment when climate change is high on the global agenda.

Governments are now crafting domestic climate change plans before December's United Nations summit meeting on climate change in Paris. The goal of the meeting is to achieve the first sweeping global accord in which every nation on earth would commit to enacting new policies to limit greenhouse gas emissions. Many governments have yet to present plans, including major emitters like Brazil, which also has a large Catholic population. The encyclical is seen as an unobtrusive nudge for action, even as it provides support for leaders faced with tough choices in countries with large numbers of Catholics.

"It gives a lot of cover to political and economic leaders in those countries, as they make decisions on climate change policy," said Timothy Wirth, vice chairman of the U.N. Foundation.

Catholic theologians say the overarching theme of the encyclical is "integral ecology," which links care for the environment with a notion already well developed in Catholic teaching - that economic development, to be morally good and just, must take into account the need of human beings for things such as freedom, education and meaningful work.

"The basic idea is, in order to love God, you have to love your fellow human beings, and you have to love and care for the rest of creation," said Vincent Miller, who holds a chair in Catholic theology and culture at the University of Dayton, a Catholic college in Ohio. "It gives Francis a very traditional basis to argue for the inclusion of environmental concern at the center of Christian faith."

He added: "Critics will say the church can't teach policy, the church can't teach politics. And Francis is saying, 'No, these things are at the core of the church's teaching.'"

Francis has drawn from a wide variety of sources, partly to buttress his arguments, partly to underscore

the universality of his message. He regularly cites passages from his two predecessors, Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI, even as he also draws prominently from his religious ally, Patriarch Bartholomew I of Constantinople, leader of the world's Eastern Orthodox Christians. He also cites a Sufi Muslim mystic, Ali al-Khawwas.

Francis begins the encyclical with a hymn written by St. Francis of Assisi, the 13th-century friar who is the patron saint of animals and the environment. Francis cites the Bible's book of Genesis to underpin his theological argument, although in a passage certain to rankle some Christians, he chastises those who cite Genesis as evidence that man has "dominion" over earth and therefore an unlimited right to its resources. Some believers have used this biblical understanding of "dominion" to justify practices such as mountaintop mining or fishing with gill nets.

"This is not a correct interpretation of the Bible as understood by the Church," Francis wrote. The Bible teaches human beings to "till and keep" the garden of the world, he said: "'Tilling' refers to cultivating, plowing or working, while 'keeping' means caring, protecting, overseeing and preserving."

His most stinging rebuke is a broad economic and political critique of profit-seeking and the undue influence of technology on society. He praised the progress achieved by economic growth and technology, singling out achievements in medicine, science and engineering. But, he added, "Our immense technological development has not been accompanied by a development in human responsibility, values and conscience."

Central to Francis' theme is the linkage between the poor and the fragility of the planet. He rejects the belief that technology and "current economics" will solve environmental problems or "that the problems of global hunger and poverty will be resolved simply by market growth." He cites finance as having a distorting influence on politics and calls for government action, international regulation and a spiritual and cultural awakening to "recover depth in life."

Amid the broad themes, Francis also touches on a wide range of specific topics, from urban planning (calling for better neighborhoods for the poor) and agricultural economics (warning against the reach of huge agribusinesses that push family farmers off their land) to conservation and biodiversity (with calls to protect the Amazon and Congo basins), and even offers up small passages of media and architecture criticism.

"A huge indictment I see in this encyclical is that people have lost their sense of ultimate and proper goals of technology and economics," said Christiana Z. Peppard, an assistant professor of theology, science and ethics at Fordham University in New York. "We are focused on short-term, consumerist patterns, and have allowed technological and economic paradigms to tell us what our values ought to be."

Encyclicals are letters to clergy members and laity of the church that are considered authoritative papal teaching documents. Catholics are expected to try to sincerely embrace the teaching and moral judgments within. But while broad moral principles are widely considered to be binding, more specific assertions can be categorized as "prudential judgments" - a phrase some critics have invoked to reject Francis' positions on hot-button issues like climate change or economic inequality.

Many conservatives will be pleased, however, because Francis also included a strong criticism of abortion while also belittling the argument that population control represented a solution to limited resources and poverty. However, he sharply criticized carbon credits - the financial instruments now central to the European Union's current climate change policy - as a tool that "may simply become a ploy which permits maintaining the excessive consumption of some countries and sectors."

Above all, Francis has framed the encyclical as a call to action, imbuing environmental protection with a theological and spiritual foundation. He praises the younger generations for being ready for change and said "enforceable international agreements are urgently needed." He cited Benedict in saying that advanced societies "must be prepared to encourage more sober lifestyles, while reducing their energy consumption and improving its efficiency."

"All is not lost," he wrote. "Human beings, while capable of the worst, are also capable of rising above themselves, choosing again what is good, and making a new start."

