

# Commentary: The pope's challenge on global warming

By **Rev. John I. Jenkins**

JUNE 17, 2015, 1:07 PM

**A**s we gear up for the 2016 election, candidates are crafting messages to appeal to the electorate. Pollsters will survey voters to see whether these candidates and messages hit the mark. If they fail, the candidates will refine the message to win the hearts and minds — or at least the votes — of the citizens.

On Thursday Pope Francis will deliver a much anticipated message on one of the most debated issues of our day: the environment. I expect his letter will be directed not only to Catholics but to all people of goodwill. It is characteristic of this pope to speak as the Catholic leader but to seek to build bridges to all people who promote friendship and cooperation serving the good of all.

The pope's objective will not be to win an election — he will never stand for any kind of election again in his life. He will be trying to deepen our common reflection and spur action on one of the greatest challenges facing humanity today. His goal will be to appeal to consciences.

University of Notre Dame scientists annually rank 180 of the world's nations on their vulnerability to climate change. Those who reside in the poorest countries are 10 times more likely to be hurt by a climate disaster than those in wealthy nations. Jessica Hellmann, research director of the Notre Dame Global Adaptation Index, reports that the world's poorest countries lag more than a century behind the richest nations in preparing for climate change. Not surprisingly, northern European countries and the United States are among the top 10 best prepared. African nations, Haiti and Afghanistan are relegated to the bottom in the latest survey.

The title of the pope's encyclical, *Laudato Sii*, will be from "The Canticle of the Sun," attributed to St. Francis of Assisi, the saint from whom he took his pontifical name. The allusion is apt, for St. Francis is known both for his love of the environment and his love of the poor. The pope and the medieval saint suggest there is a profound connection between our reverence for the environment and for our care for our brothers and sisters in greatest need.

What Pope Francis says Thursday will be translated into calls for environmental action, not only from Catholic pulpits but from nations, world bodies and interest groups. It will no doubt be sharply criticized and questioned by many who are skeptical about scientific claims or about implications for action. Indeed, I do not recall a statement that has been more widely criticized even before it has been made.

The pope will welcome the discussion. At the sometimes contentious Synod on the Family last October, he told the participants they had a duty to speak their mind openly and honestly, yet also to listen humbly and with an open heart. This pope encourages open discussion and disagreement, for free exchange can enhance our thinking.

Yet if the pope's encyclical becomes simply another salvo in the give-and-take of our political debates, we will have missed its point. If our analysis is only about which side is supported or undermined by the pope's letter, or which policy is endorsed or dismissed, then we will not have really engaged. The pope is out not to declare a side but to challenge the consciences of all of us. We should all feel the sting.

Last December in an address to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, Pope Francis said, "The effective struggle against global warming will only be possible with a responsible collective answer, that goes beyond particular interests and behavior and is developed free of political and economic pressures." He said there was "a clear, definitive and ineluctable ethical imperative to act"

The pope's encyclical will be successful if it helps all of us — whatever our religious convictions — to progress toward a "responsible collective answer" to one of the great challenges of our age. That may require that we refrain from the knee-jerk response of our political camp. It may require that we pause, reflect and — at least in the case of some of us — pray. For the immediate question may not be whether or not we agree with the letter. It may be what kind of people we have to become to hear what the pope is trying to tell us.

*The Rev. John I. Jenkins is president of the University of Notre Dame.*

Copyright © 2015, Chicago Tribune

---