

CLIMATE AND CHRISTIANITY: THE LEGACY OF POPE JOHN PAUL II

In 1979, Pope John Paul II spent just nine days in his home country, Poland. This historic pilgrimage led to a 'spiritual revolution' that culminated in the peaceful collapse of the authoritarian regime in Poland, and eventually to the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Could leaders of the Christian churches today spark a similar 'spiritual revolution' to combat manmade climate change?



JAKUB OSTALOWSKI



PRIVATE ARCHIVE

Juliana Gärtner

is research analyst for global environmental change at the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research and holds an M.Phil. in Geography and the Environment from the University of Oxford.

Prof. Ottmar Edenhofer

is director and chief economist of the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research and holds the professorship of the Economics of Climate Change at the Technical University of Berlin.



JAKUB OSTACIOWSKI

Prof. Ottmar Edenhofer

Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research
Technical University of Berlin

Juliana Gärtner

Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research

The political legacy of Pope John Paul II went much beyond Poland. He strengthened the toppling of dictatorships, from Chile and Haiti to the Philippines. At the same time, the Christian effort to subvert Soviet oppression went far beyond John Paul II. The Pope was quintessential to the success of *Solidarność* in Poland – a powerful union of reason and faith that even Gorbachev acknowledged.

However, an ecumenical spark of sorts existed between Poland and Germany, where the Protestant Church was a major catalyst for the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989.

Ignorance is an important parallel between the political crisis then and the environmental crisis now. A parallel that heightens the importance of ethical guidance. The Communist era ignored fundamental economic principles, but modern-day capitalism ignores the most basic scarcities of today’s world: the scarcity of natural resources in general, and specifically the limited capacity of our atmosphere, oceans and forests to capture and store carbon emissions. If we do not respect these fundamental natural scarcities, our Earth system will face the same destiny of collapse, although this time at a planetary scale.

At the heart of this threat to our common future lies the principle of the “global commons.” Pope John Paul II highlighted this already in his 1987 encyclical



Sollicitudo rei socialis. He strongly supported democratic voices across the globe by proclaiming the universal right to human participation in the common good and the importance of solidarity with the poor and marginalized. Within Catholic doctrine, “this right to common use of goods is the ‘first principle of the whole ethical and social order’” (John Paul II, 1981, §19). It “stems from the dignity, unity and equality of all people” (*Compendium*, §164). With particular relevance to climate change, the social doctrine states that “the universal destination of goods requires a common effort... in which progress of some will no longer be an obstacle to the development of others, nor a pretext for their enslavement” (*Compendium*, §175). Any ethical discussion of climate justice needs to engage with these principles of universal human dignity and solidarity. Principles in strong need of defence in a warming world, both within capitalist and communist systems. The “Polish Pope” himself, who stated, “there are many human needs which find no place in the market,” was certainly not a champion of capitalism either.

His successor Pope Francis applies these central principles of the Social Catechism to climate change and continues the strong ecological legacy of John Paul II. In *Laudato si'*, he references this legacy several times. He echoes ‘the ecological conversion’ that John Paul II called for, and highlights that already “in his first Encyclical [John Paul II] warned that human beings frequently seem ‘to see no other meaning in their natural environment than what serves for immediate use and consumption’” (§5). To protect the poor from adverse impacts of climate change, Pope Francis asks the world’s community to establish an effective governance regime for the climate by declaring it “a common good, by all and for all.” (§23, 174). Elevating the status of the climate to a global commons would entail a fair global sharing of the costs of mitigation, in particular by richer societies that are capable of doing so. This is an idea that some governments are obviously not keen to endorse, but which *Laudato si'* puts prominently on the table.

Moreover, *Laudato si'* opened new ground on two fronts: Never before has a Pope addressed the issue of climate change in such a systematic manner. And importantly, *Laudato si'* set out to soothe the age-old conflict between science and religion. The encyclical embraces the scientific consensus on climate change. It does not claim exclusive authority, but invites the scientific community to discuss possible paths forward together. Pope Francis here “embraces science while pointing out that ethical questions cannot be resolved by science alone” (Edenhofer et al., 2015, 907). He opened a dialogue between unusual partners: Scientists, diplomats, activists, politicians and those affected by climate change, all assembled around the encyclical as a platform to discuss climate justice. The

resonance of *Laudato si'* within the scientific community was strikingly favourable: both *Nature* and *Science* – two leading scientific journals – published approving commentaries on the encyclical. Of course, our joint symposium on climate change, held on 10 December 2018 in Katowice, built on this very bridge that Pope Francis created between reason and faith.

Anticipating *Laudato si'*, John Paul II’s ecological work was often ecumenical in spirit. In 2002, he published a joint declaration with the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I in which they argued that “the social and environmental crisis, which the world community is facing... is not simply economic or technical, it is moral and spiritual.” (John Paul II and Bartholomew I, 2002). Together, they urged us all to foster more “ecological awareness, which is none other than responsibility towards self, towards other, and towards creation” (*ibid.*). Hence, a ‘spiritual revolution’ of the 21st century would need to promote what they call “a true culture of life” that respects “universal solidarity, social justice and responsibility” (*ibid.*) for our common home.

Drawing lessons from the Solidarność movement of the 20th century, only a union of reason and faith will be able to drive a ‘spiritual revolution’ strong and fast enough to limit global warming. Especially, since we have only about 30 years left to turn the wheels of history towards decided climate action. This task needs to be tackled by reason *and* faith, because it conjoins the entire human family and touches on a fundamental question that has occupied both scientific and religious communities for millennia: *How can we all live ethically and well together on this planet?*

It is important in this joint quest that we respect and affirm a plurality of truths, while seeking that which all of us share in common. Unity in diversity. Here, concepts like truth, freedom and dignity are nobody’s exclusive dominion, but our common denominators, as central guiding principles. These powerful guiding principles are needed all the more in a world that is warming and again increasingly polarized along nationalist lines.

It is in this spirit of unity in diversity that we urge the scientific and religious communities to join forces in Poland, Europe and beyond. No 30-year-period in history has been as decisive as the one we are entering now. Let us walk in the footsteps of John Paul II and Pope Francis and foster a process of learning and transition that stabilizes the climate as our common good. Only together can we master the challenging task of decarbonizing the world economy until 2050. And only in a stable climate do our neighbours and children have a chance to live together in dignity, unity, and equality. Let us not squander it.

PROF. OTTMAR EDENHOFER,
JULIANA GÄRTNER

Further reading:

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