"Our Sister, Mother Earth"

The title of the new, long anticipated, hugely important treatise from the leader of over a billion Roman Catholics in the world, Pope Francis, is Laudato Si'. The title comes from his namesake's "Canticle of the Creatures" in which St. Francis writes: "Praise be to you, my Lord, through our Sister, Mother Earth, who sustains and governs us, and who produces various fruit with colored flowers and herbs." Laudato Si' - Praised be to you.

This is a watershed moment. This Pope has become popular as no other has since John XXIII, and far beyond the Roman Catholic church that he leads. He has also been generating the sort of reactionary backlash that you would expect from someone as progressive as he is in thought, word and deed. From American politicians (spelled G.O.P.) to Vatican politicians, he's making some conservatives just a bit nervous. (I can't wait to see the looks on John Boehner and the other Denialists' faces when Pope Francis addresses Congress in September - and makes it perfectly plain that it is the moral responsibility of political leaders to address climate change.)

The encyclical is, in a word, stunning: For one thing, it critiques the "throwaway culture" so embedded in too many of our societies and, as an antidote, calls for us "to accept that the way natural ecosystems work is exemplary," or, as sustainable design visionary Bill McDonough, would say: there are no wastes, only nutrients. Pope Francis is calling for nothing less than a new approach: industrial ecology. "We have not yet managed to adopt a circular model of production capable of preserving resources for present and future generations, while limiting as much as possible the use of non-renewable resources, moderating their consumption, maximizing their efficient use, reusing and recycling them."

On the climate system, His Holiness is clearly in the mainstream of the scientific community. And he proposes, as do most activists and policy makers committed to climate action today, a radical shift away from fossil fuels to renewables and an end to deforestation.

Even more revolutionary, he is calling for a new way of seeing our natural environment. "When nature is viewed solely as a source of profit and gain, this has serious consequences for society. This vision of 'might is right' has engendered immense inequality, injustice and acts of violence against the majority of humanity, since resources end up in the hands of the first comer or the most powerful: the winner takes all. Completely at odds with this model are the ideals of harmony, justice, fraternity and peace as proposed by Jesus." That's the ticket! John Muir, Aldo Leopold, Rachel Carson, David Brower, Barry Commoner, Hermann Scheer, and my other environmentalist heroes are smiling down from heaven at that.

Not only is this message reaching the more than a billion faithful of the Roman Catholic Church through a concerted effort from all the thousands of dioceses worldwide and from ongoing activist efforts, but it is reaching hundreds of millions of other Christians, plus Jews, Buddhists, Muslims, Hindus, and everybody else within reach of any sort of media. The coverage has been extraordinary. That in itself is a huge boost for the environmental movement. Pope Francis issuing this very strong message is what a political scientist would call a "salient event," in that it will significantly raise awareness. I commend you to the always excellent media outlet, The Guardian, for comprehensive coverage.

At the press conference, two of the world's leading Christian theologians, Cardinal Peter Turkson and Metropolitan John Zizioulas**,** talked about the encyclical. Metropolitan John was explicit: He calls our neglect of the environment a sin - an "ecological sin."