



Pope Francis arrived in Washington, D.C. on Tuesday to begin a much anticipated trip to the United States. While here, the pope will visit DC, New York City, and Philadelphia. Pope Francis, a former chemist, [has gained much attention for his calls for action on climate change](#), in addition to his focus on inequality and poverty. The pope often frames climate change as a moral issue, pointing to the fact that the poorest countries and the most marginalized people will be those that suffer the most from climate change. He issued [a papal encyclical](#) devoted entirely to the reality of climate change, the first ever on an environmental issue, which included a fair amount of scientific detail alongside biblical quotes and not-so-subtle critiques of consumerism and financial influence in government. Needless to say, environmentalists had high hopes for the pope's address to Congress, the first ever from a sitting pope. Congress (specifically, the Congressional Republicans) has hampered many global efforts to mobilize an international response to climate change and is currently advising other countries not to trust the Obama Administration's claims that the U.S. is committed to reducing emissions.

On Wednesday, the pope got off to a strong start. At the official welcoming ceremony at the White House, the pope called climate change [“a problem which can no longer be left to future generations.”](#) He applauded President Obama's efforts to reduce air pollution and greenhouse gas emissions, noting that “[w]hen it comes to the care of our common home, we are living at a critical moment of history.” It came as a surprise, then, when his speech to Congress on Thursday morning didn't even use the term “climate change.” Instead, the only mention of environmental risk came when he called for “a courageous and responsible effort to redirect our steps and to avert the most serious effects of the environmental deterioration caused by human activity.” It is probable that this statement is meant to refer to climate change, but the tone is certainly muffled. Why the sudden moderation?

This isn't the first time that the pope's words have fallen short of the progressive persona ascribed to him by the media. Although he is hailed as moving the Catholic Church toward more liberal social stances, he has not changed Catholic doctrine on issues such as abortion and marriage. He speaks of these issues in softer tones, [allowing priests to absolve the sin of having an abortion if women seek forgiveness and supporting equal civil rights for](#)

[homosexuals](#), including civil unions. But he still believes that marriage is a religious bond only between a man and woman, and he also does not sanction contraception. At the same time, his statements on climate change have been less vague, and at times he has called for changes even more radical than the most left-wing proposals. As an example, here are several quotes from his encyclical on climate change:

“It is remarkable how weak international political responses have been. The failure of global summits on the environment make it plain that our politics are subject to technology and finance. There are too many special interests, and economic interests easily end up trumping the common good.”

“We know that technology based on the use of highly polluting fossil fuels ... needs to be progressively replaced without delay.”

“It is not enough to balance, in the medium term, the protection of nature with financial gain, or the preservation of the environment with progress. Halfway measures simply delay the inevitable disaster. Put simply, it is a matter of redefining our notion of progress.”

These statements do not hide the Pope’s belief that we must act immediately nor his criticism of how the international politics have played out thus far. So where was this urgency and frankness on Wednesday?

One commentator from the [New York Times](#) ventures that the pope was trying to convey a simpler, and perhaps stronger, message to Congress: that we must return to basic principles of humanity. Pope Francis drew directly on the Golden Rule of do unto others as you would have them do unto you, making the maxim sound brave in a country that seems to hold up individualism and self-preservation as the highest virtue. He also characterized politics as “an expression of our compelling need to live as one, in order to build as one the greatest common good.” This emphasis on unity and the common good is evident in his encyclical as well. He consistently refers to the earth as “our common home,” a phrase that connotes more than the fact that we all share the same physical system; it gives the environment an emotional and cultural significance equal to the home, the center of family and community life. That vision of the planet contrasts sharply with the view traditionally ascribed to Christianity: that the Earth and its resources are here for human use and little else.

The possible effect of this message, if that is indeed what the pope intended to convey, on Congress and American policy is speculative at best. For my own part, I doubt that this single speech will affirmatively change any Congressperson's stance on a particular issue. However, this speech, in the context of all that the pope has done so far to draw attention to poverty, climate change, and other issues, may shift the tone of political discussions outside of Washington. My hope is that the pope's simple message that politics, and more specifically government, is supposed to serve the common good moves American debate away from how to get the government out of the way toward how to use government to help people move forward.