

Laudato Si', the new encyclical on climate change, is receiving global attention because of its potential impact on political debates over climate change. Part of the Pope's message seems to be based on the idea that humans have a duty to care for natural world, a rereading of the traditional assumption that God gave humans unfettered dominion.

Conservative Catholics are likely to feel uncomfortable with that idea. But they may be even less comfortable with another core aspect of the encyclical: its link between climate change and compassion for the poor, a more traditional Christian virtue though one out of favor with many conservatives.

Some see concern for the poor as an overriding theme of Francis's papacy:

*"He has committed his papacy to being a champion of the poor, and the Global South, and he sees the earth as the poorest of the poor. ... He sees himself as speaking on behalf of the developing world, and lending his voice to their cause," said the Rev. Matt Malone, president and editor in chief of the Catholic news group America Media. [\[NY Times\]](#)*

Laudata Si' emphasizes the link between environmental problems such as lack of access to clean water and the needs of the poor. It also pinpoints the poor as those most vulnerable to climate change, because of their already tenuous situation and their lack of resources to enable adaptation. As an advisor to the American bishops explained:

*"We have had a battle between powerful interest groups on environmental issues for a long time. The missing voices have been the poor and the vulnerable. You turn the page and it always starts with, how does this affect the weakest and the most vulnerable. That's not where the Senate finance committee or the U.N. start," Carr said of the document. [\[Wash. Post\]](#)*

Compassion is not an element that has been very much in evidence in current public discourse. But perhaps that may begin to change. So we can hope, at least — while remembering that among faith, hope, and charity, it is charity that is the greatest.