

Solar Panels Are Part of the Pope's Revolution—But So Is Dismantling Structural Racism

Written by [Anthony Giancatarino](#), Jun 19, 2015

On Thursday, June 18, Pope Francis released his highly anticipated encyclical on the environment, *Laudato Si* (*Praised Be*). The encyclical, a letter from the Pope that addresses moral and theological issues, drives home the message that we cannot sustain a world rooted in the economy of exclusion and extraction—a world in which the poor and the Earth lose out to the “me-first” capitalist economy.

This message is a welcome boost for many, especially those in progressive faith communities, who have long cared for the environment and the most vulnerable in our society. For example, the [Thomas Merton Center](#), a Catholic-based effort in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, has organized around issues of environmental racism, poverty, and peace for nearly 50 years. And the [Green Muslims](#), a national organization, provides education and technical assistance for Muslim communities innovating around environmental-justice solutions. The Pope's message supports this work.

But it also does more than that. The critical piece of the Pope's encyclical is the elevation of a long-standing tenet of Catholic Social Teaching called the “[option for the poor](#),” which views poor communities as the primary agents of social change. Pope Francis charges us to act in solidarity with the poor by working to create policies that center their demands, needs, and innovations. And he explicitly ties the well-being of our planet with the well-being of the poor. He writes:

Today we cannot help but recognize that a true ecological approach always becomes a social approach, which must

integrate justice in the discussions of the environment, to hear the cry of the Earth as much as the cry of the poor.

This statement is bold. To carry it out would require momentous shifts in our society.

To fully tackle climate change, as Pope Francis argues, we must rethink the fundamental structure of our economy. As Jesus says in “New Wine into Old Wineskins,” a parable that appears in three of the gospels, it’s not a good idea to pour new wine into the old container, or the wine will get ruined and the container will burst.

Jesus was probably making a point about the power structures of religion, alluding to the fact that the Pharisees, the spiritual leaders at that time, couldn’t hold the new vision that Jesus was creating. But something similar holds true for our economy today. If our economic system is like a wineskin that holds the institutions, policies, and practices that comprise our economy, then the Pope is calling for the creation of a new wineskin.

Pope Francis makes this point quite clearly in the new encyclical. “The economy accepts every advance in technology with a view to profit, without concern for its potentially negative impact on human beings” he writes, adding that “carbon credits are a new form of speculation” that lead to more pollution in poorer communities and more consumption in others.

Just as [old wineskins burst when adding new wine](#), Pope Francis warns that simply adding advanced technology, new energy development, and market-based carbon schemes to the current economic system won’t create justice for people or the Earth.

That’s because our current economic system relies on a consumer economy, which is built on exclusion and extraction. Instead, we need a new economic system—a new wineskin—that centers the well-being of people, particularly the most

marginalized in society, along with the well-being of the planet.

To achieve this, we must also center race. [Race matters](#) not only because black, Latino, indigenous, and many Asian communities [experience more poverty](#) and suffer from [a devastating wealth gap](#) compared to white communities, but also because communities of color have long borne the burdens of our dirty-energy economy and lack of policy interventions. Structural racism is part of the old wineskin. To build a new one, these communities must be primary agents in building the new economy.

Therefore, we cannot simply flip a switch to renewable energy. Renewable energy powered the slave economy once—and it can do so again. Wind for the sails brought slaves to America, and the sun was the primary energy source for the crops.

We don't want to make that same mistake today. Instead, we must change how we legislate, finance, and support local community governance so that the most marginalized can participate in a new economy powered by renewable energy. At the Center [for Social Inclusion](#) (where I work), we call this idea "[energy democracy](#)," which is about positioning communities, particularly communities of color, as owners, planners, and decision-makers of accessible and clean energy sources that address pollution and build the wealth of communities. Energy democracy can be our entryway into a sustainable, healthy environment in which everyone can thrive.

We do not have to look far to see [energy democracy in action](#). For example, [Interfaith Power and Light](#) is already reshaping the economy by bringing together multiracial, interfaith communities in 43 states to implement community-owned renewable energy and efficiency projects, invest energy savings into vital services for communities, and advocate for new policies that create opportunities to participate in a renewable energy economy.

To honor Pope Francis' call to action, all of us, regardless of our faith or practice, should support and replicate energy democracy models like Interfaith Power and Light so that we can all protect our common home.



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