

Pope tells French group of his "ecological conversion"

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A widely diverse group of French personalities involved in the ecological movement, from an actress to an archbishop, have private meeting with Pope Francis



Pope Francis receives 16 French personalities to speak about ecology on September 3, 2020, at the Vatican. (Photo by VATICAN MEDIA-FOTO/ CPP/CIRIC)

They travelled from France for some 20 hours by train and bus.

But by Thursday a group of 16 very different French personalities were in the Eternal City for an important meeting on the environment with Pope Francis.

As they crossed Saint Peter's Square in the blazing sun and headed towards the Apostolic Palace, two of them carried a small green plant. Among their number were actress Juliette Binoche and the Jesuit economist Father Gaël Giraud.

The group of 16, which included believers and non-believers alike, was led by Archbishop Éric de Moulins-Beaufort, president of the French Bishops' Conference.

United by a common commitment to caring for the environment, they were able to engage the pope in an hour-long discussion on ecological concerns.

The gathering came five years after Francis published his encyclical *Laudato si'*, "On Care for Our Common Home".

The participants said the exchange was particularly profound. Afterwards even those who are not close to the Church -- like agricultural engineer Pablo Servigne -- said they were "touched by the pope's message".

"I was angry with the Catholic institution until the publication of *Laudato si'*," said Servigne, who coined the neologism "collapsology" to designate the study of the risks of the collapse of our industrial civilization.

"The pope has truly realized that we are on the brink of a precipice, that it is a matter of life and death," he insisted.

Valérie Cabanes, an international lawyer and environmental activist, pleaded with Pope Francis to put pressure on heads of state around the world to recognize the crime of ecocide.

The actress Binoche said *Laudato si'* was "a revelation".

"Meeting the pope is a funny experience. You imagine a lot of things, but when you meet him, he becomes a human being who is trying to do what he can," she said, visibly moved by the gathering.

"Part of the ecological transition is to not waste time"

The Vatican late Thursday morning published the official speech that Francis was to deliver to the group. He distributed a copy of the discourse to each of the visitors and then opened up an unscripted discussion with them.

"Part of the ecological conversion is to not waste time. You have the official text. Now, I prefer to speak spontaneously with you," he told them.

The pope spoke about his own "ecological conversion" in the 2010s, during a meeting with Amazonian Indians.

He also praised at length the indigenous peoples as bearers of a particular wisdom. He especially insisted on the alliance he believes is necessary between "the head that thinks, the hands that act and the heart that feels".

A process of dialogue

In the official written text the pope emphasized the importance of ecological conversion, "which is the only way to respond to the important challenges facing us all," in particular the "disturbing degradation" of the planet.

This visit received a lot of media attention. It is part of a series of meetings on the environment that Francis has undertaken since the publication of the 2015 encyclical.

In fact, *Laudato si'* explicitly promotes active dialogue among people of all walks of life, no matter what their religious beliefs.

"In this encyclical, I would like to enter into a dialogue with all people about our common home," the pope says at the beginning of the text.

"Building bridges between different worlds is clearly one of the [objectives](#) of the encyclical, which calls for uniting the entire human family," explained Tebaldo Vinciguerra, an official at the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development.

"Our dicastery, as well as the pope himself, regularly receives groups of lay experts and researchers specializing, for example, in juridical, environmental or agricultural issues," he pointed out.

"Dialogue with all, including non-Catholics, is constant. This is particularly the case when there is a shared concern for the common good of the human family in our common house, when there is a willingness to devote time to encounter, mutual understanding and collaboration," he said.

"Unlikely Alliances"

Francis and the various Vatican dicasteries regularly receive many such experts.

That was the case back in 2015 with Naomi Klein, the Canadian critic of corporate globalization and author of the 1999 international best-seller "No Logo".

"Improbable and surprising alliances are being formed, for example between me and the Vatican," she admitted at the time.

What will be the consequences of this latest "improbable alliance" between the French group and Pope Francis?

Nothing seems to be fixed yet at this stage, but the Jesuit Gaël Giraud has proposed that all 16 meet soon for a seminar ("a small retreat", he called it) that could lead to the publication of a common text.

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