

# What Can We Learn from Pope Francis About Change Management for Environmental Sustainability?

## A Case Study on Success Factors for Leading Change in Change-Resistant Institutional Environments



Wendy Nelson and Johannes M. Luetz

**Abstract** Leading and sustaining change efforts is widely recognised as an important success factor for achieving progress on matters pertaining to environmental sustainability. There are several reasons for this. For example, transitioning from a fossil fuel based global economy to one that is based on renewable energy is a challenge that is widely understood to remain difficult to achieve for humanity in the absence of influential and robust change management, sustained over time and space. Hence, there is a need for strategic leadership that can drive and sustain far-reaching societal behaviour change. While political duty bearers and senior corporate executives are typically identified as those stakeholders who are best positioned to lead change efforts towards increased environmental sustainability, there is a paucity of case studies that explore the role of ‘spiritual leaders’ in this important area, which sits at the intersection of business and environmental management, and social science investigation. This case study on Pope Francis addresses this knowledge gap. As the current head of the Roman Catholic Church, a global organisation which has been identified as being among some of the most influential and at the same time change-resistant organisations in the world, Pope Francis exemplifies the pivotal role, which spiritual leadership can play in progressing the global environmental sustainability agenda. By conducting a broad review of the literature, including popular, ecclesiological, managerial, and peer-reviewed scientific publications, this case study contributes to this important discourse. Noting important connections between

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sustainability and the humanities, the study identifies the power of personal example as a key success factor for influencing change-resistant environments.

**Keywords** Change management · Change resistance · Leading change  
Environmental sustainability · Encyclical · Laudato si' · Pope francis · Climate change · Roman catholic church

It ought to be remembered that there is nothing more difficult to take in hand, more perilous to conduct, or more uncertain in its success, than to take the lead in the introduction of a new order of things, because the innovator has for enemies all those who have done well under the old conditions, and lukewarm defenders in those who may do well under the new. This coolness arises partly from fear of the opponents, who have the laws on their side, and partly from the incredulity of men, who do not readily believe in new things until they have had a long experience of them. (Niccolò Machiavelli (1513/2010). *The Prince*, p. 21)

I believe in Christianity as I believe that the Sun has risen, not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else. (C.S. Lewis, *Is Theology Poetry?* Oxford Socratic Club, 6 November 1944)<sup>1</sup>

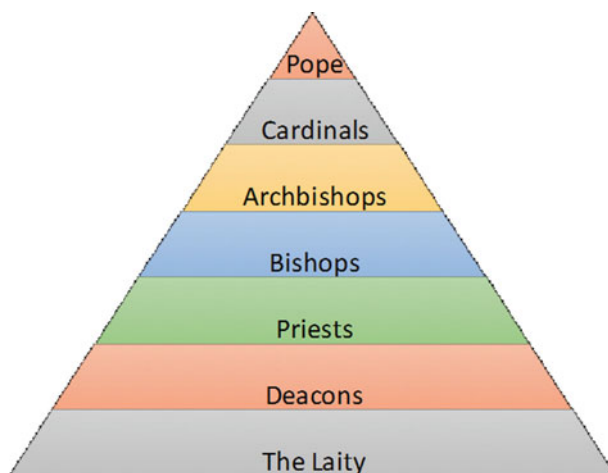
Example is not the main thing in influencing others, it is the only thing. (Schweitzer 1996, p. xviii, emphasis original)

## 1 Introduction: Research Rationale, Intended Contribution, Methodological Considerations

This paper presents a case study of the importance of leadership in managing change in the Roman Catholic Church (RCC). The RCC is ‘arguably the largest, oldest and historically most successful corporation, firm, organization known to mankind’ (Kimberly 2015, para. 1). It has been identified as the ‘oldest institution in the western world’ (Stanford 2011, para. 1), ‘the world’s oldest multinational’ (Schumpeter 2013, para. 1) and the ‘biggest charity in the world’ (Paton 2017, para. 15). Furthermore, considered to be the ‘richest religion in the world’ with ‘more than a billion members around the world’ (Said 2013, para. 11), the RCC ‘can trace its history back almost 2000 years’ (Stanford 2011, para. 1). Consequently, bringing about and managing change in such a globally influential, complex, enduring and change-resistant organisation can have powerful implications on a global scale (Bradt 2013). According to Moorhead (2017), ‘Francis is trying to rebuild his church, but to say this is a mammoth task is an understatement, and all the indications are that, to use his own analogy, he seems to be rowing his boat in one direction while others on board are pulling the oars the other way.’ (para. 5). For these reasons, an understanding of such an institution and its ethos seems to be of fundamental importance to any comprehensive change management study. Given its influence and magnitude, the RCC provides a rich contextual environment for a case study into organisational

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<sup>1</sup>Later published in a collection of essays (Lewis 1962).



**Fig. 1** Leadership layers in the RCC

change management and how humanity can link social values and change management theory to theology, spirituality and sustainability. This case study contributes to this important discourse and highlights important connections between sustainability and the humanities.

To assist in understanding the hierarchy of the RCC, a doctoral study undertaken by Verhoye (2015) compares the RCC to the conventional organisational structures encountered in corporate entities:

Organizationally speaking, the Pope would be analogous to the CEO of an organization, cardinals would be executive vice-presidents, and bishops would represent upper level management, leaders in charge of specific regions. In organizational terms, priests would be considered department managers, as they are leaders of a particular RCC congregation and finally the laity the people (p. 67).

According to the Vatican (2013), the hierarchical organisation of the RCC comprises multiple layers of leadership (Fig. 1).

Verhoye (2015) notes that although the Pope may be considered to be equivalent in power to a CEO, it needs to be understood that he is the worldwide leader of a religious institution and, unlike a CEO, is responsible both for those *in* his organisation and those *outside*, including non-Catholic Christians in every part of the world, and even if they do not directly regard him as their leader. It follows that any changes he instigates can have significant implications with important ripple effects that can reach far beyond the sphere of influence of the RCC itself (Schumpeter 2013). According to Landrum et al. (2017),

His popularity, resonating as much with general populations of Catholic constituents (e.g., Europe, United States, Latin America; see Pew Research Center, 2014) as with A-list public figures (e.g., Leonardo DiCaprio, Oprah Winfrey [...]), has crystallized into a sort of celebrity status as “The People’s Pope” (Chua-Eoan and Dias 2013). (p. 1)

Furthermore, although in secular terms, the inspiration for change emanates from the Pope himself, in religious circles, the inspiration for change might even be seen to be divine, coming from the inspiration of the Holy Spirit through the Pope (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops [USCCB] 2013). Unlike other CEO's, the Pope's word is 'the final word on matters of faith and morals (known as "papal infallibility")'. In the words of the Catechism of the Catholic Church (937) (1997): The Pope enjoys, by divine institution, "supreme, full, immediate, and universal power in the care of souls"' (Phillips 2008, para. 5). Another significant difference is that the Pope is understood to be God's representative on earth and 'the successor to Saint Peter whom Christ appointed as the first head of His church.' (Stanford 2011, para. 3). One of the Pope's many titles is 'Vicar of Christ', a term which is derived:

from Anglo-French *vicare*, meaning deputy or second in command and from the Latin meaning substituted or delegated and in the ecclesiastical sense a substitute, deputy or proxy ... The original notion is of "earthly representative of God or Christ". ("Vicar" 2001–2018, para. 1)

A CEO is usually appointed by the board of a company, whereas the Pope is selected from within the Collegiate of Cardinals by the College, which consists of the highest ranking members of the Catholic priesthood (USCCB 2013). The Pope's tenure is usually until he dies, whereupon the process of selecting a replacement begins. The College of Cardinals takes 15–20 days to discuss the needs and challenges facing the RCC and then gathers at St Peter's Basilica for the Papal conclave. It is within this context that a new leader is elected. This changing of the guard is the greatest catalyst for change in the organisation, as each Pope has his own unique style and direction for the Church (USCCB 2013).

In conceptually describing this case study, the basic research method undertaken consists of systematic literature analysis pertaining to the accession of Pope Francis and his subsequent management of organisational change within the RCC. Given that the study of change management is typically confined to the domain of business management and/or corporate culture (Hiatt and Creasey 2012; Johnson 2017; Kotter 2012), interdisciplinary research studies on change management within religious institutional contexts offer the promise of rich, insightful and even unexpected observations (Gladwin et al. 1995). Religious institutions are bound by traditions and doctrines that non-religious organisations are not similarly defined (or confined) by. Given that contemporary writers have highlighted the RCC's traditionally 'slow response to political, social, economic and technical changes around them' (Bradt 2013, para. 2), this paper seeks to scrutinise recent change management advances under Pope Francis with the aim of extrapolating lessons learned in respect of leading change and managing resistance in change-resistant institutional environments. These lessons seem to be applicable and important beyond the confines of the RCC, and they suggest that change can be possible even in cautious, conservative and/or rigid organisational environments. In view of the urgent need for a comprehensive 'great transformation' (German Advisory Council on Global Change [WBGU] 2011) to transition the global economy from fossil fuel dependency to a post-fossil fuel era (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [IPCC] 2014), lessons about leading

change in change-resistant environments have never seemed more timely (Kendall 1997; Ripple et al. 2017). By conducting a broad review of popular, ecclesiological, managerial, and peer-reviewed scientific literature, this case study contributes inductively to this important discourse.

This paper is organised into four parts. Section 2 introduces Pope Francis as the principal agent of change in the RCC. It also identifies the changes he is attempting to introduce and applies relevant change management and leadership theories to his plans to implement proposed reforms and negotiate resistance. The section also addresses Pope Francis' concern for the poor and the environment and then concludes with a short synthesis, which also sketches limitations and opportunities for further research. The discussion in Sect. 3 analyses the findings from Sect. 2 with a view to extrapolating lessons learned from Pope Francis that may similarly apply in other change-resistant institutional environments elsewhere. The study synthesis presented in Sect. 4 recapitulates the main findings of this paper with concluding reflections on the power of personal example.

## 2 Pope Francis: Change Management in the Roman Catholic Church

Jorge Mario Bergoglio of Argentina was elected as the 266th leader of the RCC on 13 March 2013 (Libreria Editrice Vaticana 2013). He took the name Francis in honour of Saint Francis of Assisi, saying, 'I believe that Saint Francis is the example par excellence of care for the vulnerable and of an integral ecology lived out joyfully and authentically.' (Libreria Editrice Vaticana 2015, para. 10).

He is the first Pope from the Jesuit order, the first from outside the northern hemisphere, the first from the Americas, and the first from outside of Europe since the eighth century (Brown 2017; Sullivan 2013). His choosing of the name Francis also seems significant in that it encapsulates his vision and priorities envisaged for his pontificate. Long-time RCC historian Jesuit Fr O'Malley said:

St. Francis loved the poor, he was concerned about nature, and he was a person of peace [...] I think he set the big priorities of his pontificate, and that is his big vision [...] He takes seriously the mission of the church, a new mission that is really old and the most fundamental mission of the church: to be love among all, patient and full of mercy and goodness. (interview cited in Dunne 2013, paras. 4, 10)

### 2.1 Pope Francis: A New Kind of Papal Leader

Francis has brought about a new kind of papacy. He is active on social media with the twitter name @pontifex (Bradt 2013), and he currently has 16.7 million followers.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup><https://twitter.com/Pontifex>—viewed in February 2018.

On 19 March 2016, Francis became the first Pope to join Instagram, and promptly broke records, hitting ‘one million Instagram followers within 12 h of launching his account’ (Garcia 2016, para. 1). In the modern world, social media constitute a critical platform for communication. Not only is his engagement with this medium of communication a change but it also helps change the perception of the RCC. Communication is key to successful change management (Kotter 2012), and the Pope is now in touch with the greatest platform of communication and social commentary of this generation (Kimberly 2015; Verhoye 2015, p. 153; cf. Libreria Editrice Vaticana 2015, para. 47). At the same time, Pope Francis values the simple mystical communications and meanings encountered in nature:

The universe unfolds in God, who fills it completely. Hence, there is a mystical meaning to be found in a leaf, in a mountain trail, in a dewdrop, in a poor person’s face. The ideal is not only to pass from the exterior to the interior to discover the action of God in the soul, but also to discover God in all things. (Libreria Editrice Vaticana 2015, para 233)

As pope, Francis prefers the simple life and would rather be addressed by his informal title of Bishop of Rome (McElwee 2013). He chooses to live in a humble guest house, instead of the papal apartment (Wooden 2013), flies economy class and drives an older car (Kirchgaessner 2015). He goes out late, dressed as a regular priest to meet with the homeless (Williams 2013), and desists wearing the traditional papal mozzetta cape, instead paring down his papal wardrobe (Griffith 2015) to be ‘fit for his call for simplicity and humility’ (Associated Press [AP] 2014, para. 1), which has earned him the title ‘slum pope’ (AP 2014, para. 4). He also chose silver over gold for his piscatorial ring, kept his pectoral cross he had as cardinal and, instead of the elaborate papal robes, wears his white priestly attire (AP 2014).

His public presence reveals a man who appears thoughtful, compassionate and authentic. This, along with his accessibility and openness stemming from his desire to live out the gospel, ‘seems to be what is the most attractive part of this Pope, why so many people find him inviting, why so many people follow him, why so many people are coming back to the practice of the faith.’ (O’Connell 2015b, para. 10).

According to a conceptual framework approach about authentic leadership developed by George (2003; George and Sims 2007) and popularised by Northouse (2016):

authentic leaders have a real sense of purpose. They know what they are about and where they are going. In addition to knowing their *purpose*, authentic leaders are inspired and intrinsically motivated about their goals. They are *passionate* individuals who have a deep-seated interest in what they are doing and truly care about their work. (p. 197; emphasis original)

Moreover, authentic leaders ‘have a genuine desire to serve others, they know themselves, and they feel free to lead from their core values.’ (Northouse 2016, p. 197; cf. George 2003; George and Sims 2007). Pope Francis is the embodiment of this description and it is here where much of his success as a leader and change manager lies. Further, Kotter and Cohen (2002) posit that a common denominator in change competent organisations is a leader who eliminates the disparity between words and deeds: ‘Deeds speak volumes. When you say one thing and then do another, cynical feelings can grow exponentially. Conversely, walking the talk can

be most powerful.’ (p. 92). Thus, by his authentic behaviour, Pope Francis has not only increased his ability to create successful changes, but also reduced resistance. ‘In short: *Nothing undermines the communication of a change vision more than behavior on the part of key players that seems inconsistent with the vision.*’ (Kotter 2012, p. 99, emphasis original).

Pope Francis’ influence extends far beyond the RCC and even the wider Christian community, and this has been acknowledged and commended by influential media outlets. In 2013, both *Time* and *The Advocate Magazine* named him Man of the Year, because of the way he handled various controversial and doctrinal issues (Chua-Eoan and Dias 2013). These issues include sexual ethics, his response to the sexual misconduct of priests, his actions on corruption within the RCC, his availability to engage with the poor, his advocacy for justice for the earth and its people and his being in touch with the public (Chua-Eoan and Dias 2013).

In 2016, *Forbes* named Pope Francis the fifth most powerful person in the world (Ewalt 2016), and in 2017, *Fortune Magazine* named the Pontiff number three on their list of the greatest world leaders (Colvin 2017). Such recognition demonstrates the vastness and scope of his influence and the close connectedness with his contemporaries, which has earned him far-reaching respect both within and without the RCC (Bradt 2013; Garcia 2016).

Pope Francis’ ability to influence and create change comes from the power vested in him as God’s mouthpiece on earth, referred to in *Lumen Gentium* (Vatican Council 1998) as ‘the sacred primacy of the Roman Pontiff and [...] his infallible magisterium’ (Chap. III, para. 18). In leadership literature, this has been called ‘legitimate power’ and is ‘[a]ssociated with having status or formal job authority’ (Northouse 2016, p. 10). In the words of Northouse (2016), ‘The concept of power is related to leadership because it is part of the influence process. Power is the capacity or potential to influence.’ (p. 10). As a leader, Pope Francis appears to understand how to yield that power effectively. His authenticity, charisma, vision, accessibility, communication skills and humility are hallmark traits of ‘transformational leadership’ (Northouse 2016, pp. 161–193), which further enable him to create change and influence people (Kerr 2017).

Pope Francis understands the value and importance of people and authentic relationships (Verhoye 2015). According to Lippitt et al. (1958), it is the role of the change manager to help the organisation and employees work toward change: ‘This means that the relationship between the change agent and the client system, the channel through which all the agent’s knowledge and influence must pass, is the most important single aspect of the change process.’ (p. 143).

Effective change managers can develop human potential and can create, maintain and manage significant interpersonal relationships. They understand that, for change to happen, for people to want to follow a vision for change, there must be someone that people want to follow. ‘Vision plays a key role in producing useful change by helping direct, align, and inspire actions on the part of large numbers of people.’ (Kotter 2012, p. 7). Pope Francis surprised the world at his inauguration by inviting people to pray a blessing over him and his ministry. Francis also washed the feet of prisoners, women and Muslims, rather than performing this on selected priests,

which is the norm. He seems to understand that it is his role to lead and model the change (Bradt 2013).

Although seen to be progressive, Pope Francis is of course a traditional Catholic Jesuit (New York Times [NYT] 2015). He is not teaching new doctrine, but a new way of knowing and understanding the gospel. ‘Francis is not so much telling us *what* to see (which our dualistic minds will merely fight and resist) nearly as much as teaching us *how* to see and what to pay attention to.’ (Rohr 2013, para. 12; emphasis original). He has emphasised that true Christianity itself is about love and mercy and despite other differences, most Christians, whatever their denomination, broadly agree with this interpretation of the gospel (Rohr 2013).

There is nothing unique about a prominent Christian figure promoting social justice. However, this shift from doctrine to a pastoral focus has significantly changed the culture of the RCC (Engelhardt 2015; NYT 2015). Furthermore, because of the Pope’s far-reaching influence, this change does not only affect the RCC but has implications for society globally. What is happening in Rome is not revolutionary change, but it may make way for just that (Engelhardt 2015), and ‘[m]any [...] are rooting for him on these changes’ (Moorhead 2017, para. 9).

## 2.2 *Pope Francis: A New Kind of Change*

The overarching reforms that Pope Francis is advocating seem to centre around ways and means to progress from a Cleric-Centric (CC) organisational culture to a Catholic Social Teaching (CST)-centric orientation. While a focus on CC emphasises power and bureaucracy, CST orientation reflects more of a pastoral care approach that is ‘more poor-centric’ (Verhoye 2015, p. 67), and characterised by relationships that emphasise the centrality of the poor and marginalised. Cardinal Donald Wuerl of Washington said:

Pope Francis is calling for a church that, to my mind, is much more in contact with the Gospel, with the living out of the Gospel. Not just the articulation of the Gospel [...] but the personal living of it, and that seems to be what is the most attractive part of this pope, why so many people find him inviting, why so many people follow him, why so many people are coming back to the practice of the faith. And for reasons known only to them, there are some who find this somewhat threatening. (interview cited in O’Connell 2015b, para. 10)

His apostolic exhortation entitled *Evangelii Gaudium*, or ‘The Joy of the Gospel’ (Francis 2013), elaborates this vision of moving the Church closer to a poor-centric orientation, and away from a CC dominated culture:

I prefer a Church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a Church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security. (Francis 2013, p. 41)

In her doctoral dissertation, Verhoye (2015) elaborates clericalism as follows:

Cleric-centrism is operationally defined as an orientation to Church organizational culture where leaders perceive structures, power, authority, ritual over meaning, authority over other,



and rigidly defined dogma to be of significant import as manifest in wardrobe, behaviour, writing, preaching and relationships. (p. 61)

To illustrate the detrimental effects that CC culture may have on priestly service, Verhoye (2015) refers her readership to a homily given by Pope Francis on 25 May 2013:

A girl-mother goes to the parish to ask for Baptism for her child and hears “a Christian” say: “no, you can’t have it, you’re not married.” Look at this girl who had had the courage to carry her pregnancy to term and not to have an abortion. What does she find? A closed door, as do so many. This is not good pastoral zeal, it distances people from the Lord and does not open doors. So when we take this path [...] we are not doing good to people, the People of God”. Jesus “instituted seven sacraments, and with this approach we institute the eighth, the sacrament of the pastoral customs office. (Verhoye 2015, p. 52; attributed to Christian Acceptance 2013)

Essentially, it appears that the RCC to which Francis aspires is one where Christ’s vision of evangelism and mission is not impeded by any form of cleric-centric obstinacy or bureaucracy. This seems to echo the words of Jesus who reminded his followers to assume the role of servants:

You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave— just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. (Gospel of Matthew 20:25-28, *Holy Bible, New International Version* 2015)

In the words of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops:

Catholic social teaching is a central and essential element of our faith [...] It is a teaching founded on the life and words of Jesus Christ, who came “to bring glad tidings to the poor [...] liberty to captives [...] recovery of sight to the blind” (Lk 4:18–19), and who identified himself with “the least of these,” the hungry and the stranger (cf. Mt 25:45). Catholic social teaching is built on a commitment to the poor. This commitment arises from our experiences of Christ in the eucharist. (USCCB n.d., para. 3)

Pope Francis (2013) clearly states this vision:

God shows the poor his ‘first mercy’. This divine preference has consequences for the faith life of all Christians [...] This is why I want a Church which is poor and for the poor. They have much to teach us (p. 156).

In short, Pope Francis seems to consistently emphasise that he wants transformation, and that he wants to lead by example and not just by discussion, and that he wants to practise what he preaches (Verhoye 2015). In the change leadership literature, these qualities of lived authenticity, professional practice and personal example have been highlighted as important success factors (George 2003; George and Sims 2007; Kotter 2012, pp. 97–99; Kotter and Cohen 2002, pp. 91–91).

In his mission to change the culture of the RCC, some of the organisational changes he has made include: Demoting and removing certain people from power, allowing for transparency and cooperation on matters relating to sexual misconduct by priests, restructuring the Roman Curia, and initiating an independent audit of the

Vatican Bank and a change in finance management. When asked about reforms at the RCC, he denounced resistance to change on the basis that change implies being alive:

people should see that the central command of the church “is not an immobile bureaucratic apparatus.” Using to [*sic*] the Latin phrase *Ecclesia semper reformanda est* (‘The church is always to be reformed’), Francis said that in the changes at the Vatican people should see “first and foremost a sign of life, a Church that advances on her pilgrim way, a Church that is living and for this reason *semper reformanda*; in need of reform because she is alive. (McElwee 2016b, para. 9–10)

One of the first big changes he made was curbing the power of the Vatican’s Secretary of State. Over time, the position had grown to include authority over finances, hiring, being the chief of staff in the papal court, in addition to the original role of top diplomat. The Vatican’s most powerful diplomat, Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, was stripped of the role, and replaced by ‘frugal, publicity-shy career diplomat - Cardinal Pietro Parolin - who, according to those who know him, is the antithesis of his most recent predecessors in the post.’ (Pullella 2014, para. 5). Further, ‘the Pope stripped the office’s authority over finances and gave it a smaller role relative to internal bureaucratic matters’ (Verhoye 2015, p. 78; attributed to Pullella 2014). He also removed Cardinal Raymond Burke, Arch Bishop of St Louis, from Curial leadership. This was symbolic as Burke was seen as representing the cleric-centric leadership whose powerful influence the Pope was attempting to curb (Verhoye 2015, pp. 79–80).

The extent of the Pope’s commitment to instituting change was exemplified by a headline in *The Independent* on 20 December 2013: ‘Pope turns to management consultants in bid to reform Vatican’ (Popham 2013). It was reported that the Vatican had hired four internationally respected consultancies, McKinsey & Co, KPMG Accountants, Promontory Financial Group, and Ernst & Young, to review its management, accounting, financial, planning and communication practices (Popham 2013, para. 3).

Another unprecedented move was his selection of eight cardinals, from all continents, to act as advisors on governing and reforming the RCC (Allen 2013). This move was also about decentralising the RCC structure and growing a kind of leadership influence that reflects the universal nature of the RCC (Verhoye 2015, p. 77; attributed Povoledo 2013). Furthermore, demonstrating the Pope’s understanding of the need for cultural competence and awareness in such a large global organisation, Father Federico Lombardi, the director of the Vatican Press Office, explained that the reforms are intended to lead to a ‘much less Roman and more widely representative way of governing of the Universal Church.’ (Zaimov 2013, para. 7). These men are said to be experienced diplomats, have extensive pastoral and governing experience, are known to have strong opinions and one is an experienced Holy See diplomat. Thus, they provide a range of experience and comprise multiple cultures and ideologies (Allen 2013).

Plagued by scandals, the Vatican Bank was in grave need of attention from the Pontiff (Povoledo 2013; Pullella 2014). When he took over in 2013, it was fresh on the back of a money laundering scandal, which saw Priest Monsignor Nunzio

Scarano arrested. Within months of Francis becoming pope, the Bank complied with international banking standards for the first time in 73 years (Vallely 2015). He then replaced many of the Bank's top advisors with a new department and fresh leadership and set up a commission to advise him on complex financial matters and economic affairs (Pullella 2014).

It appears that, in recent years, people have been conditioned to think that only matters relating to sexual ethics and the judging of others are of importance to the RCC (Engelhardt 2015). Pope Francis is trying to change such assumptions by providing social commentary on the exploitation of people and the planet, war, poverty and other issues close to his heart (Duncan n.d.). For example, he declared a year of jubilee for women who have had abortions (Kimberly 2015). Pope Francis has not changed Catholic doctrine, but through his leadership seeks to change perspectives. He has alluded to a change of thinking about the use of contraception in the face of diseases like the Zika virus and Aids, saying that in those circumstances it may not be considered as evil (McElwee 2016a). He is not afraid to criticise the RCC where he feels it necessary and is trying his best to bring people back to a contemporary RCC that is no longer seen as outdated (Kimberly 2015). This has included pronouncements of 'zero tolerance' on sexual abuse of minors committed by priests, as conveyed in a letter by Pope Francis (2017):

It is a sin that shames us. Persons responsible for the protection of those children destroyed their dignity. We regret this deeply and we beg forgiveness. We join in the pain of the victims and weep for this sin. The sin of what happened, the sin of failing to help, the sin of covering up and denial, the sin of the abuse of power. The Church also weeps bitterly over this sin of her sons and she asks forgiveness. [...] I would like us to renew our complete commitment to ensuring that these atrocities will no longer take place in our midst. Let us find the courage needed to take all necessary measures and to protect in every way the lives of our children, so that such crimes may never be repeated. In this area, let us adhere, clearly and faithfully, to "zero tolerance". (para. 13)

Further, Francis appears to want to change the mindset of the RCC on marriage, the family, homosexuality and sexual ethics (Brown 2017; Moorhead 2017), and preaches a message of 'who am I to judge?' (Engelhardt 2015, p. 3). He stands by an open-door policy of love, which treats everyone with respect and kindness in accordance with his understanding of the gospel message. Even while he adheres to the current stance of the RCC on many issues, he nevertheless seems to call for a more merciful approach (Verhoye 2015).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, 'his reforms have infuriated conservatives' (Brown 2017, para. 1), triggering significant resistance inside the RCC, with some even denouncing his views as weak thinking and theologically unsound and claiming that he wants to win the popular vote at the expense of staying true to biblical doctrine (Engelhardt 2015). At the same time, his reforms appear to bring people who have felt marginalised back into the RCC fold (Walsh 2014). According to Walsh (2014), the numbers could be significant:

A recent study, in Italy's Centre for the Study of New Religions, showed that of 250 priests interviewed, more than half reported a "significant rise" in attendance at their churches since the Pope was elected. "If we project these figures nationally," the centre's head explained,

“we’re talking hundreds of thousands of people who are returning to the Church [...] in some cases after decades.” (para. 10)

Inspired by St Francis of Assisi, and in the face of significant opposition from within (Brown 2017), Pope Francis seems determined to continue his reforms of the RCC from a Cleric-Centric (CC) organisational culture to a Catholic Social Teaching (CST)-centric orientation.

### 2.3 *A Pope for the Environment and for the Poor*

Significantly, the Pope’s ambition for the RCC to adopt a CST orientation was linked early on in his papacy to his desire for the ‘creation of an encyclical on the care for God’s creation. In July of 2014, while meeting with the leadership of the Franciscan order, Pope Francis demonstrated deep concern for the environment’ (Verhoye 2015, p. 124; attributed to Rome Reports 2014). This passion to engage the public on behalf of the Planet appears to have arisen from the Pope’s holistic interest to conjoin the forces of science and spirituality for the good of humanity and ecology:

Fr. Michael Perry, Minister General of the Order of Friars Minor, says: The Pope himself brought up the issue of the environment. And he talked about his deep concern that we need, the Church needs, to find the way to respond, using the best of science. But also using the best of goodwill of all of humanity, to bring together a consensus on trying to respond to the crisis, the ecological crisis. (Verhoye 2015, p. 124; attributed to Rome Reports 2014)

According to Duncan (n.d.), the Pope has two priorities, both of which, in a wider sense, involve care for creation and concern for conservation: ‘the drawing up of the post-2015 Development Agenda, with the adoption of Sustainable Development Goals, and the drafting of a new Climate Change Agreement’ (para. 16). Hence early on in his papacy, the notion of good stewardship of the environment and care for the poor have stood out as central issues of CST for Pope Francis, including raising awareness on climate change (Kimberly 2015).

Subsequently, these priorities found expression in his encyclical, which was released on 18 June 2015 ‘to much fanfare from climate change mitigation advocates’ (Landrum et al. 2017, p. 1): ‘Addressing “every person on the planet” in a ground-breaking encyclical, “*Laudato Si*”, Pope Francis speaks frankly and passionately about the “global environmental deterioration” of “our common home,” appealing “for a new dialogue about how we are shaping the future of our planet.”’ (O’Connell 2015a, para. 1).

According to Landrum et al. (2017):

The effect of the document hinged largely on Pope Francis leveraging his moral authority to influence public opinion on issues related to climate change. In particular, *Laudato si* advanced the message that there is a moral imperative to act to address climate change because, among other reasons, it threatens God’s creation and disproportionately affects the poor and vulnerable. (pp. 1–2)

Issuing his encyclical a few months prior to the 2015 Paris Climate Conference also suggests that the Pontiff may have sought to bring his global influence to bear in efforts to counteract what critics have called ‘the failure of global summits on the environment [...] too many special interests and economic interests easily end up trumping the common good and manipulating information so that their own plans will not be affected.’ (O’Connell 2015a, para. 10). More specifically, ‘[a]dvocates for climate change mitigation hoped that this moral appeal by the popular leader [see Pew Research Center 2014] of a socially-conservative religious institution would increase climate change concern among U.S. conservatives in general and Catholic conservatives in particular.’ (Landrum et al. 2017, p. 2).

His encyclical elaborates a comprehensive change agenda that comprises equitable concern by all and for all:

The urgent challenge to protect our common home includes a concern to bring the whole human family together to seek a sustainable and integral development, for we know that *things can change*. [...] I urgently appeal, then, for a new dialogue about how we are shaping the future of our planet. We need a conversation which *includes everyone*, since the environmental challenge we are undergoing, and its human roots, *concern and affect us all*. (Libreria Editrice Vaticana 2015, para. 13–14; emphasis added)

Importantly, this change agenda includes poor communities: Although poor people ‘tend to live far more sustainably than the wealthy’ (Luetz et al. 2019, p. 6; cf. United Nations Development Programme [UNDP] 2007, pp. 47–48; World Wildlife Fund [WWF] 2016), climate change impacts fall disproportionately on the destitute because they can least afford to prepare for or protect themselves from many of its adverse impacts (Brainerd et al. 2009; Luetz 2008, 2018; Luetz and Havea 2018).

Hence, there is an issue of inequity in the sense that those who are least responsible for global greenhouse gas stocks in the atmosphere today<sup>3</sup> are nevertheless suffering disproportionately more from its arising ill-effects (Friedrich et al. 2016). This makes the encyclical a pertinent example of how Pope Francis’ leadership may promote change management for justice and equity through linking social values, theology and spirituality towards sustainability. These examples highlight some of the critical connections between sustainability and the humanities.

## 2.4 *Synthesis, Limitations and Opportunities for Further Research*

In view of the three areas discussed above (Sects. 2.1–2.3), it appears that Pope Francis has captured the imagination of large cross sections of society for his global change agenda, both within and without the RCC (Brown 2017). This impression also appears to be supported by research conducted in the U.S. one year into his pontificate, which suggests that ‘Catholics view Pope Francis as a change for the better [...] Pope Francis remains immensely popular among American Catholics and is widely seen as

<sup>3</sup><http://www.wri.org/resources/websites/cait>.

a force for positive change within the Roman Catholic Church.’ (Pew Research Center 2014, pp. 1–2). While there are also nuanced opinions and counter-perspectives to this overall impression (The Guardian 2018), there nevertheless remains a strong sense that Pope Francis has set in motion a global change agenda ‘to reform an institution that the whole world knows is in dire need of change’ (Brown 2017; Moorhead 2017, para. 2). Hence, this case study offers important lessons that may inform change management contexts beyond the confines of the RCC (Schumpeter 2013). A brief discussion of pertinent success factors is offered in Sect. 3.

In respect of research limitations, it should be noted that the leadership perspectives offered in this paper are neither comprehensive nor fine-grained enough to allow for razor-sharp distinctions between change leadership and change management (Kotter 2011). In this sense, the perspectives presented in this literature analysis may be best perceived as indicative rather than definitive, conclusive and/or exhaustive. Moreover, there is scope for future research to fine-tune the macro focus of this discourse to reveal more microanalytical angles and perspectives.

### 3 Discussion: Managing Resistance and Promoting a Culture of Change Readiness

From the above discussion, it is quite evident that Pope Francis, over his years as Pontiff, is a reformer who has implemented measurable change within and without the RCC by introducing a rejuvenated vision on global issues such as social justice and environmental sustainability. This helps to explain why he has been recognised as Man of the Year by *Time*, with *Forbes* listing him as the fifth most powerful man in the world (Ewalt 2016; Chua-Eoan and Dias 2013).

Although management theory defines distinct styles of leadership, in practice they often overlap, and any successful leader typically exhibits more than one style (Northouse 2016). Pope Francis demonstrates multiple styles. He is authentic, transformational, servant-hearted, simple, humble and adaptive, possessing several relevant skills and traits. Undoubtedly, his efforts have created change within the RCC, slowly moving the culture away from cleric-centric (CC) bureaucracy towards Pope Francis’ vision of a poor-centric and Catholic Social Teaching (CST)-oriented RCC, which focuses on the gospel message and the needs of the people and our world, rather than rigid traditionalism or ritualistic grandeur.

Given that the theorisation of change management has been traditionally confined to the domain of business administration, management and/or corporate culture (Hiatt and Creasey 2012; Johnson 2017; Kotter 2012; Kotter and Cohen 2002), makes interdisciplinary research studies on change management within religious institutional contexts a fertile area of investigation, which offers rich and unexpected observations (Gladwin et al. 1995). Religious institutions are bound by traditions and doctrines that non-religious organisations are not similarly defined (or confined) by. This in-built or organic resistance to change allows for some very interesting perspectives on

overcoming institutional inertia to emerge, if/when ‘change’ does succeed. Seeing that contemporary writers have highlighted the RCC’s traditionally ‘slow response to political, social, economic and technical changes around them’ (Bradt 2013, para. 2), has prompted the authors of this paper to scrutinise recent change management advances under Pope Francis with the aim of extrapolating lessons learned in respect of leading change and managing resistance in change-resistant institutional environments. These lessons seem to be applicable beyond the immediate confines of the RCC, and they suggest that change can be possible even in cautious, conservative and/or rigid organisational environments. Importantly, insights may also enable more progress to be achieved toward realising the ‘great transformation’ of the global economic system (WBGU 2011), from fossil fuel dependency to a post-fossil fuel era (IPCC 2014). In view of the urgency of decarbonising the global economy, exemplified by recurrent and growing calls by ‘thousands of scientific experts who advocate urgent change’ (Luetz et al. 2018, p. 66), these lessons about leading change in change-resistant environments have never seemed more timely (Kendall 1997; Ripple et al. 2017). More specifically, scientists have employed stark imagery to warn of the consequences of global warming and urge serious action. For example:

[E]xpressed in Hiroshima atomic bombs, the energy trapped by man-made global warming pollution is now ‘equivalent to exploding 400,000 Hiroshima atomic bombs per day 365 days per year’ (Hansen 2012; cf. Braasch 2013; Cook 2013). Clearly, visualising yearly cumulative global warming energy as exploding 146 million Hiroshima atomic bombs annually makes it clear that anthropogenic climate change is likely to have severe long-term consequences that may well have some rather ‘apocalyptic’ end results. (Luetz et al. 2018, p. 64)

Expressed in simple language, changes instigated and progressively instituted by Pope Francis are linked to his values, simple lifestyle and authentic demeanour. For instance, much of the traction Pope Francis has achieved on change management seems to arise from his authentic, humble and simple approaches that have characterised his engagement with the public. The literature identifies several success factors for change management, including focusing on ‘the people side of change’ (cf. Hiatt and Creasey 2012), ‘communicating the change vision’ (Kotter 2012, pp. 87–103) and ‘authentic leadership’ (Northouse 2016, pp. 195–219; cf. George 2003; George and Sims 2007), among others.

Further, Kotter (2012) advocates for ‘clarity and simplicity of the message’ (p. 91), and warns: ‘Technobabble and MBA-speak just get in the way, creating confusion, suspicion and alienation. Communication seems to work best when it is so direct and so simple that it has a sort of elegance.’ (pp. 91–92). These success factors are reflected elsewhere in the literature, where traditionally oriented organisations are admonished to act honestly, simply, transparently and humbly:

Whether you’re a start-up founder or an established brand with a global presence, the time for illusion, smoke and mirrors is over. Not so much because you want it to be, but because there’s nowhere to hide anymore. Expectations are changing in a pretty profound way. People expect a certain amount of honesty and transparency and if you don’t provide it, they’ll find a path to it on their own. That’s upsetting and frustrating, it’s causing a lot of pain in more traditionally-oriented organizations that are used to a higher-level of control over information flow and brand control. To thrive in today’s world, you need to know how to tell a brand



story in a way that doesn't sound like a whole bunch of prepackaged BS. *You must master the art of getting real.* (Johnson 2017, p. 54; emphasis added)

Further, there is a sense that it is paramount to lead by example, or in the words of Kotter (2012), to 'Walk the Talk, or Lead by Example' (p. 97; cf. Kotter and Cohen 2002, pp. 83–100). The leadership literature highlights leading humbly by example as a critical success factor for effectively promoting change (Kerr 2017). As Albert Schweitzer is famously quoted as having said: 'Example is not the main thing in influencing others, it is the *only* thing.' (Schweitzer 1996, p. xviii, emphasis original).

Recent research scrutinised the papal encyclical through perceptual filters, observing that 'the release of *Laudato si*' offered an interesting research context for evaluating climate change cognition.' (Landrum et al. 2017, p. 3). The research concluded that 'the messenger played an outsized role compared to the message':

Opening up the "black box" of climate change cognition in the context of *Laudato si*', it appears that Deacon Ditlewicz – echoing Marshall McLuhan almost 50 years prior – was correct. When it comes to Pope Francis and *Laudato si*', "the medium is the message" (McLuhan 1964). Driven by political ideology, assessments of the credibility of Pope Francis (the messenger/medium) were what urged acceptance of the messages in *Laudato si*. (Landrum et al. 2017, p. 8)

In summary, the critical analysis presented in this section appears to harmonise with other research, suggesting that 'even brief exposure to Pope Francis's efforts to spur global action on climate change can impact perceptions of climate change as a moral issue.' (Schuldt et al. 2017, p. 176). As such, the '[r]esults complement recent correlational findings and offer further evidence of the Vatican's influence on climate change public opinion.' (Schuldt et al. 2017, p. 167). In the final analysis of this case study, Pope Francis exemplifies how authentic spiritual leadership can enact change management, enhance equity and promote justice through linking social values, theology and spirituality towards sustainability. In influencing change-resistant environments, it appears that a credible messenger will ultimately supersede the message by *personifying* or *becoming* the message.

## 4 Concluding Synthesis: The Power of Personal Example

Transitioning from a fossil fuel based global economy to one that is based on renewable energy will be difficult to achieve for humanity in the absence of influential and robust change management, sustained over time and space. Hence, there is a need for strategic leadership that can drive and sustain far-reaching societal behaviour change. While political duty bearers and senior corporate executives are typically identified as those stakeholders who are most ideally placed to lead change efforts towards environmental sustainability, there is a paucity of case studies that explore the role of 'spiritual leaders' in this important area, which sits at the intersection of business and environmental management, and social science investigation. This case study



on Pope Francis addresses this knowledge gap. As the current head of the Roman Catholic Church, a global organisation which has been identified as being among some of the most influential and at the same time change-resistant organisations in the world, Pope Francis exemplifies the pivotal role, which spiritual leadership can play in advancing the global sustainability agenda. By conducting a broad review of popular, ecclesiological, managerial, and peer-reviewed scientific literature, this case study contributes inductively to this important discourse. Noting critical connections between sustainability and the humanities, the study identifies the power of personal example as a key success factor for influencing change-resistant environments. This accords with the leadership maxim made famous by the French-German theologian, humanitarian and Nobel Peace Prize winner Albert Schweitzer: 'Example is not the main thing in influencing others, it is the *only* thing.' (Schweitzer 1996, p. xviii, emphasis original). In the final analysis, it appears that a credible, authentic and authoritative messenger will ultimately supersede the significance of the message itself. Therefore, influencing change-resistant environments succeeds best if the messenger *owns, exemplifies, personifies* or even *becomes* the living message.

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