On Wednesday I was at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, Minnesota, to talk about Pope Francis’ feverishly anticipated encyclical letter on the environment. In effect, I was asked to deliver some predictions about what to expect.

As I said that night, the great thing about predicting the future is that in the moment you do it, you can’t possibly be wrong. Futurology is like what Bob Dole once said of the vice presidency: It’s a great gig, because it’s indoor work and there’s no heavy lifting.

The anticipation is nonetheless understandable. As veteran Catholic writer Russell Shaw recently observed, probably no papal document in recent history has been subjected to such intense dissection and reaction before it appears. In some ways the release, now officially set for June 18, may feel almost anti-climactic.
Rather than another set of forecasts about the encyclical’s content, here I’ll offer four predictions about how it’s likely to be spun and miscast in the early round of insta-analysis.

**Spin No. 1: The encyclical is a political manifesto**

Headlines on Day One are likely to read, “Pope backs strong limits on greenhouse gas emissions.” The impression will be that Francis has issued a political manifesto aligning himself with the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, if not Greenpeace.

That take won’t be entirely wrong. Francis is indeed likely to accept the scientific consensus that global warming and climate change are real, and that human activity is the main cause. He’ll almost certainly call on nations to take strong action to address it.

He already said as much to reporters aboard the papal plane from Sri Lanka to the Philippines last January, asserting that it’s “mostly” human beings who have “slapped nature around.” He said he wanted to encyclical to come out this summer so it could influence a UN summit in Paris later this year, calling for “more courageous” choices.

No doubt, there will also be a strong emphasis on poverty, including the argument that the world’s poor often bear the most severe consequences of climatic disruption. That, too, is a point with a political edge.

Nonetheless, the encyclical will not be primarily a political call for action.

Instead, *Laudato Sii*, the reported title of the encyclical (meaning “Praised Be”), will almost certainly be a work in moral theology. The chief concern will be the common good, asking how someone of conscience should behave both toward others and toward the environment.

As a result, it’s probably inaccurate even to describe this as an encyclical “on the environment,” and certainly not as the pope’s “climate change encyclical.”

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It will be a theological meditation taking its point of departure from biblical teaching on God’s creation, in which climate change is an important, but secondary, extrapolation. The pope’s intended audience won’t be political gatherings, at least in the first place, but individual people, among other things calling for simpler and more sustainable lifestyle choices.

The ambition of the document, in other words, won’t be to change the political landscape, but rather individual hearts. The underlying conviction will be that if you re-orient lives and attitudes, the politics will take care of itself.

Spin No. 2: The encyclical is a dramatic break with Catholic tradition

The problem with Francis’ reputation as a maverick is that people are tempted to think absolutely everything he says or does is a novelty. In fact, this encyclical is not a reversal of tradition – it is the tradition.

One could go all the way back to this pope’s namesake, St. Francis of Assisi, and his famous canticles to “brother sun” and “sister moon” to find a deep green streak in Catholic teaching and spirituality.

More recently, St. John Paul II devoted a 1990 message for the World Day of Peace entirely to environmental themes, applauding a growing ecological awareness and asserting that the greenhouse effect “has now reached crisis proportions.”

In 2002, John Paul signed a common ecological declaration with Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople, the first among equals of Orthodox prelates, calling on humanity to “repent” for its mistreatment of the environment.

As for Benedict XVI, his statements on ecology were so voluminous he was dubbed the “Green Pope.” In a 2010 message on the subject, he insisted there will be neither justice nor peace without strong environmental commitment.
Not only did he teach on the subject, he also walked his own talk — signing an agreement that made the Vatican Europe’s first carbon-neutral state, and installing solar panels atop the Vatican’s main audience hall.

(I still recall the opening of my story the day those panels went online: “For two millennia, the Catholic Church has claimed to draw on the power of the Son. As of today, however, it’s also drawing on the power of the Sun.”)

Under Benedict, the Pontifical Academy for Sciences released a 2010 report on climate change recommending that world leaders cut carbon dioxide emissions, reduce existing pollution, and prepare for the inevitable impacts of a changing climate.

In other words, Francis isn’t overturning previous popes. He’s carrying their legacy forward.

**Spin No. 3: The encyclical represents a reconciliation between religion and science**

For a prediction-within-a-prediction, my forecast is that the second most common proper name you’ll hear in coverage of the encyclical is Galileo, as pundits insist that Francis is reversing the Church’s traditional animus for science.

While the Galileo episode reflects real tensions that have arisen periodically, the truth is that few institutions on earth have been greater promoters of scientific inquiry than the Catholic Church.

The Pontifical Academy for Sciences, for instance, is one of the oldest and most august bodies around, tracing its roots back to a fabled Italian scientific academy founded in 1603. The Vatican Observatory likewise has fostered cutting-edge research, and demonstrates the Church’s interest in discovery.

One could go on cataloging examples, such as the fact that the father of modern genetics was a 19th-century Augustinian monk, but the point should be clear: As long as science doesn’t try to scrub God out of the equation, the Church is actually a big fan.
We had sort of a trial run on this point last October, when many media outlets breathlessly reported an about-face in papal teaching when Pope Francis said that “evolution in nature is not inconsistent with creation.”

Peeling back the onion, it became clear that conditional support for the theory of evolution went all the way back to Pope Pius XII’s encyclical *Humani Generis* in 1950, and that John Paul II had referred to it in 1996 as “more than a hypothesis.” Francis wasn’t breaking new ground, but harvesting a crop planted long ago.

Bottom line: By embracing the majority opinion in climate research today and harnessing the resources of the Church to do something about it, Pope Francis is not engaging in a kiss-and-make-up exercise with science. Instead, he’s writing another chapter in the story of a long relationship which, over the centuries, has seen more ups than downs.

**Spin No. 4: The encyclical confirms Francis as a leftist**

Impressions of Francis as a left-wing radical have proven stubbornly resistant to correction, even when he says or does things that clearly cut in a different direction.

For instance, Francis has used language on abortion from which even some of the most outspoken US anti-abortion activists might shrink, calling it “horrific.” He’s defended marriage as a union between a man and a woman, and has denounced what he calls the “ideological colonization” of the developing world by Western powers attempting to compel it to adopt liberal secular values.

There’s also the towering point that he’s been pope for more than two years, and has yet to change a single comma in the Catechism of the Catholic Church, including a firm “no” to female priests.

In a soundbite, he’s not Che Guevara in a cassock.

Yet narratives often live on long after evidence suggests they’re unsatisfactory, and that’s likely to be the case with the new encyclical, too. Given that eco-activism is more strongly associated with the left in most Western nations, the encyclical probably will be seen as further proof of the pope’s ideological credentials.
As part of that picture, many commentators probably will underscore the document’s language on climate change while ignoring another likely point of emphasis: A culture that disrespects human life, for instance through abortion, cannot be relied upon to cherish other forms of life or the natural environment.

In truth, Francis is neither a political conservative nor a liberal, which are Western categories that arose during the French Revolution. If you asked, he’d probably tell you he comes out of the moderate wing of Argentina’s Peronist movement. (I have yet to meet anyone, however, including any of the Argentines I know, who can clearly define what exactly that means.)

Basically, Francis appears to sees himself as a Latin American pastor who takes Church teaching and tradition for granted, and who tries to bring it to bear on situations of suffering he’s seen with his own eyes.

Attempting to read his agenda, including Laudato Siì, as a boost for any political alignment thus is destined to get him wrong.

Full article online at: http://www.cruxnow.com/church/2015/06/05/getting-ahead-of-the-spin-on-the-popes-environmental-encyclical/