Q: To what do we owe the popularity of Pope Francis to not only Catholics, but people of all faiths?

Pope Francis has managed to make himself very popular, not only the most tweetable Pope, but someone who many New Yorkers are excited to see and I think that a lot of this has to do with the fact that he walks the walk, he doesn’t just talk the talk. You know, it’s refreshing for people to see a leader who embodies the ideas that he’s portraying.

What is particularly significant or unique about this Pope’s visit to New York? What topics can we expect to hear about from the Pope at the United Nations meeting?

It’s really unique and exciting that the Pope is visiting New York and especially his address to the UN General Assembly during a time when nations are considering climate agreements, as well as issues of sustainability, poverty, and ecological degradation. It’s also extremely important that he’s addressing the UN in Spanish, one of his strong native languages and this speaks to the fact that English is not necessarily a world dominant language, it reminds us that there are many, many people with many, many cultures who deserve to be heard even when we’re meeting in the U.S.

So when Pope Francis addresses the UN, he’ll do so in Spanish which is exciting and perhaps surprising
to some Americans, some of whom want to hear English and assume that that's our nation's language, but in fact, it's not. Many Americans speak Spanish as a primary language and this Pope has Spanish and Italian as his most familiar tongues. It speaks to the diversity of the world's cultures, and the fact that perhaps we, in the U.S., aren't always the norm.

What is so significant about Pope Francis' interest in the environment and the way that he has approached it in the Laudato si' encyclical?

1:52 A lot of people are wondering if Pope Francis is extremely radical because he is talking about the environment, and I would say two things. One: he is, in a sense. He is linking environmental degradation and social problems; he links ecology and poverty. This is really important and it's rare for someone with a platform such as his to do. At the same time, he's also building on the work of his predecessors.

How is Francis similar to, or different from his predecessors in terms of his views on the environment?

2:25 A lot of pundits have been wondering if Francis is some kind of liberal, leftist, radical Pope, but the fact of the matter is his teachings on political economy and environmental degradation, in many cases, comes straight out of his predecessors, Benedict XVI and John Paul II.

Francis addresses our "culture of waste" which leads to harm for developing countries, as well as those living in poverty in developed countries. Can you talk about how the harm that we are doing to the earth is affecting those living in poverty and why we should be held accountable for change?
Since the very beginning of his Papacy, Pope Francis has been super critical of a range of what he calls “throwaway behaviors” or “throwaway cultures.” This has to do on one hand with environmental waste and degradation and that for him is linked to industrial processes and forms of excessive capitalism that produce and produce and produce and then people in developed countries can procure those goods but the waste streams and the toxic aftereffects, and the negative outcomes are born by people living in poverty and often out of sight and therefore out of mind to those of us in developed countries.

What does Pope Francis mean when he calls for an ecological conversion?

I think one of the most challenging notions that Pope Francis has with regard to developed nations, such as the U.S., is the idea of ecological debt. This is an idea that people in super developed contexts have a debt that is owed to people living in poverty and he talks about how people like us, in the U.S., owe a debt, and owe a remediating effort to people who, for example, don’t have fresh water. This is a real challenge—we are in debt, not in an economic sense, but in a real moral sense.

In environmental ethics, there are a couple schools of thought on how we should fix the environmental crisis. One is that we need to change politics and change the economy—change the structures. Another is that we need to start with ourselves and change from within. What Pope Francis talks about in his call to ecological conversion is both. And this is unique and very important for the leader of the world’s 1.2 billion Catholics and a man who is the most re-tweeted guy on the planet.
Francis’ visit to New York City falls during climate week. What effect will his presence have on this week and the discussions that will be had about the climate between people of all faiths?

For many people who have been laboring away in climate activism and the climate movement, I think Pope Francis signifies a kind of hope, in the one hand because he talks about climate science and the imperative of climate justice in an era of climate change, but on the other hand, because he is a figure who is making this a priority at a time when nations are coming together to think about their individual and mutual obligations for future generations as well as for people around the world.

What role does Ignatian Spirituality play in Francis' character and message?

I’d say that, from what I can tell, Pope Francis is Jesuit through and through. He trusts and seeks out the expertise of scientists and experts on ecological degradation and social science and other related fields. But he also is extremely pastoral, looking to care for each person in their entirety in the way that they are in the world and he really walks the walk while talking the talk.