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Brother Glum, Mother Earth

The pope's encyclical on climate change ignores how markets and technology have lifted hundreds of millions out of poverty.

19 June 2015

Shortly after the Argentinian cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio was consecrated Pope Francis in 2013, news stories reported that the new pontiff wanted to build a stronger relationship between the Catholic Church and science—one that saw science not in opposition to, but compatible with, religious belief. Some months later, the pope declared that evolution and the Big Bang theory of creation are real and don't conflict with belief in God. Now, in the wake of the pope's [encyclical on climate change](#) and the environment, *Laudato Si* (or, *Be Praised*), the press has exulted in the pope's apparent effort to find even more "common ground" with science.

Nothing could be further from the truth. The encyclical, whose title is derived from a line from St. Francis of Assisi's *Canticle of the Sun* ("Be praised, My Lord, through all your Creatures"), is being welcomed by some in the scientific community because it proclaims that climate change is real and that humanity must address it. But the nearly 38,000-word document—most of which is *not* about climate change—actually reads like a giant step backward for the Church's social teaching: [a rejection of technological progress](#); a dark, narrow vision of human nature that ignores the enormous gains the world has made in alleviating human suffering; and an almost antihuman call, reminiscent of the most radical environmentalists, to reduce human activity drastically as the only way to save the planet. As Michael Shellenberger, president of the Breakthrough Institute and co-author of *An Ecomodernist Manifesto*, observed: "When [the] Pope speaks of 'irrational faith in human progress' I want him to visit the Congo to see what life is like when there is no progress."

Early on, Francis said that his papacy would be shaped by his experiences serving the poor of Argentina—a place where, as economic historian Pierpaolo Barbieri [wrote](#) in the *Wall Street Journal*, "Government takeovers [of private businesses] and crony capitalism are the enemy of genuine development." More than any recent pope, his vision has been shaped by this distorted view of how modern trade and commerce work. One result is that *Laudato Si* devolves into a long rant against consumerism that ignores the many benefits produced by human innovation through free markets.

French writer Pascal Bruckner has observed that modern environmentalism is essentially a composite of the blame game preached by two twentieth-century ideologies: Marxism, which blamed capitalism for humanity's problems; and Third World ideology, which blamed the West. This perfectly describes *Laudato Si*. No less than five times the pope derides humanity's "throwaway culture." His concern? We don't recycle most of the paper we use. The pope also disparages "financial gain," "financial interests," and "financial resources" more than a dozen times, though what these interests have to do with the environment isn't clear. It doesn't seem to matter. They make a convenient target in the world from which the pope hails, where a theology of class warfare seems to reign.

Pope Francis frames his argument in favor of a heavy-handed environmentalism around the idea that climate change hurts the poor the most. Yet he seems to have little notion of what has *helped* the

world's poor more than anything: namely, the march of markets and technology, which has lifted billions out of destitution. Instead, Francis rails against those who “doggedly uphold the myth of progress,” the “modern myth of unlimited material progress,” and the “myths of modernity,” including “unlimited progress.” Yet after levying these warnings against progress, the pope calls for a bigger effort to develop sources of renewable energy. Exactly how will this be accomplished, except through giant advances in technology?

Too much of the encyclical reads like a list of green gremlins cooked up by the most ardent environmentalists. Francis finds reason not to like genetically modified foods because, he claims, wherever they're employed, “productive land is concentrated in the hands of a few owners” and small farms disappear due to “an expansion of oligopolies for the production of cereals and other products.” This claim ignores the good that genetically engineered food does in boosting production and helping to feed people around the world.

The pope also decries the way humans are depleting the world's natural resources. Under this heading, he includes a lack of fresh drinking water in some areas. He claims that water suitable for drinking “is a basic and universal human right.” But in much of the underdeveloped world, human overuse isn't responsible for the scarcity of drinking water; rather, lack of technology to discover, pump, and purify water is the issue. Bringing clean water to Africa's poor, for instance, has nothing to do with Americans or other wealthy peoples using too much of their own water. Instead, the solution lies in transferring the tools we have developed for ourselves—technologies that have drastically reduced disease and dehydration—to the poor.

The most dispiriting thing about the encyclical, however, is the relentlessly bleak vision of the world this pope proffers. He at times sounds like a survivalist warning that time is running out—and not because the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand. Francis talks of impending, large-scale natural disasters, the breakdown of social life on the planet, and warns, “Doomsday predictions can no longer be met with irony or disdain.” His critique ignores so much—the extension of democracy and rise of the middle class in the Third World, the decrease in wars, the eradication of deadly diseases, and even the decline in pollution in places, thanks to technological innovations like cleaner engines and fuels.

The pope's assuming of the apocalyptic tone of the environmentalist is, in the end, ironic. It is the Church's gospel that offers us the true Apocalypse, which is a hopeful revelation of God's coming and cause for joy among the good. *Laudato Si*, by contrast, is perhaps the least hopeful, most joyless document to come out of the Vatican in my lifetime.

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