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Pope Francis may challenge capitalist Catholics during U.S. trip

Pope Francis, known for his condemnation of capitalism and consumerism, making first visit to U.S.

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Pope Francis, the Roman Catholic Church's leader who has made the world's poor a key focus of his papacy, arrived Tuesday in the U.S. and brought a history of biting critiques of modern-day capitalism and consumerism with him.

'He has put poverty back on the front burner of American politics.'— Journalist Michael Sean Winters

The Pope, who has referred to the unfettered pursuit of money as the "dung of the devil," landed in the U.S. at a time when a billionaire businessman, who boasts shamelessly about how rich he is, leads a pack of candidates vying to be president.

Pope Francis will visit Washington and New York City, the political and financial capitals of the country, and given his propensity for speaking his mind, he might have something to say about how they operate — something not so positive.

Some American Catholics are bracing for a dressing down from Pope Francis, who is also going to Philadelphia for the World Meeting of Families.

"I think we are all really going to have our consciences afflicted," Stephen Schneck, a professor at the Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C., said in an interview. "I think we are all going to be challenged by what the Pope is calling for."

The Pope, in his writings and in his public speaking, has called for structural change in the global economic order, arguing that the current system has imposed a "mentality of profit at any price, with no concern for social exclusion or the destruction of nature."

He has urged, not just Catholics but everyone, to resist idolizing money. Greed for it can ruin society, destroy the environment and turn people against each other, he said in a speech in Bolivia in July.

Pope 'absolutely' anti-capitalist

In his encyclical on the environment released in June, the Pope wrote about how a market that promotes extreme consumerism can lead to people getting caught up in a whirlwind of needless buying and spending.

"Obsession with a consumerist lifestyle, above all when few people are capable of maintaining it, can only lead to violence and mutual destruction," he wrote.

There is no doubt about how the Pope feels about capitalism, according to Michael Sean Winters, a journalist with the National Catholic Reporter, he's "absolutely" anti-capitalist.

Winters was part of an event last week at the Cato Institute in Washington where Pope Francis's controversial views on capitalism were discussed.

He summed up the juxtaposition of American culture and Pope Francis this way: "American capitalism was celebrated in a show called *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*. Pope Francis has administered in the name of Christ to the poor and forgotten," Winters told the audience.

Pope Francis, an Argentinian, has never stepped foot on U.S. soil before, yet he's already had an impact on the American political agenda and public discourse, Winters said in an interview.

"He has put poverty back on the front burner of American politics," he said. Past popes have talked about economic inequality and decried capitalism too, but this one is different, Pope Francis's messages are truly resonating, he said.

"This Pope, his bluntness, and the very familiarity with which he speaks, makes him accessible in a way no pope has ever been," said Winters.

The Pope's bluntness, however, and how he's used it when speaking about economic models, hasn't been welcomed by all Catholics in the U.S.

Catholics can disagree

"I would suspect that some Catholics who are advocates of the free market may be frustrated with the pope because they don't feel that he's making some key distinctions that they wish he would make," Jay W. Richards, author of *Money, Greed and God*, said in an interview after speaking on the panel with Winters.

Richards, a fellow at a think tank called the Discovery Institute, said he'd prefer that Pope Francis didn't talk about economic policy at all, but if he is going to, he'd like to hear him say that free markets, entrepreneurship and trade have helped lift millions of people out of poverty.

"That's a very relevant moral point when we're talking about what economic policies ought to be advocated by Catholics," said Richards.

So, how do American Catholics who advocate for free enterprise reconcile those views with the lectures they get from their Pope, who tells them the pursuit of wealth can ruin society? Can Catholics in the U.S. pursue the so-called American Dream, can they desire a bigger house, fancier car and the latest Apple gadget, while their Pope warns them about the perils of greed and excessive consumerism?

Yes, Americans can be capitalists and Catholics, according to Richards, who noted the Pope himself has acknowledged he's no expert when it comes to economics.

"I would say that a faithful Catholic can certainly endorse economic freedom, can endorse capitalism, properly defined, but he or she needs to do it in a way that's consistent with the principles of Catholic social teaching," said Richards.

How best to help the poor, for example, is where some American Catholics might diverge from what Pope Francis advocates, and that's OK, said Richards.

"It's possible for a faithful Catholic to disagree with the Pope on prudential questions," he said.

Stephen Schneck of Catholic University doesn't expect Pope Francis to scold America while he's in it, but he anticipates he will "call on America to step up to its moral responsibilities to the world."

The pontiff is providing Americans with a new framework, he said, that challenges them to think about the moral dimension of their economic systems and consumer culture, and that's a good thing.

"He really is a conscience for the world right now," he said.