



What should Pope Francis say about climate change?

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Pope Francis will address a joint session of Congress on Thursday, Sept. 24, with special emphasis on the horrors of climate change and the need for an enforceable emissions reduction treaty to emerge from next December's United Nations climate summit in Paris.

The cause of global warming, according to Francis, is quite clear: Capitalism. "Once capital becomes an idol and guides people's decisions" he said in Bolivia last July, "it even puts at risk our common home."

Nothing could be further from the truth. The correlation between wealth and environmental quality is overwhelming and undisputed. Simply put, the more affluent a society is, the cleaner it is.

This truth is self-evident at many scales. Rich cities — think San Francisco — are brilliantly clean, while the poorest, like Detroit, don't even pick up their garbage. When it comes to nations, the best example was probably the border between affluent West Germany and the communist East, littered with decaying factories and untended landfills.

If free-market capitalism is so bad, what would Francis substitute? Right before he comes to the United States, while cozying with the Castro brothers, he'll witness the abject poverty of communist Cuba. The horrendous planned economies of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union were the world's ecological basket cases. Beijing has the dirtiest air on earth, but as China has developed, there's growing pressure to clean it up, just as there was in England and the U.S. following their industrialization.

Rather than despising affluence, the Pope would do well to embrace it. In the scientific community, there's universal agreement that neither bad weather nor changing climate mean very much to rich societies. It's the poor ones that can suffer greatly.

Consequently, the best way to deal with weather and climate is with economic development. Decades ago, a strong tropical cyclone could kill more than 100,000 people in Bangladesh.

Today, while still a horrific disaster, the same storm would likely drown a few hundred, thanks to better communication and a modernized infrastructure.

Just like the belief that affluence is evil, there is a current delusion that the world is converging upon a meaningful climate treaty. Much has been made, for example, of China's statement last November that it "intends" to hold carbon dioxide emissions constant "around" 2030. In the preceding 25 years, its emissions will have risen 250 percent. The U.S. has had generally flat-to-lower emissions since 2005, thanks in large part to the substitution of abundant and clean-burning natural gas for coal in power generation. President Obama says we will reduce our emissions a total of 32 percent (from 2005) by 2030.

Last year, in preparation for December's summit, the U.N. called for every country to submit emissions reduction plans like these, by last March 31. Most of the big emitters have done so.

The Environmental Protection Agency has an easy-to-use computer model that calculates the amount of warming that will be avoided by this massive international action: 20 percent.

That's impractically small. Forecasts of global warming have been coming down in recent years, and indications are that the numbers used by the U.N. are somewhere around two times too big. Instead of 3.2 degrees Celsius of warming in this century, it looks like we are more on track to get around half of that. As it stands, the plans submitted to the U.N. would reduce that warming a grand total of 0.3 degrees Celsius, assuming that the newer forecasts are correct.

No one would notice, and poor countries will still be at the mercy of their weather.

Rumor has it that the Pope is going to soften his anti-capitalist rhetoric when he's in Washington. So, what should he really tell Congress? Perhaps that promoting economic development isn't just the best thing that we can do about climate change, it's also the only thing that will foster environmental protection and resistance to the vagaries of weather and climate. That's the Christian thing to do.

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