

The climate courage of Pope Francis

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KUDOS to Pope Francis for calling a conference emphasizing the moral dimensions of climate change. It's about time we took a clear and sober look at an issue that can cause so much harm to so many, especially the poor and downtrodden.

The core problem for the conference is to balance the costs and benefits imposed by climate change against the costs and benefits of a major reduction in the use of fossil fuels, with the understanding that there are only two other sources of dense energy that can effectively replace them, nuclear power and large hydroelectric dams.

Abundant and dependable energy frees mankind from a menial existence, allowing us to use our given talents for the greater good. The mental capital of the poor in the underdeveloped world is untapped without dense energy. The burning of dung for cooking is a major cause of early death from pulmonary disease. The massive deforestation that must occur without dense energy amplifies floods from ubiquitous tropical downpours. Solar power simply cannot run a city from late afternoon through early morning. Wind is far too intermittent, especially over tropical lands, and would require backup from either coal or natural gas to keep the electrical grid stable.

The conference has a moral duty to the poor, namely to help them find ways to not be poor. There is no debate that depriving them of the technological means that are required to lift their societies is immoral.

The conference also has a moral duty to examine the issue of climate change itself. Is it moral for scientists and policymakers to use computer models for climate change that are clearly predicting far too much warming? What kind of climate would God want for us — the one we have today, the cooler one at the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, the much warmer one that accompanied the rise of agriculture and civilization, or thousands of feet of ice over what is now Chicago? Homo sapiens has lived through all of these.

The conference has a moral duty to seek and follow the truth, wherever it may lead, even through the thorniest of dilemmas. If crop-based biofuels reduce carbon-dioxide emissions, is it moral for the United States — the world's largest producer — to burn up half of its corn crop every year? If these fuels indeed result in *more* carbon dioxide emissions than simply powering automobiles with gasoline would, is it moral to put

thousands and thousands of people out of work — and gravely harm the state of Iowa — by shutting down the massive infrastructure that now serves the corn-ethanol industry?

The conference also has a moral duty to examine the corruption of science that can be caused by massive amounts of money. The United States has disbursed tens of billions of dollars to climate scientists who would not have received those funds had their research shown climate change to be beneficial or even modest in its effects. Are these scientists being tempted by money? And are the very, very few climate scientists whose research is supported by industry somehow less virtuous?

Then there is the all-important question of what our authority should be. Should it be the constructs of the human mind as expressed by interacting differential equations in a computerized simulation of climate change? Or should it be how God and nature express that climate, having placed us in what is now the 21st consecutive year without a statistically significant lower-atmospheric warming trend? I would think that Christians should be humble before God. “The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork” (Psalm 19:1).

Pope Francis has done the world a wonderful favor. It is now time to examine all the moral aspects of climate change, the way we power our society, and the need to protect and help the least among us. Anything less would be a waste of the pontiff’s calling.

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