

Francis' fact-free flamboyance

GEORGE F. WILL

Washington Post Writers Group



Pope Francis embodies sanctity but comes trailing clouds of sanctimony. With a convert's indiscriminate zeal, he embraces ideas impeccably fashionable, demonstrably false and deeply reactionary. They would devastate the poor on whose behalf he purports to speak — if his policy prescriptions were not as implausible as his social diagnoses are shrill.

Supporters of Francis have bought newspaper and broadcast advertisements to disseminate some of his woolly sentiments that have the intellectual tone of fortune cookies. One example: "People occasionally forgive, but nature never does." The Vatican's majesty does not disguise the vacuity of this. Is Francis intimating that environmental damage is irreversible?

And the Earth is becoming "an immense pile of filth"? Hyperbole is a predictable precursor of yet another U.N. Climate Change Conference — the 21st since 1995. Fortunately, rhetorical exhibitionism increases as its effectiveness diminishes. In his June encyclical and elsewhere, Francis lectures about our responsibilities, but neglects the duty to be as intelligent as one can be. This man who says "the Church does not presume to settle scientific questions" proceeds as though everything about which he declaims is settled, from imperiled plankton to air conditioning being among humanity's "harmful habits."

Francis deplores "compulsive consumption," a sin to which the 1.3 billion persons without even electricity can only aspire. He leaves the Vatican to jet around praising subsistence farming, a romance best enjoyed from 30,000 feet above the realities that such farmers yearn to escape.

The saint who is Francis' namesake supposedly lived in sweet harmony with nature. For most of mankind, however, nature has been, and remains, scarcity, disease and natural — note the adjective — disasters. Our flourishing requires affordable, abundant energy for the production of everything from food to pharmaceuticals. Poverty has probably decreased more in the last two centuries than it has in the preceding three millennia because of industrialization powered by fossil fuels. Only economic growth has ever produced broad amelioration of poverty, and since

growth began in the late 18th century, it has depended on such fuels.

As the world spurns his church's teachings about abortion, contraception, divorce, same-sex marriage and other matters, Francis jauntily makes his church congruent with the secular religion of "sustainability." Because this is hostile to growth, it fits Francis' seeming sympathy for medieval stasis, when his church ruled the roost, economic growth was essentially nonexistent and life expectancy was around 30.

Francis' fact-free flamboyance reduces him to a shepherd whose selectively reverent flock, genuflecting only at green altars, is tiny relative to the publicity it receives from media otherwise disdainful of his church. Secular people with anti-Catholic agendas drain his prestige, a dwindling asset, into promotion of policies inimical to the most vulnerable people and unrelated to what once was the papacy's very different salvific mission.

He stands against modernity, science and, ultimately, the spontaneous creativity of open societies in which people and their desires are not problems but precious resources. Americans cannot simultaneously honor him and celebrate their nation's premises.