

Green-left Pope Francis endorses flawed view of progress

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Popular Pope Francis is certain to enhance his moral authority and celebrity status with an encyclical that offers the greatest moral validation to the deep green-progressive stance on global climate change, inequality and the immorality of market-based economics.

This is an astonishing document. Page after page reveals Francis and his advisers as environmental populists and economic ideologues of a quasi-Marxist bent. The language is vivid, almost hysterical. Profound intellectual ignorance is dressed up as honouring God. Forget the apologies that play down the historic import of this encyclical.

For conservative Catholics in Australia such as Tony Abbott and his Catholic backers this document offers only a relentless repudiation of their ethical framework and policies. This sweeping interpretation of Catholic morality demands a searching criticism to offset the wild applause.

It highlights a schism in Christian thinking between those who believe human dignity finds expression in economic freedom and markets as the path to individual and social virtue and those, like Francis, who call for a sweeping “ecological conversion” to combat what he sees as the united evils of environmental degradation and rampant corporate and financial power, joint proof of humanity’s lost compass.

The encyclical is a moral vindication of the Left, remarkable in its sweep and intensity. It will have a profound impact on global debates and impinge on debates in Australia. This assumes, of course, that many of the anti-religious, often proudly pagan elements in the developed world with whom the Pope has aligned himself will have the nous to exploit his manifesto.

Above all, the encyclical reveals the depth of the dilemma facing pro-market economic reformers across the world and in Australia: their position is delegitimised as immoral. Francis has given immeasurable moral status to their opponents.

At one level this is a clever effort to tackle the greatest problem facing the Catholic Church since the Enlightenment — the conflict between religious faith and reason based on science. This is the rock that has smashed Christianity from the time of Darwin.

Is a reversal of this centuries-long trend at hand? By embracing catastrophic warnings about “Mother Earth”, calling for humanity “to repent of the ways we have damaged the planet” and urging the substitution of fossil fuels, the Pope seeks a historic reconciliation between science and faith. Indeed, on the central question facing the globe he declares a unity between faith and science.

Francis champions the darkest warnings from science. “Doomsday predictions can no longer be met with irony or disdain,” he says. “We may be leaving to coming generations, debris, desolation and filth.” Francis says that flouting the science is a sin.

He endorses the view that “for human beings to degrade the integrity of the earth by causing changes in its climate, by stripping the earth of its natural forests or destroying its wetlands, for human beings to contaminate the earth’s waters, its land, its air, and its life — these are sins”. If you want a historic parallel, imagine on publication of Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* in 1859 the pope had embraced then or later this theory with a Christian credo that reinforced it.

Of course, that was untenable at the time. But it has now happened on climate change. Francis brings flouting science and offending God together. So much for sceptics! The encyclical wants a “new dialogue” to redress “human abuse of God’s creation”.

The Pope touches every ecological nerve. He praises the 1992 Rio summit, complains about industrial pollution, throwaway consumer culture, rising sea levels, threats to several species and “unruly” growth of many cities, backs

renewables and insists that coal, oil and “to a lesser degree gas” must be “progressively replaced without delay”.

He criticises politics and business for being too slow to respond and calls for “enforceable international agreements”. The Pope says all Christian communities should be involved in “ecological education” and individuals must engage in “ecological conversion” — changing the way they live to God’s design.

The crisis of the planet, he says, originates in spiritual debasement. It constitutes an ethical crisis manifest in many dimensions, notably in the operation of the global economy and finance. At this point Francis advances his central thesis: the damage to the planet and damage from economic excess originate in the same human flaws and self-gratification.

“We need to reject a magical conception of the market,” the Pope warns. Problems cannot be solved “simply by an increase in the profits of companies or individuals”.

Mankind must recognise that “a decrease in the pace of production and consumption” can lead to another, better form of progress. Francis moves to his bottom-line position: “The time has come to accept decreased growth in some parts of the world.”

It is a pure green view of economic and human progress. Francis warns “people’s quality of life” can diminish because of economic growth. He complains that “maximisation of profits” misunderstands “the very concept of the economy” and comes at the cost of future resources while the market “tends to promote extreme consumerism”.

This economic ideology means the Pope is hostile to buying and selling of “carbon credits” to combat global warming. As a market mechanism this merely encourages “a new form of speculation”.

He complains about economies of scale in agriculture and extols “small-scale food production systems” using a modest amount of land and less waste. He believes in limits on private property rights.

He rejects the idea that economics and technology “will solve all environmental problems” and repudiates the notion that “the problems of global hunger and poverty will be resolved simply by market growth”.

This is no recognition that growth and investment over the past generation, spearheaded in China, has led to the greatest destruction of poverty in human history. Francis has a different world view. In a sense it is not new. The

Catholic Church has long been heading in this direction. Now, it is sealed by a popular Pope with moral fervour.

Francis gives voice to the developing world, the injustices of Latin America and the utopian relationship between humans and nature embodied by St Francis of Assisi. He laments the poverty of the developing world yet enunciates a flawed view of economic progress: “Christian spirituality proposes a growth marked by moderation and the capacity to be happy with little.” He calls for a new “economic ecology” that addresses “overproduction” and the “absolute power” of finance.

The Pope says “less is more”. This may be an eternal verity but Francis is blind to the liberating power of markets and technology.

His message fits perfectly with reactionary dogma now gospel in Catholic schools throughout Australia.