

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

Aug 13, 2015

Home > Pope Francis: Technology + greed = disaster

---

## Pope Francis: Technology + greed = disaster

by Thomas Reese

Faith and Justice

Francis: The Environment Encyclical

A superficial review of *Laudato Si?* could lead the reader to think that Pope Francis is a Luddite. He has very critical things to say about technology, especially when it is connected to greed.

The goal of technology, he argues, should not be to increasingly replace human work with machines in order to save money and make more profit. Like Pope John Paul II, Francis holds work in high esteem. Work is a necessity, part of the meaning of life on this earth, a path to growth, human development and personal fulfillment.

But Francis begins his examination of technology by acknowledging in chapter 3 of his encyclical that we are the beneficiaries of two centuries of technological advances. Technology has remedied countless evils that used to harm and limit human beings, he writes. But he notes that the power that comes from technology can be used by those with knowledge and economic resources to dominate humanity and the entire world.

We need but think of the nuclear bombs dropped in the middle of the twentieth century, he explains, or the array of technology which Nazism, Communism and other totalitarian regimes have employed to kill millions of people, to say nothing of the increasingly deadly arsenal of weapons available for modern warfare.

Quoting Romano Guardini, he notes that there is a tendency to believe that every increase in power means an increase of progress itself but in reality contemporary man has not been trained to use power well. Sadly, Pope Francis argues, our immense technological development has not been accompanied

by a development in human responsibility, values and conscience.?

Francis is especially critical of an undifferentiated and one-dimensional technocratic paradigm where the world (including human beings and material objects) is seen as something formless, completely open to manipulation. The goal is to extract everything possible from things while ignoring the reality in front of us.

This leads economists, financiers and experts in technology to accept the idea of unlimited growth ?based on the lie that there is an infinite supply of the earth?s goods, and this leads to the planet being squeezed dry beyond every limit.?

In short, Francis does not think that technological products are neutral. Rather ?they create a framework which ends up conditioning lifestyles and shaping social possibilities along the lines dictated by the interests of certain powerful groups.?

Francis saves his harshest words for economic interests who ?accept every advance in technology with a view to profit, without concern for its potentially negative impact on human beings.? They show ?no interest in more balanced levels of production, a better distribution of wealth, concern for the environment and the rights of future generations. Their behavior shows that for them maximizing profits is enough.?

In Francis? mind, this is the cause of our current economic and environmental crisis. What is needed is a broader vision where ?technology is directed primarily to resolving people?s concrete problems, truly helping them live with more dignity and less suffering.? Technology must serve humanity, not the market.

?Nobody is suggesting a return to the Stone Age,? he affirms, ?but we do need to slow down and look at reality in a different way, to appropriate the positive and sustainable progress which has been made, but also to recover the values and the great goals swept away by our unrestrained delusions of grandeur.?

## Advertisement

?Once the human being declares independence from reality and behaves with absolute dominion, the very foundations of our life begin to crumble,? Francis believes. Rather than being a cooperator with God in the work of creation, quoting John Paul II he says, ?man sets himself up in place of God and thus ends up provoking a rebellion on the part of nature.?

For Francis, ?the present ecological crisis is one small sign of the ethical, cultural and spiritual crisis of modernity.? Humanity ?cannot presume to heal our relationship with nature and the environment without healing all fundamental human relationships? including our relationships with others and God.

At the heart of this crisis of modernity is a culture of relativism, but Francis, unlike his predecessors, believes that ?practical relativism typical of our age is even more dangerous than doctrinal relativism.? In practical relativism, human beings ?place themselves at the center? and ?give absolute priority to immediate convenience and all else becomes relative.?

He is not surprised to see the culture of relativism, ?which sees everything as irrelevant unless it serves one?s own immediate interests,? going hand and hand with ?the omnipresent technocratic paradigm and the cult of unlimited human power.?

The result is ?the mindset of those who say: Let us allow the invisible forces of the market to regulate the economy, and consider their impact on society and nature as collateral damage.? He condemns the ?use

and throw away? logic that ?generates so much waste, because of the disordered desire to consume more than what is really necessary.?

In the later chapters of *Laudato Si?* he will lay out his response to the environmental crisis, but even in chapter three he shows his support for an economy that favors productive diversity and small scale producers. ?For example, there is a great variety of small-scale food production systems which feed the greater part of the world?s peoples, using a modest amount of land and producing less waste, be it in small agricultural parcels, in orchards and gardens, hunting and wild harvesting or local fishing.?

But he recognizes that small farmers and producers are threatened by economies of scale and by the difficulty they face in linking to regional and global markets because the infrastructure for sales and transport is geared to larger businesses.

He calls for government support of such small producers. ?To ensure economic freedom from which all can effectively benefit,? he asserts, ?restraints occasionally have to be imposed on those possessing greater resources and financial power.? He finds calls for ?economic freedom? to be bogus when ?real conditions bar many people from actual access to it.?

One might think that Francis is anti-business, but in fact he thinks ?Business is a noble vocation, directed to producing wealth and improving our world. It can be a fruitful source of prosperity for the areas in which it operates, especially if it sees the creation of jobs as an essential part of its service to the common good.?

Francis? words about domineering technology, a single-minded focus on profit, and practical relativism are prophetic and challenging. They fly in the face of many American cultural presuppositions. Pope Francis does not believe that technology and the market will magically provide the solution to social and environmental issues, rather they are part of the problem.

On the other hand, he believes that technology can and should be used to improve the lot of humanity and that business people are called to a noble vocation that is in service to the common good.

*This is the third of a series of columns on the chapters of Laudato Si?. The first chapter was examined in ?Pope Francis: Facts are more important than ideas.?' The second chapter was examined in "Revelation and creation: respecting and sharing God?s gift?."*

[Jesuit Fr. Thomas Reese is a senior analyst for NCR and author of *Inside the Vatican: The Politics and*

Twitter: @ThomasReeseSJ.]

**Editor's note:** We can send you an email alert every time Thomas Reese's column, Faith and Justice, is posted. Go to this page and follow directions: Email alert sign-up.

**Like what you're reading?** Learn more about our eBook collection of Thomas Reese's writings on the encyclical: *Caring for Our Common Home: A Readers' Guide and Commentary on Pope Francis' Encyclical on the Environment*.

## In This Series

### Religions must take lead in protecting creation, pope says

Sep 8, 2016

### Season of Creation marks month of eco-contemplation for Christians

Sep 1, 2016

### Laudato Si' and the liturgical work ahead

Jul 19, 2016

### Editorial: We may be seeing the birth of a new lay movement

Jun 17, 2016

### Year-old Laudato Si' has stirred up action for Earth

Jun 16, 2016

[View all ?](#)

---

**Source URL (modified on 08/03/2017 - 8:06am):** <https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/faith-and-justice/pope-francis-technology-greed-disaster>

#### Links

[1] <https://www.ncronline.org/join-conversation>