

George Will Calls Pope Francis a “False Prophet”

Pope Francis has received a lot of heat from conservatives for his position on the environment. The latest salvo is from George Will, who brutally called Francis a “false prophet” in the title of [his syndicated column last Sunday](#).

Essentially, Will accuses Francis of being heavy on idealism when it comes to his environmental ethic and light on facts. Will believes that capitalism and modern technology have made the world a better place, and not the “immense pile of filth” that Francis says it is becoming in his document *Laudato Si*. According to Will, Francis’ ideas “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.”

He goes on:

“[Francis] 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.

Matt Ridley, author of 'The Rational Optimist,' notes that coal supplanting wood fuel reversed deforestation, and 'fertilizer manufactured with gas halved the amount of land needed to produce a given amount of food.'"

The gripes of Will and other conservatives have some legitimacy to them, as Francis is probably on more shaky ground when he has spoken about the environment at the level of science or policy. He would do well to stay at the more general, exhortatory level proper to spiritual leaders.

That said, I believe conservatives need to come up with some form of positive vision in regard to the environment. Many view today's conservatives as having primarily a negative identity when it comes to the issues of the environment, education, and health care – saying what shouldn't be rather than presenting ideas of what should be. Negative may get you some votes and seats in one election cycle (see 2014), but it's not a strong long-term strategy.

In the end, the positive motivates people more than the negative. It's not enough for conservatives to merely oppose global policies on behalf of the environment; they need to complement this opposition with a coherent and persuasive articulation of their alternative. If they don't, they may very well find themselves increasingly irrelevant in future elections.

[Image credit](#)