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Pope Francis says 'trust politicians, not free people.' Really?

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For the second time in six months Pope Francis has waded into the murky waters of global economics. And for the second time he has shown himself a naïve believer in the power of government.

In his initial foray, the papal exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (The Joy of the Gospel), Pope Francis wrote that politics is “one of the highest forms of charity, inasmuch as it seeks the common good.” In that same document, he warned against a “crude and naïve trust in the goodness of those wielding economic power.”

The pope's message is clear: Trust politicians, not free people.

What would Francis have politicians do? In addressing the U.N. System Chief Executives Board this month, the pontiff called for what he termed “the legitimate redistribution of economic benefits by the State.”

Rather than using his moral authority to convince people to practice charity, Pope Francis instead tries to convince politicians to take what people will not give. With this approach, the pontiff faces two insurmountable obstacles.

First, charity requires free will. Forcing the rich to give to the poor is not charity.

Second, as is so often the case when those in power call for the redistribution of wealth, Francis does nothing to define the most important term he uses: legitimate.

Just how much can governments legitimately redistribute in order to do global “good works”? To answer, we need an honest assessment of how much people need. Pope Francis gives no hint. But the United States government's definition of poverty gives us a place to start. According to the government, the 2014 poverty line in the United States is just under \$24,000 for a family of four. A recent Gallup poll reported that worldwide median household income is just under \$10,000. From here, it is just simple mathematics.

To bring everyone in the world up to the U.S. poverty line (adjusting for differences in costs of living), we would have to raise about \$20 trillion. Every year. To put that in perspective, the entire economic output of the United States would not be enough to reach this goal. In order to raise \$20 trillion, governments would have to tax every person in the world with an income over the poverty line an additional 30 percent beyond the taxes they are already paying.

And this only satisfies our needs for one year. Once people realized what a permanent global 30 percent tax hike entailed, they would adapt and global output would plummet — thereby making everyone a lot poorer.

Meanwhile, Francis ignores the only viable solution to poverty humans have devised. Free markets have brought more people out of poverty than all of the world's social programs combined. Over the past two generations, while the number of people on Earth doubled, the number of people living in extreme poverty declined by 80 percent, largely a result of increased economic freedom globally.

Tellingly, Francis' home country of Argentina ranks in the bottom 10 percent of countries for economic freedom as measured by the Fraser Institute. Perhaps the pope is hostile to free markets because he has never experienced one.

With more freedom comes a greater ability to be greedy and to harm others. But so too comes a greater ability to

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be charitable and to help others. The right solution is people, governments and Pope Francis working together. Governments should prevent people from harming each other but otherwise leave them alone. People should be free to act. And popes should advise people how to exercise their freedoms well rather than advising politicians to curtail those freedoms.

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