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Faith, freedom & Francis

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In nine short months, Pope Francis has become the darling of the Catholic and non-Catholic worlds alike and with good reason. His penchant for offering counsel and support to troubled souls, his remarkable tolerance and kindness and his emphasis on the church's humanity at the expense of its grandeur have served to reinvigorate a church that has been searching for its voice since John Paul's death in 2005.

So what makes Francis so special? The answer is clear: On social issues, he is unwilling to view the church in dictatorial terms. Not only does he preach love and compassion, he practices it. On economic issues, though, Francis takes a decidedly different tack; he comes across as a statist who believes that government is the mechanism that can and should address economic concerns. Just as his social approach promises to lift many out of despair, his economic approach threatens to leave millions in inescapable poverty.

In *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." There are two glaring problems here: Successful politicians don't seek the common good; they seek to get elected. And even when the elections are over, politicians seek only the ruling party's opinion of the common good.

Francis warns against a "crude and naïve trust in the goodness of those wielding economic power," while advocating trust in the goodness of those wielding political power.

In this, his own naïveté is nothing short of breathtaking.

Interestingly, elements on both the left and the right disagree with his faith in politicians. On the left, Occupy Wall Street tells us that politicians are co-opted by people looking to perpetuate their own interests. On the right, the tea party serves as a constant reminder that these same politicians lose touch with their constituents as a matter of course. Neither group is without a point.

But simply because one should not place one's faith in politicians, that does not mean one should be faithless. As ill advised as it has been to look to politicians to solve economic problems, there is a clear and obvious way to address them — and the answer comports perfectly with the church's understanding of free will.

Across time and across countries, the data are quite clear: People who live in societies with more economic freedom have high incomes, lower unemployment, less poverty, less income inequality and cleaner environments. Free markets have done more to lift the poor out of poverty than all of the world's social programs combined.

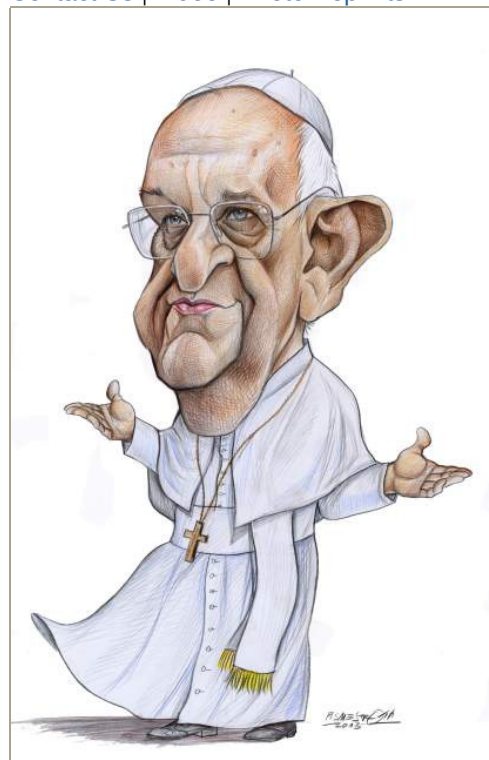
Instead of praying for more politicians, the pope should be praying for far fewer, because when people are left alone to participate peacefully and voluntarily in markets, everyone wins. When politicians decide to solve our economic problems by force and fiat, most are worse for their efforts.

In the end, politics is not nearly as much about giving as it is about taking. Government cannot be a tool for charity because charity requires free will. Absent free will, charity becomes theft and gift becomes entitlement. Francis is correct that economic freedom is not sufficient for building a just society. But he is wrong in believing that it is not necessary. The government's proper role is to secure our freedom and to do no more. The church's proper role is to advise us how to exercise that freedom well.

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