

# Hooray for Pope Francis

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Among the many reasons I've stopped writing commentaries on a regular basis is the harsh fact that so much of the news from the collective realm seems unworthy of comment.

In America, the worst of the news comes right from the top, from the people who are supposed to be leaders of our society. The problem is that the institutions those leaders represent are now scrambling for survival. Gone is the American gravy train that followed the end of World War II, where we skimmed the cream off the entire world's milk.

That roughly half-century of American dominance — from 1945 until the early years of the 21st century — was a period of almost unimaginable bounty for this country. During that epoch, America may not have actually controlled all the world's wealth and resources, but we enjoyed an exalted position of advantage, namely, the ability to call the shots on the allocation of global wealth and resource. While we were generous on occasion in sharing our cornucopia with other nations — the Marshall Plan to help rebuild Europe after the war is an obvious example — we invariably exacted tribute in exchange. America's largesse was always finally self-serving, so that we ended up with the lion's share of the goodies.

As our status as a global superpower yielded ever-increasing wealth and power, American institutions grew quickly to become the envy of the world in almost every arena — industry, commerce, science, education, medicine, government, and the military. Envy was accompanied by resentment, however. In much the same way that an indentured serf may bow down in the presence of the feudal lord while privately excoriating the extreme privilege of royalty, so the rest of the world gave us our due, but grudgingly. Meanwhile, we justified our position as top dog through the meme of American Exceptionalism. We enshrined into myth the belief in our country as God's Gift to humanity, the "Shining City on the Hill." With this belief underpinning the expanding American empire, we assumed that our destiny was to rule the world. Not only did this grant us the supposed right to be the richest nation on earth, but it meant that we could do whatever the hell we wanted with impunity. We made the rules, and those rules were designed for making money.

60-or-so years is just a momentary blip on the radar screen in the larger scheme of earth's history or even human civilization, but it was long enough for Americans to become habituated to having things our own way. Many Americans still believe that today. But something happened over the second half of that 60 years that is now accelerating wildly. While our major institutions grew fat on the mother's milk of seemingly endless wealth and resource, they also aged prematurely, so that now, as the spigot of economic gain provided by the one-time bounty of cheap fossil fuels begins to run dry, our institutions are unprepared to deal with the inevitable and necessary constraints.

In earlier commentaries, I've written about the life cycle of institutions. Whether an individual corporation or a group of affiliated organizations, institutions are created by charters that define their purpose, namely, to serve various segments of the public welfare through development and marketing of products and services. Early on in their life-spans, most institutions are consecrated to that effort. They may do so well or badly, but they give it their best shot. If they don't succeed, as often happens, their charters may be revoked, or they'll be replaced by new institutions. If they succeed, however, another future awaits, one that may and too often does eventually backfire.

Consider just two organizations as examples: *The Red Cross* and *The Sierra Club*. Both groups were created out of a clear need — in the case of *The Red Cross*, to aid communities and individuals toward recovery after various disasters or crises, and with *The Sierra Club*, to promote greater awareness and acceptance of the importance of maintaining the well-being of our natural environments through protection of wild life and wild places. As with so many institutions, both of these organizations came into being with lofty and worthwhile goals.

What happens to organizations that succeed, such as *The Red Cross* and *The Sierra Club*, is that they grow in power and influence. For awhile, this is a good thing, in that they are better able to carry out their mission statements. More money flows in, and significant amounts of that influx are directed to the salaries of people who work in the organizations. On the face of it, that's positive, since people who serve the public welfare deserve to be compensated for their efforts. But there's a fly in the ointment of human nature. Over time, too much success (i.e., too much money) will inevitably cause the organization's focus to shift away from its avowed mission and toward the maintenance and furthering of its own self-interest. Why? Because the people who run the organization become habituated to their lovely meal-ticket. They devolve into conservatism and stodginess out of concern for their own security.

This occurs subtly at first, but becomes increasingly overt over time. Eventually, the organization may succumb to a kind of criminal narcissism, where the

mission takes a back seat to the continued prospering of the organization itself. In other words, the day-to-day work deteriorates away from true service into bureaucratic protection of the organization's power. That means insuring that the flow of money continues into the coffers of those who run the organization. Lip service is still paid to the original mission, but the results are less and less effective.

This has occurred with both *The Red Cross* and *The Sierra Club*. *The Red Cross* has suffered scandal after scandal in recent years after botched operations during numerous disasters, and few committed environmentalists regard *The Sierra Club* as anything more than a bunch of fat cats who cozy up to K Street lobbyists and make deals to pass watered-down environmental legislation. This is not to suggest that these two organizations lack good intentions or sincere, committed workers, but dedication in the lower ranks cannot overcome corruption at the top.

If we trace back the record of social institutions in America to the 1970s, we see the beginnings of this process, which deepened through the 1980s and 1990s and is now pandemic in this young 21st century. The bulk of "mature" institutions in America — meaning those that are the largest and most powerful — are less concerned with the public good than with their own survival. They are devoted to maintaining the status quo of their power, which takes the form of overriding concern with short-term profits and continuation of business-as-usual, since that is how their nests are feathered. So-called "reforms" are usually just schemes to keep the money flowing. If lies and criminality are required to achieve that, then so be it.

For instance, the costs of higher education in traditional universities — both private and public — have risen so steeply over the past four decades that regular working stiffs can no longer afford to send their sons and daughters to a typical four-year college. A Bachelor's Degree from such universities now costs upwards of \$100,000 to obtain. As a result, two "solutions" have been created to alleviate the problem. Both are bogus, however. The first is a massive national program of student loans, which effectively saddle students with a lifetime of debt. Student loan debt is now larger than the entire sum of consumer debt from credit cards. Second is the advent of "virtual, on-line universities," most of which are for-profit businesses. Sadly, these educational mills are turning out to be largely cruel jokes, since only a small percentage of students who enroll ever graduate (around 10%), and those who do get a diploma often can't get jobs afterwards. In other words, student loans and online colleges are basically scams to keep the money flowing into the industry of education.

Such corruption is increasingly visible across the entire spectrum of institutions in America. The energy industry and national politics are particularly ripe examples

of damaged institutions. In both arenas, denial of climate change has taken root and flourished, since acknowledging that we are in deep trouble would threaten business-as-usual, disrupt the flow of profits, and necessitate a culture-wide reconsideration of our profligate modern lifestyles. Heaven forbid.

Enter Pope Francis.

I don't know where this guy came from or how he became Pope, but thank heaven he showed up.

For as far back as we care to look — literally centuries — The Catholic Church has a woeful history of damn near tragic narcissism. The lies and corruption of the institution of Catholicism are legendary, almost mythic. And yet, here is Pope Francis, telling the truth. How refreshing!

Among the duties of the Papal office are sporadic encyclicals, which are letters written by the Pope and circulated among the Bishops of the Church to guide them in their teachings to the faithful. Since becoming Pope in March, 2013, Francis had thus far published two encyclicals — entitled respectively "The Light of Faith" (June, 2013) and "Praise be to You" (May, 2015). Both contained certain revolutionary and shocking reforms aimed at altering former, long-held conservative stances of the Church.

On Thursday, June 18th, less than a month after his second letter, Pope Francis released his third encyclical. This one blows the lid off everything that has come before. Entitled, "Praise Be," the letter contains (to quote the text of the Associate Press reporting) a "sweeping environmental manifesto" calling for a bold cultural revolution to reform what Francis describes as a "structurally perverse" economic system where the rich exploit the poor. The Pope minces no words in asserting that predatory capitalism bears responsibility for many of our woes, laying the blame for climate change squarely on wrong-headed human activity, and he chides those of us who are privileged to examine and correct our rampant over-consumption.

Needless to say, in the single day since its release the encyclical has provoked a virtual storm of protest from all the usual suspects, who condemn it with standard litanies from the Church of Free Market Fantasies.

As those who read my commentaries are probably aware, my faith in collective humanity in general, and more specifically in the powers-that-be who make policy in our societies, is effectively non-existent. I still believe in goodness on an individual basis; I admire and respect many human beings for their courage and heart, even some of those with whom I share precious little in how we see the world. Reasonable people can disagree about almost anything.

Over my lifetime, I've become convinced that, in the mass, humans don't change until we are forced to do so. I now regard that as a biological fact; it's simply how we're built. Please understand, however — I don't mean to imply that resistance to change is invariably a failing. In some circumstances, holding fast may be the perfect strategy. But whether that trait is helpful or harmful in a given situation, my judgment remains that the overwhelming majority of humans are hard-wired to hang onto whatever we have until it's taken from us or we're otherwise forced to let it go. As a result, I'm not surprised at the resistance to the Pope's encyclical. No, civilization is run mostly by people whose attitude is that they'll be damned if they'll give up what they have at any cost, which is an orientation that may eventually prove to be truer than they imagine.

I don't have a clue what will be produced by the ripple effects of the Pope's encyclical. Maybe it will be little more than pissing into the wind. Maybe not. Time will tell.

Whatever ensues, I find this event a significant sign of the times, an important marker in the sand, and in perfect correspondence to the Uranus-Pluto symbolism of this decade, especially now, when the three-year transit has ended and the pressure for real-life change starts building to a head. For the leader of an institution as massive yet historically backward as the Catholic Church to publicly make what are in collective terms radical and revolutionary statements about the need to change how we live on this planet is not merely surprising, but downright amazing.

Lying on the part of institutions and their spokespeople has become utterly commonplace and banal. The mainstream media is now just an echo chamber for toxic fantasies. I can't say with any certainty that the truth will save us or set us free, but I sure as hell don't like lying, whether the lies are aimed at convincing ourselves or others that we can "get away with murder" and escape the laws of reality.

Since the political circus is already gearing up for the next presidential election in America, my loins are already girded against the onslaught of lies to come. Pope Francis' letter comes as a tonic to my soul, a brief respite from the funhouse of distorted mirrors in which most of us live.

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*Here is a link to the complete text of the encyclical translated into English:*

<http://newsinfo.inquirer.net/699575/full-text-pope-francis-encyclical-letter-laudato-si>

*If you'd like to read or watch reactions — both pro and con — to the Pope's encyclical, just google it.*