

Fr. Dennis Hamm, SJ, participates in an interfaith prayer service at Saint John's Parish at Creighton University. (Courtesy of Fr. Don Doll, SJ)

Responding to a Pope of Surprises

What Is Francis Really Saying About Climate Change and Economic Inequality?

By Fr. Dennis Hamm, SJ

Our pope is full of surprises — from eschewing the papal suite to washing a Muslim woman's feet on Holy Thursday. Last year, he offered "Laudato Si," an encyclical on climate change and the world economy. Some people find all of this "radical."

Let's slow down and examine what he is actually doing.

Popes have commented on the economy since 1891, when Pope Leo XIII applied Catholic moral principles to social issues in "Rerum novarum." Popes Saint John Paul II and Benedict XVI both spoke about the growing ecological crisis and are cited in "Laudato Si." Ultimately, Francis' encyclical continues a long-held tradition.

Our media treat climate change as a controversy with symmetrical "sides," but Pope Francis accepts global warming as a fact, largely caused by human burning of fossil fuels and exploitative land management. He recalls our Jewish/Christian vision regarding the divine gift of creation and our human charge to care for it.

He also spells out "the human roots of our ecological crisis," specifically identifying "the technocratic paradigm." While he celebrates the benefits of technological progress, Francis condemns greed and self-centeredness that might be caricatured this way: "I am the center of what is valuable in the universe; everything and everybody else is 'raw material' to be manipulated for my purposes."

His encyclical's fourth chapter describes integral ecology, which essentially means a study and vision that includes the human species along with other forms of life. The pope laments that a small but powerful minority wields economic power in a way that works against the vast majority of humanity in a disproportionate, unsustainable use of Earth's resources. He affirms the global market as essential but insists that it should not take on a cancerous life of its own. He says nothing about capitalism but maintains that the global market should be focused first on meeting human needs and the integral

development of all.

These observations and analyses lead Francis to urge practical efforts and discuss the roles of education and spirituality. Technical solutions, however, will be ineffective unless we learn how everything is connected and allow ourselves to be converted by our Creator's grace.

Our fascinating and challenging pope is not wandering outside his "wheelhouse." He is doing exactly what a pope is supposed to do: bringing traditional Catholic social teaching to bear on the issues of the day. Our call is to learn from his teaching and live out that vision as faithful citizens, serving the common good of the human family. ✠



Fr. Dennis Hamm, SJ, is a professor emeritus of theology at Creighton University in Omaha.