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# Pope's climate message challenges Texas core values

By **Michael Brick** | June 17, 2015 | Updated: June 17, 2015 9:44pm



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Pontiff's message confronts views on environment, faith.

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AUSTIN - Texas runs on faith and oil. The people elect leaders beholden to commerce, conservatism and Christianity. Rarely do they find their views challenged.

"Humbly invoking the blessings of Almighty God," begins the state constitution. A country song reminds, "God Blessed Texas."

Now here comes one of the largest and most conservative religious organizations in the world, the Roman Catholic Church, which has staked out far right positions on such signature political issues as abortion and gay rights, speaking through its leader, a man widely believed to communicate directly with God, to deliver a distinctly uncomfortable message for a state built on the economic foundation of fossil fuels.

"Dear Texas," Pope Francis might as well have called his encyclical, which is really called "Laudato Sii," or "Be Praised."

Meant as a teaching letter to the faithful, the document cites scientific evidence of the human role in climate change, denouncing the selfish consumerism of wealthy societies reliant on the exploitation of oil and gas.

"Man," Francis wrote, according to a draft leaked to the press, "has slapped nature in the face."

At the national level, advocacy groups on all sides have been treading lightly. Asked for comment, representatives of both the American Petroleum Institute, an industry group, and the Natural Resources Defense Council, an environmental group, would say only that they were reviewing the document.

***Bending to the message***

In Texas, though, the stakes are clear. The oil and gas industry employs more than 350,000 people statewide, contributing about \$3.5 billion to the tax base. And the Catholic Church forms the largest religious body, with 4.6 million adherents, or 18 percent of the population, according to the



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**Pope's climate message challenges Texas core values**

Texas Almanac.

Bending to the message of the encyclical would involve renouncing jobs, lifestyles and worldviews.



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"Political candidates here in Texas are going to have to deal with this," said Jeremi Suri, a public policy professor at the University of Texas. "What are they going to say, that the pope is wrong? That he's a crazy liberal? They can't say that."

By framing his argument as part of a campaign for the welfare of the global poor, the pope has shifted the debate from the realm of the political to the moral. He is not without recent historical precedent.

In the civil rights era of the 1960s, Christian preachers sought to shame political leaders by scrutinizing a contradiction in the predominant belief system of the South: the right to local control of societal institutions versus the God-given mandate to treat all people equally. During the Cold War, Pope John Paul II took a position against totalitarian communism, putting the pressure of moral authority on bishops in his home country, Poland. Around the same time, U.S. President Ronald Reagan found himself at odds with Protestant leaders over the nuclear arms race. Weapons built for national defense, pastors argued, carried the power to destroy the planet created by God.

"People carry contradictory ideas in their minds," Suri said. "It's the role of figures like the pope to break down those contradictions."

In Texas, some scholars suggest, the message draws scrutiny to a similar contradiction between a God-given right to make a living from natural resources and a mandate to preserve God's creation for future generations.

Church leaders have historically served the petroleum industry as ministers and even boosters. In the 1950s, for example, the Southern Baptist evangelist Billy Graham helped produced a

largely celebratory film called "Oiltown, USA." More recently, oil field ministries have flourished, some seeking to reach workers with an annotated Bible called "God's Word for the Oil Patch."

"The pope's statement entreats evangelical Protestantism to recast the terms of oil from a providential gift to an ecological threat," said Delia Byrnes, a graduate student focusing on the petrochemical industry in the American South at the University of Texas.

### *'This is a big deal'*

For petroleum industry leaders in Texas, the encyclical complicates a business landscape with plenty of other contradictions and uncertainties. Earlier this month, in anticipation of global climate policy negotiations in Paris, several European energy companies endorsed a tax on carbon emissions, partly to gain a say in a process increasingly viewed as inevitable. Rex Tillerson, chief executive of Exxon Mobil, said in a recent speech that "our investments and innovations will be vital in the decades ahead - especially as the world seeks to manage the risks of climate change."

Here in the state capital, where business interests dominate most every debate, some environmental conservation advocates hope to gain momentum from the encyclical.

"This is a big deal," said James Marston, founding director of the Texas office of the Environmental Defense Fund. "It will restart a debate that has been stuck in neutral."

But others expect the message to encounter great reluctance.

"It's not going to go well," said Carl Raschke a professor of religious studies at the University of Denver. "It's not just the energy business. It's the suspicion on the part of conservative evangelicals who have great influence in the state of Texas about the pope's motivation."

More likely, the encyclical will likely produce some "grumbling" within the fossil fuel industry, but little change, said Gabreil Eckstein, an energy law professor at Texas A&M

University.

"I don't see energy giants rolling over and stopping their oil and gas activities," he said. "But this may highlight that they need to look at issues of climate change more seriously."

On the national stage, some Catholic Republican presidential candidates have forcefully dismissed the pope's views. Former Pennsylvania Sen. Rick Santorum has said the church should stay out of scientific issues. Former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush has told his supporters, "I don't get economic policy from my bishops or my cardinals or my pope."

Texas Christians, even many Catholics, may identify with that response.

"It's such an ideological thing," said Jill Carroll, a Houston-based lecturer on religion in public life. "And there's just too many billions of dollars invested in things staying how they are."

### *Vatican's true target*

As the message begins to spread among congregations on Sundays, Catholic priests across the state may find themselves seeking a more subtle version of the message to win over oil industry workers and executives. While industry leaders remain committed to oil and gas, they have started to acknowledge that fossil fuels cannot last forever, promising investors eventual developments in renewable energy sources.

The pope is "indirectly addressing the issue of sustainability," said Henry Groppe, founder of the Houston-based industry forecasting firm Groppe, Long & Littell. "And I applaud that."

But the true target of the message from the Vatican - the greed of wealthy nations - may have to wait for another day.



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