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T-shirt said 'no to fracking,' but did Francis?

by Brian Roewe

Eco Catholic

An anti-fracking pope?

That question led the Francis effect into environmental circles last week, as a photo on Twitter showed the pontiff holding up a T-shirt that read, in Spanish, "No to fracking." Holding the shirt in the photo along with the pope are Fernando "Pino" Solanas and Juan Pablo Olsson, two Argentine environmental activists who, along with other Argentines, met with Francis Nov. 11 at the Vatican. Solanas is the director of the recent documentary "La Guerra del Fracking" ("The Fracking War").

On social media, the photo -- and another showing the pope holding a T-shirt saying "Water is worth more than gold" -- soon circulated among eco-watchers, leading some to interpret the gesture as a stance against the controversial drilling process. Headlines, such as this one from Newsday, announced Francis as the "world's newest anti-fracking activist."

Others weren't so convinced.

At Time.com, Elizabeth Dias sought to temper the anti-fracking excitement, suggesting that Francis didn't come out against fracking, but against poverty. She pointed out that the previous three popes have typically spoken about ecological justice in terms of addressing poverty. For instance, when St. Francis of Assisi became patron saint of ecology in 1979 under Pope John Paul II in addition to patron saint of the poor, it strengthened the connection between the two causes.

"Posing with environmental activists of any kind?fracking or other?is a way for Pope Francis to show his solidarity with the people ecological injustice largely hurts," Dias said. "That's the heartbeat of his mission, of his very name and identity."

Francis appeared to emphasize the connection between poverty and the environment, tweeting three days after the meeting with the Argentines:

Take care of God's creation. But above all, take care of people in need.

? Pope Francis (@Pontifex) November 14, 2013

Dias also pointed out that it has been the Argentine filmmaker and the activist who have pushed the anti-fracking Francis image, not the Vatican. The Vatican has so far been silent, with the audience not listed in Vatican news releases, nor providing a statement on the meeting or ensuing anti-fracking fervor.

Outside of the shirts photos, others grasped to reports that Francis would soon formally take on environmental issues. EJOLT, an environmental justice coalition who had a member present at the meeting, blogged Nov. 12 that during a conversation about water contamination, the pope "mentioned that he is preparing an encyclical about nature, humans and environmental pollution."

Early reports have described Francis in the early stages of working on an encyclical under the title "Blessed are the Poor." If that's the case, any discussion of ecology would likely come in the context of those with the least and affected the most.

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