

The Pope's Message for Climate Change Deniers

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"It was their Waterloo," claimed Kert Davies, executive director of the Climate Investigations Centre. "They wanted the encyclical not to happen. And it happened." Pope Francis' papal document on climate change was already in gestation from March 2013, when he assumed duties at the Vatican. For years, he had been interested in the ravages of climate and its link to human endeavour.

In April, the efforts by climate change denialists were stifled by the Pope's increasing reservation to provide them a platform ahead of the Paris summit to be held in December. The April 28 Vatican summit convened by Francis and sponsored by the Vatican Pontifical Academy of Sciences seemed to be conspicuously free of anti-climate change titter. Among the absentees, as reported by *The Washington Post*, was Philippe de Larminat, initially invited subject to available space. After securing a ticket from Paris to Rome, he was informed that there was none.



The resulting encyclical, *Laudito Si*, directs attention to various crises that the Vatican has entertained over some time, for, "Nothing in this world is indifferent to us." [1] Pope Francis finds precedent thought important. There was the encyclical of Pope John Paul XXIII, *Pacem in Terris*, which directed attention to the calamities that would issue from nuclear war. There are the remarks by Pope Paul IV on ecological degradation as "a tragic consequence" of the "ill-considered exploitation of nature" by humankind.

Even that fustian conservative reactionary, Saint John Paul II would lament the human approach that "sees no other meaning in their natural environment that what serves for immediate use and consumption." Nothing less than an "ecological conversion" was needed.

Ultimately, Pope Francis sees the saint that inspired him so much, Saint Francis of Assisi, as the figure who saw that "an integral ecology calls for openness to categories which transcend the language of mathematics and biology, and take us to the heart of what it is to be human."

To that end, he issues an ultimate disabusing observation to those who believe that a temporal station somehow justifies immediate predation and ruthless use of the environment. "We are not God. The earth was here before us and it has been given to us.

This allows us to respond to the charge that Judaeo-Christian thinking, on the basis of the Genesis account which grants man 'dominion' over the earth (cf. Gen.1:28), has encouraged the unbridled exploitation of nature by painting him as domineering and destructive by nature. This is not a correct interpretation of the Bible as understood by the Church."

The response from those indifferent, if not openly hostile to the idea of climate change as a human-induced induced phenomenon, has varied. Even such papers as *The Washington Times* (Jun 18) have argued that "the extent of the Pope's demands for change go beyond the bounds of even the most liberal American officeholders." The link with other progressive agendas - issues of sex changes and abortion - have further muddied the waters of faith and politics.

At points, observers have wondered whether the Pope's response has verged on a fundamental critique of civilization itself - for humankind was "not meant to be inundated by cement, asphalt, glass and metal."

The most well honed barb has been for the business civilizations, of which the United States has been foremost. Environmental summits, Pope Francis surmises, have been held hostage to the fortunes of technology and finance. "There are too many special interests, and economic interests [that] easily end up trumping the common good and manipulating information so that their own plans will not be affected."

The GOP response has been one of bewildered counters and eccentric contradiction. Confused presidential hopeful Rick Santorum, whose connection with the empirical world of science and verification is more tenuous than most, has suggested that climate change is a matter for the scientists. Theology should be a separate realm, operating in alien isolation and splendid insularity.

He admitted to being a fan of the Pope to Talk Radio 1210 WPHT, but, in what is a form of reverse scientific logic, suggested that, "The Church has gotten it wrong a few times on science, and I think we're probably better off leaving science to the scientists and focus on what we're really good on, which is theology and morality" (CBS Philadelphia, Jun 1). In short, keep theology in politics, and science far removed.

What emerged was a seemingly choreographed reaction: the GOP was suddenly deferring responsibility to scientific opinion, the very opinion which it has politicised and eviscerated for years. "I don't want to be disrespectful," cautioned the Texan Rep. Joe Barton, senior Republican on the Energy and Commerce Committee, "but I don't consider him an expert on environmental issues" (*US News and World*, Jun 19).[2]

In predictable fashion, Jeb Bush wished the debate would leave faith and science separate, a conceptual division neat and virtually impossible from the side of politics that sees no difference - till it affects them. "I don't think we should politicise our faith." From creationist science to monkey trials dismissing evolution, the whole point here is that science and faith often constitute a fundamentally politicised amalgam.

Pope Francis is certainly assembling his opponents. Greg Gutfeld of Fox News Channel's *The Five*, could not resist calling Pope Francis the "most dangerous man in the world." [3] Here, the Vatican was proving an activist institution in the most dangerous of ways - at least from the conservative standpoint.

Galileo's corpse must be, not so much turning, as constricting with ironic laughter at this turn. None of this can overcome the fact that the conservative power base went into apoplectic meltdown. A traditionally conservative institution had gone in to battle for a cause that had, rather erroneously, been deemed an exclusively progressive one.

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Notes:

[1] http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html

[2] <http://www.usnews.com/news/politics/articles/2015/06/19/pope-francis-climate-message-yields-little-gop-response>

[3] http://www.salon.com/2015/06/19/how_pope_francis_just_destroyed_the_gops_religious_con_artists/

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