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Students scrutinize fracking lease at Franciscan University

Sharon Abercrombie | Aug. 14, 2013 Eco Catholic

A small but vocal group of environmentally conscious students at Franciscan University of Steubenville in Ohio have taken their school to task for leasing 223 acres of its property to a Texas oil and natural gas company for mineral exploration and possible hydraulic fracturing.

Students for a Fair Society went public with its objections on July 14 -- the vigil of the feast of St. Bonaventure, a Franciscan -- after making numerous unsuccessful attempts to dialogue with school officials during the past two years, said incoming senior, Joseph Antoniello, 26, the group's current president.

Hydraulic fracturing, or fracking, is the process of drilling by injecting chemicals and water into the ground under pressure in order to split apart shale and release more natural gas and oil. Debates continue regarding possible health risks [1] associated with fracking.

The statement criticizes Franciscan University's leasing of land on June 14, 2011 to Dale Property Services, Penn, LP, of Texas, saying that it "contradicts the social doctrine of the Church, as well as the environmental ethics demanded by our being caretakers of creation."

"In the document *Global Climate Change: A Plea for Dialogue, Prudence and the Common Good*, our Bishops seek to move steadily beyond the fossil fuel industry which, in spite of alleged prosperity, does not mitigate the damage done to the atmospheric environment and the advancement of the climate change epidemic," the students' letter read.

The statement goes on to speak to the harmful impact of hydraulic fracturing on the air, water, land and human life. The industry, it says, mostly fails to honor the principles of solidarity, subsidiarity, the common good, the right to life and dignity of the human person.

"In a world that has grown hungry for what it faintly recalls as peace, we cannot but question this industry and the action of our beloved academic institution," it read, before quoting Pope Benedict XVI's 2010 World Day of Peace Message: "If you want to cultivate peace, protect creation."

Both the Franciscan University administration and the diocese of Steubenville declined to respond to questions regarding the school's oil and gas lease, with each instead emailing statements in response to Students for a Fair Society's press release.

The university said that the lease it signed in 2011 granting permission for passive offsite drilling underneath university property has remained inactive to date. It saw the agreement "as a means to provide resources to advance our education mission."

"In the two years since the issue of hydraulic fracturing has received much more attention with multiple opinions emerging as to its merits and detriments both among theologians and in the industry itself," the statement said. "While issues such as these may be subject to debate, Franciscan University remains committed

to following the teachings of Jesus Christ and the Catholic Church as an academically excellent and passionately Catholic institution."

Steubenville Bishop Jeffrey M. Monforton was more succinct, saying in an email through his communications office, "I respect the university's decision."

While the lease, which runs until 2016, has remained inactive, Antoniello warned that should it activate it can be extended until drilling operations complete, and could eventually move to the ground underneath student dormitories and other campus buildings.

Outside of fracking, the group has said the university has "sustained and fed a culture that appeared apathetic towards and/or biased against" specific groups, calling it on its website [2] "blatantly contrary to Catholic thought and action." Communities they feel are marginalized on campus range from the poor, immigrants and the bullied, to those speaking out on issues such as civil rights, environmental protection, unjust war and capital punishment.

In their statement, the Students for a Fair Society also raised issue with the university's rejection of their request to join other Catholic institutions in taking the St. Francis Pledge, a project sponsored by the U.S. bishops' conference-backed Catholic Coalition on Climate Change. The pledge asks individuals, families, parishes and organizations to protect creation by making lifestyle changes and to support people in poverty most affected by climate change.

Franciscan University is viewed as one of the most conservative Catholic schools in the nation, with a current enrollment of more than 2,400 undergraduate and graduate students. That a group of environmental activists have emerged on a campus more known for pro-life issues is an immediate attention-getter.

Formed in 2011, Students for a Fair Society likewise addresses the pro-life issue, seeing its boundaries of interpretation as limitless. Pro-life, it explains in its constitution [3], must extend beyond the unborn to embrace all creation, with a responsibility to the earth as a whole, to each other and to future generations.

"We are not combating the conservatism at Franciscan by being progressive, but rather by simply being Catholic," Antoniello said.

Currently, it has about 20 active members, and Antoniello said that a smattering of faculty, alumni and employees also object to the fracking lease, but fear going public. Some, however, have privately told him they are delighted the word has gotten out.

"There are so many environmental concerns surround[ing] the oil and gas industry," said one employee speaking on the condition of anonymity for fear of being fired.

"I would have expected a Franciscan organization to be more cautious about this kind of thing. It looks as though the school's mission is being guided more by the principles of the American Right than by a real Catholic or Franciscan vision," the employee said.

But support hasn't been limited to within the school, as anti-fracking organizations have reached out to Students for a Fair Society.

"Outside response has been outstanding," Antoniello said.

That has included several universities and colleges, one of which was Wheeling Jesuit University in Wheeling, W. Va., where a theology professor has invited the group to speak to her class in the fall on the topic of linking

Catholic social teachings to issues of local and regional significance.

At this point, Antoniello welcomes all the blessings, support and speaking invitations he can get. In a phone interview, he described the apathy around environment and climate change on Franciscan's campus.

"Earth Day and Arbor Day just aren't talked about," he said.

Last October on the Feast of St. Francis of Assisi, the university's patron saint, Students for a Fair Society scheduled a viewing of the South Pacific climate refugee documentary "Sun Come Up," but only a handful of people showed up. Given the prevailing mindset, Antoniello wonders if his plan to start a community garden to help feed Steubenville's poor communities will fly.

Cristina Ramos, a senior and vice president of the Students for a Fair Society, shares Antoniello's discouragement. In an e-mail, the political science and theology major told *Eco Catholic* how saddened and shocked she was by Franciscan's narrow vision around anything environmental.

The school is "top notch" academically, Ramos said, and she appreciates the opportunity to receive the Eucharist more than once a week. But the administration's decision to allow fracking underneath the campus remains a real puzzler for her.

"My first thoughts were 'is this even allowed?' My second thought was, 'Would St. Francis even be proud of this?' I don't think so," she told Eco Catholic.

While she recognized the benefits of an energy self-sufficient country, she said not enough is known about fracking and its effects on the environment. That Franciscan went forward with their decision without more information is contrary to the church's teaching on creation care, she said.

"We must never make decisions that benefit ourselves but harm those around us. This is the only world we have. It is crucial to take good care of it for the sake of those expected to live after us," she said.

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[1] http://green.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/01/21/taking-a-harder-look-at-fracking-and-health/
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