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EarthBeat



Pope Francis presents a gift to U.S. President Donald Trump, accompanied by his wife, Melania, during a private audience at the Vatican May 24, 2017. (CNS/Paul Haring)



by Brian Roewe

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At the conclusion of their much-anticipated Vatican meeting last year, Pope Francis presented President Donald Trump with a variety of gifts, among them his encyclical "*Laudato Si*', on Care for Our Common Home."

That the pope gave the president a copy of his 2015 landmark text on ecology — the first papal document devoted entirely to the subject — drew widespread reaction, seen as perhaps a not-so-subtle message from Francis as Trump debated within his administration whether he would commit to keep the United States in the Paris Agreement on climate change. (He didn't.)

The choice of the environmental tome as a gift to Trump "amused and delighted" Jane Mellett, a parish pastoral worker in the Dublin Archdiocese who was watching footage of the encounter.

"I thought to myself, 'If the Pope gives you a document to read, I think the least you can do is read it,' " Mellett, 38, told NCR in an email.

So the Irish woman decided to lend the American president a hand.

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In true pastoral fashion, Mellett, who works at two West Dublin parishes and is a member of the Laudato Si' Ireland Committee, decided to meet Trump where he was, or at least on his preferred messaging medium: Twitter.

"If he won't read *Laudato Si*', then I'll tweet it to him one paragraph at a time," she told herself.

On May 31, 2017 — a week after the pope-president meeting, and as it turned out, a day before he announced his intention to pull the U.S. out of the Paris Agreement — Mellett tweeted Trump for the first time, sharing a four-minute summary video of *Laudato Si*'. "It's short and snappy and gives a good sense of the document," she

told NCR.

Later that day, she introduced the virtual pseudo-retreat on the encyclical and its 246 paragraphs that she'd lead for the world leader over the course of the next 11 months.

Each night, Mellett's phone beeped at 10 p.m. (5 p.m., Eastern time) with an alert: "Tweet Donald."

On most days, she shared quoted passages from the designated *Laudato Si*' paragraph of the day.

Other times she summarized the idea of the paragraph to fit into Twitter's 140-character limit.

(Nine months into the digital contemplation, at Paragraph 146, Twitter graciously gave Mellett more space with which to work, when it doubled the limit to 280 characters.)

For the most part, the *Laudato Si*' tweeting of the president garnered little engagement, and fell well short of reaching "viral" status. Occasionally, a tweet

would elicit a handful of "likes" and a retweet here and there. Trump did not respond to any of the nearly 300 tweets Mellett sent his way.

But that didn't mean other people weren't following along.

By the time Mellett reached the end of the encyclical on May 8 — coincidentally, in the midst of the latest U.N. climate change conference in Bonn, Germany — fellow member of Laudato Si' Ireland Kate Liffey commented, "This has been a remarkable journey. … What a unique way to bring the light of Laudato Si to life!"

For Mellett, the exercise indeed became a unique way for her to engage the environmental encyclical.

"It was almost a form of *lectio* as by doing that I certainly learned more about *Laudato Si*' with each tweet that I sent," she said.

"The document is so rich," she continued, "each sentence carries a weight of information and it is so deeply spiritual that you can literally meditate on some passages."

For her, the sections in Chapter 1 on biodiversity and Chapter 4's examination of integral ecology stood out and "really helped to rekindle that sense of awe and wonder" in her for nature that the pope identified as a starting place for any ecological conversion.

As for where she would direct Trump's attention, Mellett turned to Chapter 5, where Francis invites all into a dialogue about possible approaches and actions "which can help us escape the spiral of self-destruction which currently engulfs us."

Early in the chapter (Paragraph 164) Francis writes, "An interdependent world not only makes us more conscious of the negative effects of certain lifestyles and models of production and consumption which affect us all; more importantly, it motivates us to ensure that solutions are proposed from a global perspective, and not simply to defend the interests of a few countries. Interdependence obliges us to think of *one world with a common plan*."

"A global consensus is essential," he continued, "for confronting the deeper problems, which cannot be resolved by unilateral actions on the part of individual

countries," listing among possible outcomes of such consensus an increased development of renewable energy and more energy efficient measures, as well as sustainable agriculture, better marine and forest management and universal access to drinking water.

"Has Mr. Trump considered the possibilities of a green economy, which can support many 'green jobs'?" Mellett, echoing the pope, asked. "Focusing on renewable [energy] instead of fossil fuels, communities working together, reconnecting with nature and with one another — working towards a greener world?"

"Simply backing out, hiding behind walls and throwing stones helps no one," she said.

In terms of the role of the U.S. in addressing global climate change, Mellett again turned to Francis in *Laudato Si*' on the added responsibility he said was required "above all on the part of those countries which are more powerful and pollute the most." The U.S. is the largest historical global carbon polluter; presently, it ranks second in total greenhouse gas emissions behind China, but still first in per capita carbon emissions.

As for her own country, Mellett called Ireland's recent vote to divest from fossil fuels "a huge success story" in which Irish Catholics in particular can take pride. Trócaire, the Irish church's overseas development agency, was among a coalition of organizations lobbying the government to take meaningful action to address climate change.

Mellet noted Ireland has had a dismal record itself on addressing climate change — recently ranked second-worst in the European Union on climate actions — and "this bill goes a long way to improving that record."

Another push toward Irish action on climate change could come next month during the World Meeting of Families, to be held Aug. 21-26 in Dublin, with Francis joining for the final two days.

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A project called "Our Common Home" invites participants into a conversation about what's happening to the world and what role they can play in caring for creation. In

addition to hosting a *Laudato Si*' garden prayer space, Our Common Home will provide educational workshops and is taking steps to "greening" the family gathering on the Emerald Isle through reducing its environmental impact and limiting its waste accumulation. Additionally, the Irish bishops plan to mark this year the Season of Creation (Sept. 1-Oct. 4).

Mellett, who has worked on the project all summer, believes that the message of caring for our common home can result in the church developing a leading voice — whether in person or on Twitter — when it comes to combatting climate change.

"This has the potential to leave a lasting legacy in the Irish church," she said.

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