

The Irish Catholic

[News](#)
[Opinion](#)
[Feature](#)
[Family and Lifestyle](#)
[Reviews](#)
[Gallery](#)
[Video](#)

Feature

Taking Pope Francis to the classroom



by Cathal Barry
November 19, 2015

Cathal Barry speaks to a student teacher about using papal encyclicals in lesson plans



Student teachers introduce the *Laudato Si* tree.

[Share](#) 246
 [Tweet](#) 0
 [googleplus](#) 0
 [ShareThis](#) 262

A number of students from one of Ireland's leading teacher training colleges have taken a unique approach to teaching children about the environment.

Papal documents aren't usually the top choice resource for teachers, especially at primary school level, but Pope Francis' recent encyclical on the environment has proven to be accessible for all ages.

That's what a group of student teachers from Limerick's Mary Immaculate College found when they took on the challenge of explaining *Laudato Si'* to a class of 12-year-olds at Corbally's Scoil Íde.

Third year student teacher David Walsh told *The Irish Catholic* he "thoroughly enjoyed" the experience and would "absolutely" consider using other Church documents in classes in the future as a result.

"I thoroughly enjoyed the experience. I loved working with the class and engaging with the students' questions and thoughts on the issue.

"I will absolutely be using Church documents when teaching in the future," he said, adding that encyclicals such as *Laudato Si'* are ideal resources for teachers as they deal with "contemporary" issues.

"It's about the now and the future rather than the past. It's about going



3,304
Followers



0
Fans

Most Read Articles



Taking Pope Francis to the classroom

[Read More](#)



New vision needed for Catholic education

[Read More](#)



End of an era

[Read More](#)

Find us on Facebook



[Like Page](#)

[Share](#)

Be the first of your friends to like this



The Irish Catholic Newspaper

November 19 at 10:28am

Our Editor Michael Kelly nails media hypocrisy and double standards on the Church.

forward," he said.

David also said he was "surprised" at the level of engagement from students with the Pope's encyclical and the subject of the environment.

"I was surprised that even though they were so young they had great insights and were able to express them perfectly," he said, adding that Pope Francis is a person young people "respect".

Passionate

"This Pope is concerned about the youth and the environment. I think he's a friendly and approachable Pope, set on doing the right thing.

"Pope Francis is a person the children respect and take heed of. They could clearly see that care of the environment is an issue he is passionate about and so understood the need for action," he said.

Head of Theology at Mary Immaculate Prof. Eamonn Conway said "it's important for students to engage with papal documents and see that they impact on real life".

He said *Laudato Si'* in particular "touches on so many aspects" of the primary school curriculum, which "allows for the Christian perspective on a whole range of issues to be brought to life in the classroom".

In preparation for the teaching initiative, which took place over a two week period and included four hours of direct teaching, the student teachers read *Laudato Si'* in depth and derived four main themes to focus on.

The themes selected, which would form the basis of four distinct lessons, were:

- Pollution.
- World hunger.
- Climate change.
- Endangered animals.

David explained that the group decided to open up the first lesson by showing the class a number of key quotes from *Laudato Si'* without revealing the Pope as the author.

The student teachers selected quotes such as: "The Earth, our home, is beginning to look more and more like an immense pile of filth."

And: "Humanity has disappointed God's expectations."

David said the students were "shocked" to eventually discover that they were direct quotes from the Pontiff.

"These quotes really shocked and surprised the children as they are not things you would generally hear in today's world. The children were shocked furthermore to discover that the Pope said these things himself. It's not stuff you would expect a Pope to say," David said.

Addressing the second topic, world hunger, the student teachers got the class to play the 'biscuit game', which involves dividing the class into different groups of different sizes representative of the continents.

They then gave each 'continent' a different number of biscuits which were representative of how much food that continent would have.

David explained that this "reflected the Pope's message in the encyclical about the inequality of resources in our world".

"That was something they really enjoyed. It was their favourite. They had really great questions afterwards. They could really reflect critically on the whole

situation," he said.

On the third issue, climate change, the student teachers focused on "how we are not caring properly for our common home".

They also developed a 'word cloud' comprising of the most popular words within *Laudato Si'*: world, human and God.

"We took from that the message that God created the world for humans and so it is up to humans to take care of the world for God," David said.

Opportunity

Teachers also provided the class with the opportunity to 'suggest' to Pope Francis by means of a suggestion box ideas about how they could prevent climate change, with the children coming up with ideas such as walking or cycling to school rather than taking a lift in a car.

On the last topic, endangered animals, the student teachers played another game based on an old favourite – musical chairs – in an attempt to impress upon the children the issue of melting ice caps in the North Pole.

The children, pretending to be polar bears, had to walk around the class and jump onto pieces of newspaper, representing ice, laid on the floor whenever the music stopped.

As the game progressed, teachers removed more and more pieces of newspaper.

Concluding their teaching initiative, the student teachers invited the class to write a prayer on a sheet of paper in the shape of a leaf and attach it to their hand-crafted '*Laudato Si'* tree'.

David said there were a "great variety" of prayers, with the children asking God to assist them "in their efforts to make the world a better place".

Overall, David said the experience led him and the class to discover "the link between religion and nature".

Prof. Conway said he was "hugely impressed" with the caliber of the student teachers involved in the project.

He raised in particular their "ability to translate the at times difficult language of the encyclical into perfectly sensible concepts for sixth class pupils".

Prof. Conway said he was equally impressed with the children being taught.

"I was amazed at how quickly the pupils grasped the seriousness of the issues being discussed and how quickly they could relate to real issues and ask tough questions about the problem of evil and suffering in the world.

"I would definitely encourage other schools to look to do something similar," he said.

