

GOOD NEWS

A global success?

BY JACK MCDEVITT

Frank Broadwell looked out at a cloudy sky as *Marine One* descended towards an open field near Santa Caterina Church on Mazzorbo Island. Ben Tyler, one of his staff, leaned forward. “Mr President, why are we way out here? I’d expected, since we were going to meet the Pope, it would have been at the Basilica or someplace.”

Broadwell sighed. He had bigger things to think about. “It’s okay, Ben. His Holiness likes to stay out of the limelight. He’s not much given to showing off.”

Ben’s phone sounded. He listened for a few moments, nodded, and smiled. “Good news, sir. MacIntyre’s holding a press conference. Something’s happened.”

“Who’s MacIntyre, Ben?”

“The neurologist. He does a lot of health research. It has to be good news.”

“Good. We can use some.” After six months of Middle East conflict over land grabs, trade wars with China and India, and climate issues, Broadwell would take anything he could get.

“They don’t have any details yet. You want me to follow up on it?”

“Sure. See what you can find out.” He dismissed it and sat back while they touched down. The Secret Service guys opened the door and climbed outside. “This shouldn’t take long.”

Pope Leo XIV was seated in an office. He was the second Englishman to serve as pope in church history. He was medium-sized and had lost most of his hair. But strong features and laser eyes left no doubt who was in charge. “Good evening, Your Holiness,” the president said.

He rose and smiled. “Mr President, welcome to Santa Caterina.”

Both men signalled to their security people that they could leave. When they were gone, the president closed the door. Then he turned back to the Pope. “Barry,” he said, “it’s good to see you again.”

“You as well, Frank. I wish we were meeting under happier circumstances. Please take a seat. Would you like something to drink?”

“No, thank you.” Broadwell removed his jacket. “Barry, we’re running out of time. The climate is exploding, the ice caps are melting at an increasing rate, and we are losing 2% of our species every year. If we continue on this path, by the end of the century we are going to be alone on this planet.”



“I know that, Frank. The Church has been a leading voice in promoting renewable energy.”

“Barry, we are absorbing areas needed by wildlife, and destroying most of the fish in the oceans. Growing populations require more food, but we’re running out of arable land. There are clean water problems. Trees are going down in large numbers. That pours more carbon dioxide into the atmosphere. The global population’s at 11 billion. Unless we stabilize it, nothing else is going to matter. We need the Church to change its position on contraceptives.”

Barry stared gloomily through a window at a quarter moon. “Do you really think I don’t know that?” he asked.

“We need your help.”

“Human reproduction is a divine gift, Frank. The Church’s recognition of that goes all the way back to Augustine. Using an artificial method to block a child from coming into existence is a serious offence against the intentions of the Creator.”

“You think God would be happier if we just let the planet go to hell?”

“You didn’t let me finish, Frank. I didn’t say that is *my* view. But it is the position of the Church. Has been for 17 centuries.”

“I’ve done my research. Pope John appointed a council to look into the contraceptive ban. If he had lived —”

“I know.” Barry took a deep breath. “After he died, Paul VI issued *Humanae Vitae* and that was the end of it.”

“We need you to step in.”

“This has been a bleak period, Frank. I’ve been working behind the scenes, doing what I can. I’m getting a lot of resistance. It’s hard to turn the corner with this kind of thing. But I’m putting together a council to look into the issue. And fortunately, we have the numbers to get it through. It won’t be easy. We’ll run into the same problem John did: the right wing will do everything they can to prevent movement on it. But this time, it’ll work. I’ll make it happen.”

“If I can do anything to help, let me know.”

“I wish you could, Frank. But any move you make would be perceived as interference, and would only make this more difficult. No. Trust me on this. I’ll take care of it.”

A light rain was falling into the trees when Broadwell returned to the helicopter. One of the Secret Service guys held the door for him. He climbed inside and watched a happy smile light up Ben’s features. “Everything okay, Mr President?”

“Yes. Couldn’t have hoped for more.”

“Glad to hear it, sir.”

The agents followed him in, closed the door, and told the pilot they were ready to go. She started the engine.

“Ben, did we hear any more from MacIntyre? The neurologist?”

“Yes, sir. Like we thought: good news.”

“I’m glad to hear it.” They lifted off. The rain grew more intense. “They cure cancer?”

“Better than that, Mr President. They claim they’ve cured *old* age.”

“What?”

“They’ve announced that they’ve learned how to lengthen something. Telomeres, I think they said. Anyhow, they say they’ve stopped the ageing process.” He frowned. “Mr President, you okay?” ■

Jack McDevitt has been published twice in *Futures* (once as co-author with Tom Easton). He has won numerous awards, including a *Nebula*. And the IAU has named a comet after him.

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