

## Growing number of parishes digs the green movement

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ROMEDEVILLE, Ill. (Catholic Explorer) - The ecological footprint for Earth Day, which was celebrated for the first time in 1969, can be traced back to the Kennedy administration. In 1963, Sen. Gaylord Nelson, a Democrat out of Wisconsin and founder of Earth Day, gained support for an 11-state, presidential conservation tour, which eventually flowered into an annual reminder for earth's inhabitants to be good stewards of the earth.

Another politician and former presidential hopeful, former Vice President Al Gore, D-Tenn., received an Academy Award for his 2006 film, "An Inconvenient Truth," about global warming and climate change. The film, which premiered at the 2006 Sundance Film Festival, was lauded by scientists, government agency officials and educators and forced the matter of global warming to the vanguard of the American psyche. The two-hour-long documentary-style feature length film has been used to introduce the idea of environmental stewardship and to initiate conversation among numerous parish groups throughout the diocese.

Although Americans throughout the country celebrated Earth Day April 22 with panel discussions, recycling projects and the like, the idea of environmental stewardship has blossomed into a year-round campaign to save the planet. Since Pope John Paul II in 1990 first urged the faithful to care for God's creation, believers have joined in the proliferation of environmental preservation projects. This past February, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops issued a statement calling for a "Moral Focus on Global Climate Change." Citing a report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the bishops concurred with findings that linked greenhouse gas emission among other issues with global warming.

The bishops urged the faithful to take actions that would address the potential consequences of climate change as well as highlighting the dangers and costs of inaction. They also called for making the poor and vulnerable - who are especially impacted - a priority, since they have "little or no voice in this vital discussion," and charged believers with pursuing the common good and the practice of prudence. Referring to the matter of environmental stewardship, Bishop Thomas G. Wenski of the Diocese of Orlando, Fla., who chairs the USCCB Committee on International Policy, stated a global conscience coincides with "traditional virtue. ... We do not have to know with absolute certainty

everything that is happening with climate change to know that something seriously harmful is occurring.”

At the diocesan level, Maribeth Meaux, a member of the environmental team for the Peace and Social Justice Ministry, has coordinated several presentations aimed at raising the level of awareness among believers that respect for the environment coincides with the Catholic faith. Relying on a presentation of “An Inconvenient Truth” to stir discussion about environmental concerns, Meaux makes a habit of sharing her research on the matter. To date, she has made presentations at St. Mary Parish in Mokena, Ill., St. Isidore Parish in Bloomingdale, Ill., and St. Jude Parish in New Lenox, Ill. Speaking about the impact of the film, she said, “I think it does an excellent job about being clear.”

Although the film has its critics, including members of the Catholic faithful who tend to disregard its message due to Gore’s political affiliation and stance in favor of pro-choice, Meaux said the film “is about global warming.”

Two environmental workshops are scheduled in May - one on May 17 at Resurrection Parish in Wayne, Ill., and another May 19 at St. Charles Borromeo Pastoral Center in Romeoville. The impetus for discussion at these upcoming events comes from two separate films: “Kilowatt Ours,” a 30-minute film that provides a brief explanation of the most urgent environmental problems in the United States, including mountaintop removal, global warming, the increase in childhood asthma and mercury contamination. It also offers practical ways “that we can be energy efficient,” according to Meaux.

The spiritual basis for environmental stewardship is addressed in the film, “Keeping the Earth,” a 27-minute long film that traces the biblical roots for respecting God’s creation, she added. Within the seven core values of Catholic teaching is care for creation, she said. “It guides our actions. The whole topic of global warming” is echoed within the interrelationship of “our core values,” including economic justice and preferential options for the poor, added Meaux.

The Rev. Clare Butterfield, executive director of Faith in Place, a Chicago-based nonprofit organization that advocates on behalf of environmental stewardship, told the Catholic Explorer in an April 20 telephone interview that the key to “growing advocacy” and respect for God’s creation is making the process easy. In light of the mountain of information, predictions, warnings and cautionary statements poured out in the media and via the Internet, Rev. Butterfield suggested that parish-based environmental ministries begin their programs with an introduction about the status of the earth’s climate and follow up with simple, yet, effective conservation methods. She recommends a promotion in favor of the new energy-efficient light bulbs. “They last for about five years, and they use a fraction” of the resources required to operate traditional-style bulbs.

A regular leader for energy-saving and environmental stewardship workshops, Rev. Butterfield said consistency and simple directions - signs reminding patrons to “shut off the light” - gets the message out. Gradually, conservation techniques “sink in.”

She compares efforts to inform the public about energy conservation and the need to support legislative proposals aimed at reducing the “greenhouse gas” to the stop-smoking campaign initiated by the U.S. Department of Public Health in the 1970s. The anti-smoking campaign had an immediate impact, causing thousands of smokers to kick the habit, said Rev. Butterfield. She cited the fact that scientific evidence supported the department’s contention. Meanwhile, the campaign gathered the support of the medical community as a whole, helping to further raise the level of awareness nationwide. The campaign to respect God’s creation is equally as important, she said.

With the support of the church, a concerted effort on the part of scientists to analyze the adverse effect of greenhouse gas and a movement within the government to establish a variety of earth-friendly pieces of legislation, Rev. Butterfield said she expects Americans would soon adopt conservation methods as a whole.