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The solar-powered, inner-city parish

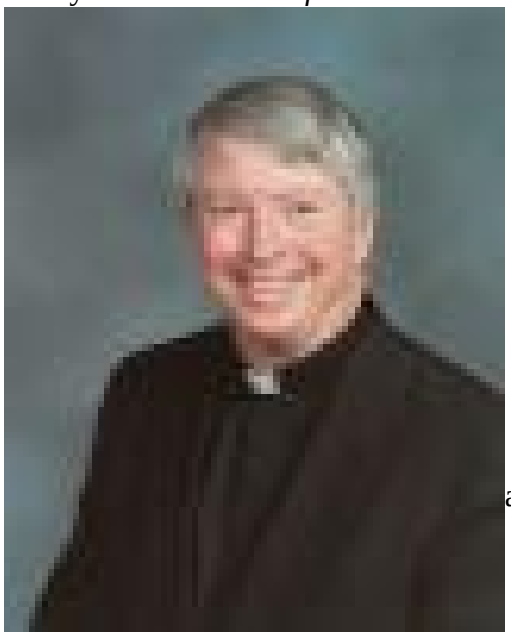
Rich Heffern | Nov. 30, 2010 Eco Catholic

Throughout the last century the tall spires of U.S. Catholic churches could be seen rising above city neighborhoods or as the highest point below the grain elevator in a small town. Those spires symbolized the values, spirituality and community to be found in the parish church, school and gathered assembly.

Today some feel Catholic parishes could become seedbeds for a wider embrace of earth-friendly practices, and they are making it happen.
In their 1995 pastoral, ?At Home in the Web of Life,? the Catholic bishops of the Appalachia region asked: ?Now might not our own Christian communities themselves become small centers of a sustainable path, small islands of creativity, proclaimers of a culture of life??

Thanks to the efforts of its former pastor, Fr. Charles Morris, St. Elizabeth Parish in Detroit stands out. It?s a working-class congregation located in an inner-ring suburb of probably the last city in the country one would expect to produce a green parish.

NCR: How did you come to be so ecological-minded?

Fr. Morris: In 1988 I heard climate scientist James Hansen speak. It was a warning shot across the bow. Then I read Fr. Tom Berry?s book *Dream of the Earth* and heard him speak. My mantra became: ?We are part of creation, not  apart from creation.? It occurred to me early that if it doesn?t come from churches, I don?t know where it will come from.

One of the first things we did is put in solar collectors on the St. Elizabeth rectory garage roof to provide hot water. In 1997 the parish had an energy audit done by the Environmental Protection Agency. We started a community garden. Between 1997 and 2002 there was a 60 percent reduction in the parish?s energy demand.

This was accomplished by a wide variety of steps.

New windows were installed in the church, along with a more efficient boiler in the church basement. Double-paneled windows created an envelope system with dead air between the two panes. Programmable thermostats in all the buildings were added.

All the incandescent light bulbs in church and rectory were changed to compact fluorescent bulbs. Simple things like weather-stripping on doors and programmable thermostats in the church and rectory were introduced. The boiler pressure was lowered from 8 pounds to 2.5.

On the water side, low-flush toilets and low-flow showerheads were installed, and rain barrels added to supply the garden. A solar attic fan was installed in the rectory. The sun hits a small photovoltaic panel located on the roof that powers the large fan.

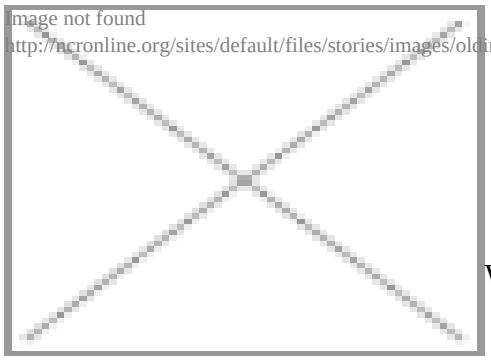
On the roof of the rectory garage, 64 square feet of solar collectors provide for hot water needs, supplying 100 percent of the hot water in summer. The rectory?s front porch roof has four 120-watt solar panels. Sixteen batteries in the basement store the power generated by the solar panels, and that power runs seven circuits in the rectory building.

I woke one morning during winter and found out later there had been power outage in the neighborhood from an ice storm. I didn?t even know it.

NCR: Besides the changes to the parish?s physical plant itself, what other changes did you initiate?

Fr. Morris: The rectory and church lawns are managed without pesticides or chemicals. In the back of the church there is a farmers? market after Sunday Mass, where local farmers sell their produce. One farmer regularly sells raw milk and honey. We had a collective of farmers that sold meat and eggs also. We advertised in the neighborhood.

In addition, the parish has sponsored classes for the parishioners and neighbors in sustainable living -- teaching canning, root-cellaring, and the use of non-toxic household cleaners.



We had an organic garden on the parish grounds, with a rain barrel collecting water from the roofs for the garden.

The parish sponsored a picnic and ice cream social. We ate free-range chicken and pork chops, and I made homemade ice cream using raw cream, with no hormones or antibiotics

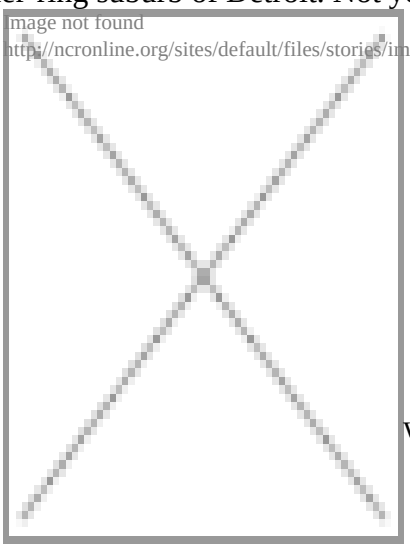
I try to use the liturgical year as occasions for preaching. I talk about the food system on Corpus Christi Sunday, and use a cosmological theme on Trinity Sunday.?

The parish council likes the fact that the parish saves a ton of money.

On Trinity Sunday we dedicated the new solar panels after Mass. I used a prayer for blessing of solar panels that I got from a member of Michigan Interfaith Power and Light.

Up on the roof with my stole and holy water on a clear day there was not a breath of wind, but then as the holy water hit the turbine a gust of wind came from nowhere. I was reminded of the upper room with its tongues of fire and mighty wind.

St. Elizabeth is in a working class inner-ring suburb of Detroit. Not your typical place for on-site renewable systems. If it could work there, it can



work anywhere. If it can work in Michigan, it can work anywhere. Two percent of all their energy is coming from solar access in Germany; we in Michigan have more sun than Germany, so it?s possible to do the same here.

I left St, Elizabeth in July. I?m active now with Michigan Interfaith Power and Light and I am teaching as adjunct faculty at Madonna University in Livonia, Mich, teaching a class in sustainability.

Interesting things are going on around the country in the church. The archdiocese of Baltimore has adapted a portfolio management tool for parishes and schools there. It?s an interactive energy management tool that allows you to track and assess energy and water consumption across your entire portfolio of buildings in a secure online environment. The Portfolio Manager can help a faith community set investment priorities, identify under-performing buildings, verify efficiency improvements, and receive EPA recognition for superior energy performance.

You can rate the energy performance of buildings on a scale of one to a hundred, relative to similar buildings nationwide. It tracks energy savings and avoided emissions translates into how many cars off the road or trees planted for storytelling purposes. You can aggregate it with other parishes.

It?s sacramental. It is a witness to the Gospel, back to our Catholic roots. We are a part of creation, not apart from it, as St. Francis of Assisi taught us.

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