

Ideas for celebrating Earth Day in your parish

Carol Meyer | Mar. 29, 2011 | Eco Catholic

Earth Day is too good an opportunity to pass up. With the environmental crisis growing daily, God knows we need to take every opportunity to educate and motivate our church members to care for creation.

Everyone is already hearing about Earth Day in the community, so why not take advantage of the collective awareness and momentum?

One challenge this year is getting through Lent and Easter and still having energy to expend planning an Earth Day liturgy or other events. That's why I'm helping you out by sharing some ideas, so you don't have to start from scratch.

And, if you're like me, once you start thinking of creative ideas, you get all excited and suddenly have new oomph and drive to carry them out. And even if you're too heavily involved in Holy Week and Easter to do more, usually someone is willing to take the lead on this.

Because Earth Day falls on Good Friday, probably the only reasonable time to celebrate it is the weekend after Easter, which is what our parish is doing. It will take some ingenuity to connect the resurrection-themed readings with Earth care, but it can be done. If politicians can take any question a reporter throws at them, and maneuver it around to their favorite agenda, then surely we can too!

Here are some connections I am seeing:

1. The early Christians lived simply in community, a model of how we are to live on the Earth
2. We should be so filled with Easter joy and faith that greed and materialism, the main factors in Earth's destruction, aren't part of our lives
3. We should work unselfishly for Earth's welfare, even at a sacrifice, out of love for the Jesus we cannot see, because we know He loves the Earth, its people and all life
4. In the Gospel, Jesus says, "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." Jesus was sent to bring God's reign to Earth, so we are sent to bring God's healing and justice to Earth. God's plan is dependent on a healthy planet and
5. One important way we know and feel God's everlasting love (from the responsorial Psalm) is from the constant beauty and nourishment we receive from creation.

This would be a great time to have a guest speaker at your adult education class or to plan a parish outing in nature. Even if you plan such an event, I strongly encourage you to do something during the liturgy because that will have the greatest impact and touch the most people. Reverend Peter Sawtell, of Eco-Justice Ministries, says that Earth care needs to be included in worship because worship is the center of the community's faith and values, and if it isn't visible there, it will be seen as optional or periphery.

Here are some specific ideas that you might try or at least use to come up with your own innovations:

- Have the teens write and pray the prayers of petition focused on their greatest Earth concerns
- Younger children could draw pictures on the Earth Day theme and they could be displayed in the back of church or taped to the ends of the pews
- The penitential rite could focus of our wrongs against the Earth. The celebrant could say, "Let us call to mind our sins, especially those committed against God's Earth...For our greed and destruction of the Earth, Lord have mercy, etc."
- Visuals could include a statue of St. Francis; a globe or big picture of the Earth; the elements of earth, air, water, and fire; a banner; a display of sacred objects from the Earth brought by parishioners; or a mobile of Earth objects.
- If you are a smaller congregation, you might have a handout for people as they leave church. One year we used a sticker. It could be an Earth prayer, a flower, or a packet of seeds. I've known churches who've given away trees.
- You might include a flier in the bulletin with stories of hope, highlighting people of faith who are making a difference for the environment
- After the homily, part or all of which is devoted to Earth care, time could be given for everyone to fill out a small index card saying what action they will take to be better stewards of the Earth. They could be taken home or put in the offering basket and blessed at the altar.
- Tables could be set up in the back of church for folks to sign a petition or write a congressperson related to an Earth care issue
- Incorporating the Arts would be great, for instance liturgical dance, the display of original Earth artwork or photographs, a special choir piece or solo relating to the glory of God's creation, or a nature story/testimonial used somewhere in the liturgy
- It might be a perfect occasion to call your Green Team forward and give them a blessing, or if you don't have one, various other people, like the grounds keepers, the recyclers, the facilities managers, etc. who help make the parish more "green."

Okay, I'm getting carried away. But you get the idea. Sounds like fun, right? Great for building community, getting people involved, spicing things up, helping people make connections between their faith and the environment, and certainly good for our beloved Earth, so desperately in need of some serious prayers and beneficial actions.

And if you're still wanting more ideas and resources, there's the good old Internet. You can find ready-made petitions, sermon ideas, bulletin inserts with quotes from the pope and bishops, and much more.

Here's to a million fantastic Earth Day celebrations in our Catholic parishes!

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