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Eco-Palms: a sustainable witness for Holy Week

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Eco Catholic

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Fair Trade coffee, the installation of recycling bins and community gardens are becoming part of the fabric of Catholic parish life. The rubber meets the road in the call to poverty of spirit not just in the reading of papal encyclicals or in good homilies, but particularly in the priorities parishes make both in programming and purchasing.

Eco-Palms [1] represents one such opportunity for parishes to be the sermon they preach, particularly at the beginning of Holy Week. Eco-Palms represent palms used at Palm Sunday services that are sustainably harvested, and members of the local communities who harvest the palms are guaranteed a fair wage.

The original research for Eco-Palms was funded by the North American Commission for Environmental Cooperation, headquartered in Canada. Lutheran World Relief and the University of Minnesota Center for Integrated Natural Resources and Agricultural Management have taken the charge to make Eco-Palms available to houses of worship across North America. Organizations representing the Presbyterian Church and the United Methodist Church also support the project.

Eco-Palms are grown in forests in Guatemala and Mexico. As Lutheran World Relief states on its website: Of the $4.5 million spent on palms each year for Palm Sunday, very few of the profits ever reach the palm harvesters. Over-harvesting is encouraged among many of the export firms that deal with palms. The firms pay by volume, then throw away large amounts that aren't export-quality. Over-harvesting damages forests that provide the habitat for the palm trees, and forests become depleted. Ergo, communities lose this key source of income.

With Eco-Palms, harvesters are paid for the quality of the palms harvested, not the quantity. The upshot is that there is less waste and less stress on the forest, which preserves the nature reserves.

Second, there are no middlemen. The community harvests, packages and sells the palms itself. With less overhead, more of the profits goes to the growers. Given the steady market, the local communities are motivated to protect the forest into the future.

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According to Eco-Palms website, more than 25 percent of the costs goes back to the harvesting community. The participating communities have either already obtained or are obtaining "an outside sustainable certification from SmartWood, a division of Rainforest Alliance," the site states.

Unlike the traditional strip palms I used as a child, Eco-Palms come in fronds -- one stem with many leaves. In fact, they remind me of the palms I used the year I had the privilege of participating in the Palm Sunday procession from Bethany to Jerusalem -- full palm stems with many leaves that you can wave in the crowd. The palm's appearance is a deep green. We have used these palms for Palm Sunday procession for the last few years, including this year at my current parish of St. Christopher in Detroit. Children in particular like the palms because they are "cool" to wave.

Unlike the traditional strip palm, Eco-Palms are soft and do not lend themselves to being folded into crosses. Parishes might want to consider making available some strip palms for congregants who wish to make crosses out of palms each year.

Although Eco-Palms cost a little more per palm (we estimate about a 12 cent/palm differential) Eco-Palms provide a much fuller palm, with up to 20 leaves on each stem. And as with fair trade coffee, one has the satisfaction of knowing that the palms are fairly traded as well, resulting in fiscally and ecologically sustainable communities.

Although Palm Sunday has passed, parishes might want to consider making the switch for next year. For more information, visit ecopalms.org [1], lwr.org/palms [2] or pcusa.org/palms [3]. Catholic Relief Services also wrote an endorsement of Eco-Palms [4].

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Links:
[1] http://www.ecopalms.org
[2] http://www.lwr.org/palms
[3] http://www.pcusa.org/palms
[4] http://www.crsfairtrade.org/2009/03/eco-palms-order-by-march-9-for-palm-sunday/