



Parish and
School Working
Together to
Translate Faith into
Environmental
Action

In the beginning, God created the earth and gave it to all of us to preserve. We are called to safeguard earth's precious resources so that they might be shared fairly with all the peoples living in the world. We are called to live sustainably so that future generations may also know the beauty of God's creation.

Sharon Horvath and Andy Pike





Photos: www.123RF.com

“**T**O PROMOTE THE JOYFUL STEWARDSHIP OF OUR EARTH THROUGH SPIRITUALITY, SIMPLICITY, AND SUSTAINABILITY.”

This is the mission of the Creation Care Ministry of St. Thomas Aquinas Catholic Church in Indianapolis. This mission was formalized in the fall of 2007 when several members of the parish who regularly saw each other at environmental events in the city decided to make creation care a formal ministry of the parish. The goals of the Creation Care Ministry are four-fold:

1. To encourage parishioners to explore the spiritual foundation of ecological actions.
2. To educate parishioners about the importance of being good stewards of our environment and to assist them in employing more eco-friendly options in their own homes and workplaces.
3. To develop concrete actions for parish leaders and ministries to lessen any

negative environmental impact we may have as a parish.

4. To develop a long-term environmental action plan for the parish and the school.

St. Thomas Aquinas Catholic School, through the combined efforts of school families, faculty, and the parish, seeks to guide a diverse student body toward becoming independent learners and responsible, faith-filled, caring citizens. The vision of the school and the mission of the parish Creation Care Ministry complement each other. Working together, we have been able to take some actions that we think could serve as a model for other parishes to follow.

Creation care was not a new concept at the school. Faculty would celebrate Earth Day each year, but creation care was not an

everyday focus. Since the parish Creation Care Ministry was formed, however, the school and parish have collaborated in a number of ways. This close collaboration is facilitated by the fact that one of the members of the parish Creation Care Ministry is also a school faculty member.

The foundation of the environmental efforts in both the parish and the school is our faith, which calls us to care for creation. In the book of Genesis we are told to cultivate and take care of our world. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) lists caring for creation as one of the major themes of Catholic social justice. The parish and school explored the spiritual dimension of the daily choices we make through a program called Lent 4.5 (www.lent45.org). This program from the Passionist Community of Holy Cross Province in Louisville, KY, is based on the idea that if all of Earth's resources were divided among all people, each person would need the equivalent of 4.5 acres to supply all their needs. However, it takes 22.3 acres per person to maintain the average American lifestyle. The need to reduce could not be clearer. Through bulletin inserts, discussion groups, and an accompanying school curriculum, parishioners and students learned how they could live in a simpler, more sustainable way.

Once people realize that our faith calls us to care for creation, they want to make changes that reflect that belief. But in order to understand what changes should be made, they must first understand the



issues. The Creation Care Ministry facilitated a five-week course for adults entitled "Living Lean and Green." Educating children about the issues is just as important as educating adults, however, and members of the Creation Care Ministry assisted school faculty with a semester-long fifth- and sixth-grade project in which students teamed up to learn about various environmental issues. Students then presented what they had learned to the rest of the school and also to the parish as part of a larger Earth Day fair.

From 2008 to 2011 Creation Care Ministry members also provided support for a school improvement goal, which stated, "All students will demonstrate improved respect for all of God's creation." The school theme for several years was "We Care for Creation." Each month focused on a different aspect of creation, such as trees, energy, natural resources, water, birds, wildlife, and caring for our neighbors and ourselves. The school began several initiatives during this period that brought caring for creation from a once-a-year discussion to an everyday habit. Each of these concrete actions may be small by themselves, but when the entire school does them, each action makes a significant difference.

The amount of solid waste in the school has been reduced by about 30%. Lunch waste has been reduced by composting fruit and vegetable scraps, recycling milk cartons, and collecting juice pouches and chip bags to upcycle into new products through Terracycle (www.terracycle.com). Students are encouraged to bring their lunches in reusable containers. Bins for paper recycling are in each classroom and are used routinely. The parish added a commingled recycling bin in 2009 to recycle cardboard, metal, plastic, and glass.

The Creation Care Ministry established a St. Thomas Aquinas community vegetable garden in 2009. Students are able to use a portion of this garden to learn about plants and nutrition, as well as about sharing food with our neighbors through a local food pantry. Students also plant flowers and help maintain the St. Thomas

Aquinas Schoolyard Habitat and Meditation Garden, which is a joint project of the parish and the school.

Students are invited to participate in Earth Council, which allows students who have an interest in the environment to take part in service projects such as collecting gently used school supplies for donation to other schools, managing the annual paper drive, Earth Week aluminum can and shoe collections, and pulling invasive garlic mustard at a local park. Earth Council students also create nature-themed art projects.

All of these actions helped St. Thomas Aquinas School to be honored on April 22 (Earth Day) as a 2014 Department of Education Green Ribbon School. St. Thomas Aquinas School was one of 48 schools honored this year for exemplary efforts to reduce environmental impact and utility costs, promote better health, and ensure effective environmental education. Because we are a Catholic school, we have a little different perspective on what it means to be a Green Ribbon School. Being a Green Catholic school means that we live our Catholic teachings: care for creation and for each other is an integral part of our school culture. We recycle as a way to be good stewards of our earth's natural resources. We try to reduce our energy use not just as a way to save money, but also because generation of electricity from coal has a real effect on the health of people living nearby.

While we are thrilled and humbled to be named a 2014 Green Ribbon School, St. Thomas Aquinas School and Parish are making our own plans for the future. Because the school is the largest user of energy on the campus, reducing energy use in the school is critical to reducing energy use overall. Already, we have replaced older fluorescent tubes in the school with more efficient and lower-wattage tubes. The Creation Care Ministry is facilitating the installation of occupancy sensors in school bathrooms, closets, hallways, and other locations. A thermal imaging study is planned to identify places where heated

or cooled air may be leaking from the building.

The Creation Care Ministry has been encouraging parishioners to sign the St. Francis Pledge to Care for Creation and the Poor since this initiative was launched by the USCCB in 2009. The pledge is a way to bring awareness to the issues of environmental degradation, climate change, and the impact on the poor and vulnerable. The pledge asks people to pray, learn, assess, act, and advocate on environmental issues. The pledge can be taken by not only individuals, but also by parishes and schools. The school is considering how this pledge might be implemented within our classrooms. (More information about the pledge can be found at www.catholic-climatecovenant.org.)

St. Thomas Aquinas Catholic School and Parish continue to work together to bring the message of creation care to our students, our faculty, our school families, our parishioners, and all those with whom we come in contact. As we all make changes in our own attitudes and actions, we can all come closer to the Kingdom of God here on Earth.

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