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## Catholic Multicultural Center puts pope's encyclical into action



Around the Diocese

Written by Laura Green, For the Catholic Herald

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**MADISON** -- Pope Francis' recent encyclical *Laudato Si'* makes a firm and urgent case for taking care of God's creation in order to care for the poor and vulnerable among us.

He asserts that environmental stewardship must always be tied to social justice and vice versa. For the Catholic Multicultural Center (CMC), the encyclical is an affirmation of the work it has already been doing.

### Bringing poor, environmental stewardship together

"The encyclical really brings the poor and the environment together, which is exactly what we have been doing, exactly what we at the CMC stand for," said CMC Director Andy Russell.

Over the past several years, the center has made environmental stewardship an integral part of its mission of serving those in need.

This came in response to the fact that low-income and minority communities are often hit the first and the hardest by the consequences of environmental degradation, a theme that the pope touches on throughout his encyclical.

### Installing solar panels

With this in mind, in the fall of 2014, the CMC installed a solar panel system on its roof to produce some of its own electricity from clean, renewable energy.

"The solar panels are one little way that we can lessen our harm not just to the poor, but to everyone," said Russell. By using renewable energy, the CMC is reducing its contribution to the pollution and resulting harm caused by coal-fired power plants.

One other way the solar panels have an immediate impact on the poor is through their effect on the center's services. By saving money on electricity, the center can now spend more money directly on helping those in need and expanding its services.

Currently the money the panels save on an average annual basis equals the cost of providing approximately 10,000 meals through the daily free meal program.



Volunteers harvest spinach in the Catholic Multicultural Center's food pantry garden in Madison, one way the center is caring for creation and helping the poor (Contributed photo)

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The CMC is working to expand the solar project by the end of this year and install additional solar panels to see even more savings.

Going solar is certainly not a new idea for Catholic organizations. Pope Benedict XVI, who also issued many statements on the Catholic faith and the environment, ushered in the installation of solar panels at the Vatican in 2008.

The installation of solar at the CMC was a community led effort, with much of the funds for the first phase of the project coming from a partnership between St. Thomas Aquinas Parish in Madison, St. Bernard Parish in Middleton, and St. Francis Xavier Parish in Cross Plains.

The solar project at the CMC gives people a way to live out their faith by becoming involved in a Catholic environmental stewardship initiative, according to Russell.

### **Food pantry garden**

Working at the food pantry garden is another way CMC volunteers and supporters become involved in caring for creation.

Through a partnership with Madison Area Food Pantry Gardens, the CMC has been growing fresh, local produce for its food pantry and meal program for nearly five years.

During the growing season, guests find the CMC food pantry is fully stocked with an assortment of fresh local produce that they otherwise might not have access to.

"The vegetables we grow don't always look like the ones in the store, but they are always nutritious, tasty, and fresh," joked volunteer garden leader Dick Reynolds, who offers his time to coordinate the all-volunteer-run garden.

From his perspective, growing food for those in need is a way for not only Catholics to live out their faith, but for people of all faiths to get involved in helping the community.

Reynolds explained the mutually beneficial relationships he sees through gardening. People suffering from food insecurity get fresh produce. The earth is cared for so that it may continue to sustain people in need for years to come.

And, people from many different backgrounds connect and learn with one another through their shared work in the garden.

"For volunteers who work full time or are busy with many other things in retirement, for them to take the time to come regularly is inspirational," said Reynolds.

The results of the gardening efforts are inspiring as well. Last year, volunteers grew and harvested over 7,700 pounds of produce for the CMC's food programs.

"I hope that the land is better than we found it as a result of our work there," Reynolds said.

### **Helping neighborhood**

The CMC reflects this same sentiment in regards to the South Madison neighborhood in which it resides. "[Caring for creation] is often forgotten in neighborhoods like this," said Russell.

Lots of trash and a polluted creek are just a couple of the problems that plague the neighborhood, problems not often seen in more affluent neighborhoods with more resources to address those issues.

Workshops and neighborhood projects hosted by the CMC over the last year and a half have been trying to change that.

These programs aim to offer tools people can use to benefit their communities and their own lives, from saving money on electricity to creating positive neighborhood spaces like the CMC rain garden.

Patricia Hernandez, CMC neighbor and volunteer, regularly participates in these programs. According to her, the motivation for her participation is simply wanting to help out and make her neighborhood a better place for everyone, especially the poor among us.

### **Installing rain garden**

Last spring, she helped install a rain garden at the CMC along with other community members and

volunteers.

"The rain gardens clean the water that we all drink," Hernandez explained. "If everyone did things like this, it would be better for our planet. Our grandchildren would live better lives than we do."

As with the food pantry garden, Hernandez also commented on how working on projects like this unites people. She said participating in the programs at the CMC allowed her to meet new people that she otherwise wouldn't have met, coming together with these new friends to work towards building a stronger community.

### **Part of one family**

Hernandez explained, "We are all like family. We have to help one another out."

Pope Francis' encyclical asks us to do just that, to help one another as one human family by being good stewards of creation and of one another.

As for the CMC, Russell says the center will continue to lead by example, living out the Catholic faith by serving the poor while also being a good steward of creation.

If you would like to learn more about or support these efforts of the CMC, contact Andy Russell at 608-441-3247 or [andy@cmctoday.org](mailto:andy@cmctoday.org)

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