News
EarthBeat



Students from St. Michael's School in Brattleboro learn how recycling is sorted and compost is made at the Windham Solid Waste Management District. (Courtesy of the Diocese of Burlington, Vermont)



by James Dearie

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An effort by a bishop to promote greater care for the Earth and the teachings of Pope Francis' 2015 encyclical, "*Laudato Si*', on Care for Our Common Home," resulted in a diocesan-wide celebration of a Year of Creation in 2017.

The idea for a year dedicated to creation in the Diocese of Burlington, Vermont, came about while Bishop Christopher Coyne and his advisers planned the diocese's 2016 celebration of the Season of Creation, an annual event that encourages Christians to pray for the Earth from Sept. 1 until Oct. 4, the feast day of Francis of Assisi.

"There were just so many good materials," Stephanie Clary, the diocese's mission outreach and communication coordinator, told NCR. "We thought, why pick just one or handful to do during the month of September?"

That's when Coyne had the idea of implementing the programs and materials the diocese had considered over the course of the year, and the Year of Creation was born.

The Year of Creation was similar to the diocese's 2016 project, the Year of Mercy, during which the diocese held "jubilees" every month for different groups of people, like religious, lay ministers and children. For 2018, the diocese is celebrating the Year of the Family.

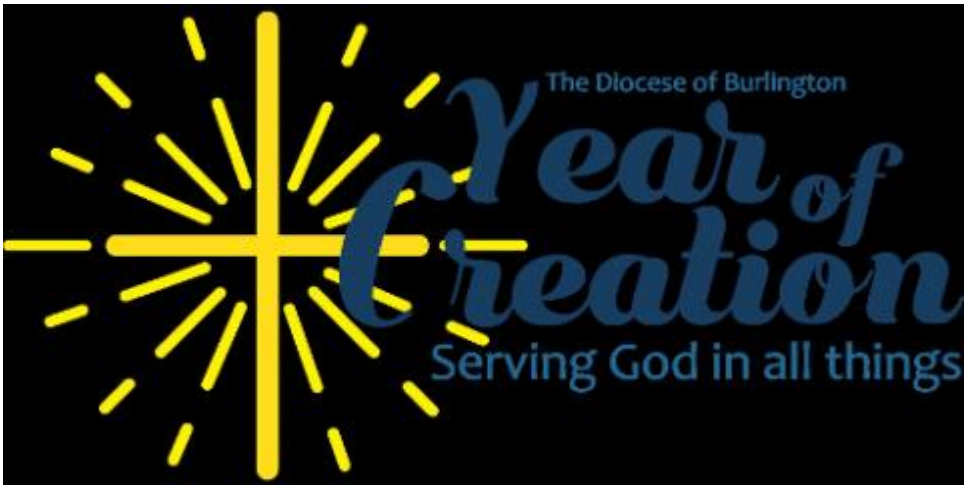
To help implement the 2017 initiative, the diocese, which includes all of Vermont, assembled a committee of scientists, activists and people of faith. Clary, who has studied theology and ecological justice, was on the committee, as were representatives of the diocese's high school and college students, faith leaders and activists. The scientists, including non-Catholics, came from around the state.

Of course, there was also a webpage for the initiative.

Work began on the project quickly; the first committee meeting was in December, with the opening event only three months away, but "there was so much [relevant material] that already existed, it was really just a matter of us as a committee deciding which things to use and when," Clary said.

After some online promotion and social media activity, the Year of Creation kicked off March 3, 2017, the first Friday of Lent, at Immaculate Conception Cathedral in Burlington. Coyne led a special Stations of the Cross for the Earth that incorporated quotes from Pope John Paul II as reflections, which Clary notes was important, emphasizing that care for creation is central to the teachings of the church.

"It's not like this is only a Pope Francis thing," she said. "This is part of our Catholic tradition and always has been."



Logo for the Year of Creation (Courtesy of the Burlington, Vermont, diocese)

The stations were followed by a soup dinner donated by local businesses and a conversation about fasting, including the positive impact abstinence from certain food products like red meat and dairy can have on the environment.

All diocesan schools held an environmentally themed day April 12; students chose different ways to acknowledge the importance of caring for creation, with each school picking a different activity — like cleaning up local parks, holding a prayer service for creation or putting on an eco-themed fashion show.

The spring issue of Vermont Catholic, the diocese's official publication, was dedicated to environmental justice.

"The Year of Creation has been a stimulus" for environmental action, Fr. Charlie Ranges, pastor of the Essex Catholic Community, told NCR. The community is composed of the combined parish of Holy Family-St. Lawrence and St. Pius X Church in Essex, both a few miles east of Burlington. Environmental activists maintain a strong presence in both.

Both parishes worked to make their kitchens more environmentally friendly during the year; at Holy Family-St. Lawrence, a group known as the Green Kitchen Committee had the idea to make the kitchen of their new parish hall, already part of an energy-efficient building, as green as possible. The group found energy-saving appliances to furnish the kitchen and instituted new rules for those renting the hall, ensuring that any event held there would have a minimal environmental impact. The utensils kept in the kitchen are all biodegradable.

The Holy Family Parish Hall served as the site for the next event of the Year of Creation April 23, Divine Mercy Sunday and one day after Earth Day. A roundtable discussion of sustainable practices in parishes was held after vespers in the church to coincide with Catholic Climate Covenant's Mercy2Earth Weekend.

The following month, St. John Vianney Church held "Sing Praise to God All the Earth," a concert inspired by the pope's encyclical. The concert featured prominent composers from Oregon Catholic Press — Jaime Cortez, Tom Kendzia and Bob Hurd.

The initiative's biggest event came in September with the Action for Ecological Justice Conference, featuring a day of workshops before a keynote address by former president and CEO of Catholic Relief Services Carolyn Woo, at St. Michael's College in Colchester.

According to a report on the conference in the Vermont Catholic magazine, "Woo suggested responses such as land and crop adaptations, watershed management, alternative farming techniques, alternative crops, water service and community capacity building" in her talk, as well as supporting environmentally responsible businesses. She also encouraged attendees to remain hopeful and noted that, by some measures, Vermont is among the greenest states in the union — fitting, as the name comes from *vert mont*, French for "green mountain."

About 200 people attended the conference.

The diocese also began a new partnership with Commons Energy, a local energy solutions company. The company "will do a free walkthrough audit" of any of the diocese's roughly 400 buildings, including parishes and schools, Clary says. Many of the buildings are decades old and could be made more environmentally friendly.

If the company determines that the sustainability of the building could be substantially improved, the company will do a full audit, producing "a list of varying

projects they could undertake to increase energy efficiency in the building," Clary says, before working with them to make those changes a reality.

About 20 to 25 diocesan buildings are currently at some phase of one of these projects.

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Clary noted that many churches in the state want to go solar, and a few either have or are in the process of doing so. While that is certainly exciting, the diocese is hoping that the improvement projects take place first. "We want to make sure their building is using energy efficiently before they invest in something like solar," Clary says.

The diocese also instituted a new waste management and composting system, cutting back on the waste the diocesan offices were producing. Through a partnership with Chittenden Solid Waste District, the diocese live streamed its waste management education and encouraged parishes and schools to adopt similar strategies.

Ranges credits Coyne, whom he calls "a great man and a great leader" with helping to keep the diocese a force for environmental consciousness. "I think he was inspired by Pope Francis," he said.

Clary also observed a very positive response to the bishop and his message. Protecting creation "is an integral part of our faith," Clary said. "It's not an add-on or optional, so people were really excited and really appreciative."

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