EarthBeat Stories of climate crisis, faith and action



EarthBeat wants to know what your parish is doing. Click the image to fill out our survey.



by Jesse Remedios

View Author Profile

jremedios@ncronline.org
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Welcome to Burning Questions, the EarthBeat feature that addresses those questions smoldering in your mind about climate change and religion — from the basics to more complex, and everything in between.

Let's say your parish recently hosted a Christmas gathering. Food was served. Many plastic forks and knives and plates were used, then tossed out. Let's say this bothered you.

Sound familiar? Our latest Burning Question is for you: *What are parishes doing to eliminate their use of single-use plastics and reduce waste?* (You can send us your questions here. And thanks to Rita Houlihan of Church of the Ascension in New York City for this wek's question.)

We'll take a stab at answering this, but EarthBeat would also love to hear from you. Tell us about what your parish is doing to combat the climit crisis through this survey.

In the meantime, let's start with the basics.

What are single-use plastics?

Single-use plastics are just what they sound like: Plastic items that can only be used once before they are thrown away or recycled. These are your plastic grocery bags, straws, cups, bottles, lids and utensils. The list goes on.

Single-use plastics are, quite literally, everywhere. It's pretty overwhelming.

Consider this. In 2016, humans produced more than 300 tons of plastics globally, according to Earth Day. Half of that was for single-use plastics – items that are used and discarded in a matter of moments but last for hundreds, perhaps thousands, of years.

But what makes single-use plastics so bad? I always recycle!

Recycling is great. Keep recycling! But as Valeria Merino, Vice President for Global Earth Day, pointed out in Catholic Climate Covenant's 2018 webinar on plastic waste , reduction is actually "the core idea … We think that unless we reduce consumption, everything else is minor."

The UN has reported that only nine percent of the world's plastic has actually been recycled. Pope Francis himself uses a special phrase for our single-use plastic addiction: the "throwaway culture." Most of our plastic goes into landfills and is broken down into smaller pieces. Those smaller plastics can contaminate our soil and water, working their way into the human food chain.

Single-use plastics are sadly wreaking havoc on our oceans, generating dangerously massive wads of debris known not-so-fondly as plastic soup. According to Plastic Oceans International, a nonprofit dedicated to raising awareness about plastic pollution, more than eight million tons of plastic are dumped into our oceans every year. Moreover, one in three species of marine mammals have been found entangled in marine litter.

Whales are marine mammals. Don't we still want to save the whales?

Ok, I'm on board. How can my parish cut out single-use plastics?

A toolkit created by the Earth Day Network suggests a three-step process for any group or individual looking to take steps at reducing their waste:

1. Learn about the problem.

2. Examine one's own consuming habits and look for ways not only to recycle, but more importantly, to reduce your usage.

3. Engage others by sharing your own experience and inviting them to do the same.

If you want to get a jump on that first goal, we've got you covered. EarthBeat has an entire series dedicated to the topic of Reducing Waste. Check. It. Out. This includes a deeper dive into the so-called "throwaway culture" and plenty of examples of parishes and schools that have taken on initiatives aimed at tackling this problem.

Speaking of examples, what are some things parishes have done about this?

St. Joan of Arc Church in Minneapolis started their waste reduction process by looking at their parish's hospitality functions. They moved away from using plastic foam cups to compostable versions. Eventually, they reduced the waste headed to a landfill at their annual three-night Cabaret fundraiser to a mere 38 pounds.

Many parishes have taken similar steps to substitute disposable tableware with reusable plates, utensils and cups. Similarly, some parishes have opted to stop serving bottled water at parish events and instead set up pitchers of tap water and compostable cups.

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St. Mark Church in Vienna, Virginia, took steps to raise awareness, including hosting a speaker about living a zero-waste lifestyle and screening the documentary "Bag It." Events like these are important because, as NCR has reported, one of the biggest hurdles for parishes taking on waste reduction to overcome is changing the culture.

This is a lot to think about. Anymore tips?

Sure thing. Here's a few, courtesy of Catholic Climate Covenant program manager Paz Artaza-Regan:

- Start with relevant info in bulletins and newsletters. Make waste reduction relevant by making connections to issues in the local community.
- Get youth involved. They will influence their parents.
- Get the pastor and parish leadership on board. A word of support from the pulpit is incredibly helpful.
- Start with smaller, attainable goals. She suggests a Lent project as a great strategy.
- Incorporate educational programming as part of any project.

- Incorporate prayer and spirituality into any project:"Caring for creation is part of our catechism, it's a moral call."

[Jesse Remedios is an NCR staff writer. His email address is jremedios@ncronline.org. Follow him at @jcremedios.]

This story appears in the **Burning Questions** feature series. View the full series.