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An aerial view of Immaculata High School campus in Sommerville, N.J., showing the solar pan

An aerial view of Immaculata High School campus in Sommerville, N.J., showing the solar panels on the school is seen in this 2022 photo. (CNS photo/courtesy Immaculata High School)

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SOMERVILLE, N.J. — October 13, 2022
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Solar panels and energy-efficient equipment have come to a school, parishes and even the Pastoral Center of the Diocese of Metuchen, New Jersey.

Immaculata High School in Somerville is the first in the diocese to use solar panels in an effort to align diocesan practice with Pope Francis' encyclical "*Laudato Si*', on Care for Our Common Home," said Msgr. Joseph G. Celano, diocesan episcopal vicar for administration and pastor of Immaculate Conception Parish, which oversees the school.

"Even though the solar panels are not visible from ground level, they are in fact there and they will be supplying renewable energy," he said of the 1,228 solar

panels lining the roofs of the school's two buildings.

"Our students will be very aware this is a step we are taking to be good caretakers of the environment, so it will be good for them to see our example, that we are leading the way when it comes to alternative energy sources," he said.

In a year, the school's solar panel arrays, which are financed, maintained, and owned by the firm Madison Energy Investments, are estimated to offset the greenhouse gas emissions generated by more than 19,000 trash bags dumped into landfills and will be the equivalent of the carbon sequestered by nearly 7,500 tree seedlings grown for 10 years.

Special equipment allows for optimizing the power output for each solar module, allowing for adjustments during different weather conditions, while adding additional levels of monitoring capability and safety.

In the end, Celano said, there will be significant cost savings as well as positive steps toward answering the pope's invitation.

"It is important that we show a sense of solidarity with the Holy Father, especially through our care of creation, which aligns with his encyclical, *Laudato Si*'," Msgr. Celano said.

The solar panels were installed during the annual observance of the Catholic Church's Season of Creation, which ran from Sept. 1, the World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation, through Oct. 4, the feast of St. Francis of Assisi.

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Celano said the project also comes in response to a request by Metuchen Bishop James F. Checchio, who asked diocesan officials early in his tenure to look at ways to encompass the pope's call to begin a dialogue on caring for the earth and shaping the future of the planet.

Likewise, work on the conversion to renewable energy sources is underway at the Pastoral Center in Piscataway, home to the diocesan offices, as well as at other schools and churches including St. Matthias Parish in Somerset, and St. Thomas the Apostle Church in Old Bridge.

Steve Michalek, director of the diocesan Office of Properties and Facilities Management, said he sees the switch to solar power as a "win-win-win."

"We are aligned with Pope Francis, it's environmentally friendly, and it's fiscally responsible," he told The Catholic Spirit, Metuchen's diocesan newspaper.

Coupled with other efforts underway, it is estimated the Pastoral Center could eliminate 80% of its electricity cost when the solar panels are installed.

"Over 25 years, we will likely save $3 million, so that's the financial beauty of it," Michalek added.

Environmentally conscious upgrades to the Pastoral Center include installation of a white monochromatic roof to reflect sunlight to help defray heating and cooling costs; high-efficiency rooftop air handling units to lower electricity needs, and encourage energy efficiency and outdoor LED lighting and energy-efficient indoor lighting.

Solar has been "around long enough, it's been proven to work, and we feel confident in this solution," Michalek said.

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