News
EarthBeat



Solar panels are seen on the roof of St. Catherine of Siena Church's rectory buildings in Pittsburgh. More than 170 panels were installed on the roofs of the school, church and rectory buildings. Installation was completed March 4. (Theresa Doerfler)



by Theresa Doerfler

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

Pittsburgh — May 19, 2025

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Even on a cloudy Pittsburgh afternoon, for the St. Teresa of Kolkata Parish's Care of Creation Team, the decision to go solar was clear as day. Fifty people gathered in front of St. Teresa's St. Catherine of Siena Church in Pittsburgh's Beechview neighborhood to celebrate the blessing of the first array of solar panels at a Catholic parish in the Diocese of Pittsburgh.

As the ceremony began on the Saturday after Earth Day (April 26), the group sang Bernadette Farrell's lyrics, "Longing for light, we wait in darkness, / Longing for truth, we turn to you. / Make us your own, your holy people, / Light for the world to see."

Auxiliary Bishop Mark Eckman presided over the ceremony to bless the array, which includes more than 170 panels on the roofs of the school, church and rectory buildings. Installation was completed March 4, and the array was connected to Duquesne Light by April 1.

Eckman joked about the overcast day. In a Pittsburgh climate that doesn't always provide a lot of sunlight, even "a wee little bit of light" can make a difference, he said, reminding those in attendance, "Light is something we have to share with one another."

Eckman thanked St. Teresa of Kolkata parish for lighting the way, "Other parishes will follow, we hope, so we can all be light for one another."

Read this next: Pittsburgh parish creation care group hosts Earth Day fair

Advertisement

Even though Western Pennsylvania has fewer sunny days than other parts of the U.S., solar energy is still a viable option, especially considering the rising cost of electricity. For St. Teresa of Kolkata parish, the decision to go solar was both economically prudent and ethically sound. Heeding Pope Francis' *Laudato Si'* encyclical, they used proceeds from a building sale to make an initial investment of $295,000 that will generate more than 90% of the electricity usage for their three campuses.

According to Chuck Rakaczky, business manager, the cost of electricity has been one of the highest costs for the parish after expenses for staff, averaging more than $60,000 a year.

Rakaczky said he is obsessed with the app on his phone that lets him see their daily solar electricity production. The panels power the St. Catherine of Siena campus, and on days when they generate more than they need, the surplus goes to Duquesne Light, first for the other parish campuses and then for credit to their account.

Rakaczky expects the parish to save $54,000 annually with the panels, which will also greatly reduce the amount of carbon released into the atmosphere from the parish's energy needs. The return on investment will take less than six years, and the annual savings will support other parish services and capital improvements.

Members of the Care for Creation Team had to overcome the doubts of a "naysayer group," reluctant about the initial cost outlay, and a change in leadership at the parish. "A lot of education had to take place," said parishioner Roberta Zolkoski. But, she said, "Luckily, there were good-spirited people" who were willing to learn.



Auxiliary Bishop Mark Eckman celebrates the blessing of the first array of solar panels at St. Catherine of Siena Church in the Diocese of Pittsburgh on April 26. (Theresa Doerfler)

Chris Peta, co-founder of Laudato Sol, a nonprofit dedicated to solar energy as a tool for evangelization, gave a talk to the parish care for creation group in spring 2023. Peta credits Stella Smetanka Mericli, the convener of the care for creation group, for her leadership, "It's amazing what Stella and her group accomplished."

Reflecting that the blessing took place just hours after Pope Francis was laid to rest, Peta became emotional. "Seeing that it's what we're meant to do, according to

Laudato Si'… I think he'd be smiling," he said.

Fr. James Bachner, former pastor, was on hand with Fr. Fernando Torres, current pastor, to celebrate the day. "God gave us his Son," Bachner told the crowd. "And God gave us the sun. God gives us gifts." He expressed his hope that the solar array at St. Teresa of Kolkata parish is just the beginning for the diocese.

While Chuck Goetz, chief facilities officer for the Diocese of Pittsburgh, admitted there are no projects currently under review at the diocesan level, he said, "I know that there are some committees in parishes within the diocese that are looking into the possibility of sustainable energy options to include solar."

They only need to follow the example at St. Teresa of Kolkata, a parish formed in 2019 during a diocesan consolidation, with three church buildings in Pittsburgh's Brookline and Beechview neighborhoods that serve Pittsburgh's growing Latino population, with weekly Spanish-language and bi-weekly Portuguese-language Masses.

Francis ended *Laudato Si*' on a hopeful note: "In union with all creatures, we journey through this land seeking God. … Let us sing as we go. May our struggles and our concern for this planet never take away the joy of our hope."

At St. Teresa, the blessing ceremony closed, appropriately, with Marty Haugen's song based on "The Canticle of St. Francis." On the chilly April afternoon, people sang together, "Praise for the sun, the bringer of day, / He carries the light of the Lord in his rays."

Read this next: In sunny Arizona's Tucson Diocese, solar power makes moral, economic sense