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Climate change part of the justice message at SOA

by Patrick O'Neill

COLUMBUS, GA.

In the early 1990s, the words global warming were infrequently heard. Times have changed, said Bellarmine College Preparatory science teacher, Casey McCullough.

McCullough and partner, Joseph P. Carver SJ, spoke to a full house of mostly college students Saturday as part of the Ignatian Family Teach-In for Justice workshop titled: "Creation Our First Teacher: God's Invitation and Our Human Response."

McCullough told his audience that global warming was, "The most compelling social justice issue we confront today."

McCullough said he's glad the so-called "Greening of America" has gone primetime. Awareness has been raised, but it's far from "mission accomplished," he said.

There's just "one earth of finite resources being used at an unsustainable rate," McCullough said. With just five percent of the world's population, Americans consume 30 percent of the world's resources and produce 30 percent of the world's waste. If the rest of the world's people consumed at US rates, it would take the equivalent of four earths' resources to sustain life.

The problem of over-consumption by rich nations means the poor suffer, McCullough said. About three billion of the earth's people live in poverty, and one billion of those live on one dollar a day or less, he said.

Change needs to come from the top down, McCullough told the students, and change must come in the "consumption patterns" starting with food consumption.

McCullough gave five suggestions that could begin the process of reducing US consumption patterns:

1. Reform your diet. Eat less meat. Meat production requires massive use of fossil fuels.
2. Become a "locavore." On average, supermarket foods travel between 1,500 and 2,500 miles from farm to grocery store. Buying locally produced foods saves energy.
3. Compost your food waste instead of putting it in a plastic bag and sending it to the landfill. A home compost operation requires about "five minutes a day" of labor.
4. Start a garden.
5. Cut solid waste in your diet -- plastics especially. Processed foods produce lots of waste, and plastics are the worst.

Even when recycled, plastic bottles cannot be remade into new bottles, and about 90 percent of plastic cannot be recycled at all, McCullough said.

"Every time you buy a plastic water bottle you're using virgin resources," he said. "There's no need at all for plastic bags. There's no need at all for plastic water bottles." Use refillable containers and reusable grocery bags, he said.

McCullough said the world produces "60 billion tons of plastics each year," and millions of tons end up in oceans. The problem is so acute that plastics produce "garbage patches" from ocean currents that carry millions of plastic bottles out to sea where they mass together causing known and unknown environmental consequences, he said.

McCullough and Carver urged students to promote better consumption patterns on their campuses by pushing for sustainability.

Quoting Martin Luther King Jr., Carver said problems are caused by "the actions of bad people" and "the silence of good people."

Following the lecture, Martin Carney, a religious studies teacher at Fordham Prep in the Bronx, told McCullough he was moved by his comments.

"Unfortunately, we're probably going to go out and get some fast food for lunch," Carney told McCullough.

In an interview, Carney said sustainability was a moral and practical imperative for humanity.

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"For our own survival we've got to do this," Carney said. "It's just more and more clear that if we don't make these changes, I think our survival is at stake in a lot of ways."

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