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St. Francis feast film screenings bring climate refugees to light

by Brian Roewe

Eco Catholic

Across the country, churches, schools and communities celebrated Oct. 4 the feast of the patron saint of animals and the environment ? Francis of Assisi ? in a multitude of ways.

Many attended the traditional blessing of animals and pets; some made an effort to get outside to enjoy and experience nature as Francis did; still others honored his vow of poverty by serving the homeless.

Not surprisingly, each of these celebrations of the spirit of St. Francis was held in the days surrounding the feast day at the University of St. Francis, in Joliet, Ill.

But added among the traditional events this year was a screening of the film ?Sun Come Up,? an Academy Award-nominated documentary that tells the story of the Carteret Islanders, who have sought out a new home with rising South Pacific Ocean levels sinking their home in the Carteret Atoll, at its highest point five feet above sea level.

The university learned of the screening in April through the Catholic Coalition on Climate Change, and signed up for one of the organization?s 320 available copies of ?Sun Come Up,? as did more than 20,000 people in 42 states, and even Canada and Australia.

Dan Misleh, executive director of the coalition, said the group learned the story of the Carteret Islanders nearly a year ago through a news item describing how the Bougainville, Papua New Guinea Catholic diocese was assisting them in relocating to the mainland.

?We realized that this was a story that could help humanize the climate change problem and it shows how

the Catholic community has stepped up," said Misleh, who with others in the climate coalition contacted the NGO leading the relocation effort, Tulele Peisa, and began coordinating plans to spread the islanders' plight with the Feast of St. Francis.

For the University of St. Francis community, Franciscan Sr. Mary Elizabeth Imler, vice president of mission and ministry, said the film offered a way to view climate change in a new light "not from the perspective of endangered animal and plant species, "but from human beings who are losing their homes."

"Sun Come Up" follows the Carteret people, who began meeting in 2006 over concerns of rising sea levels, as they search for new land to relocate and work to build relationships with the people of Bougainville, the largest of the Solomon Islands archipelago and a land still recovering from a civil war stretching from 1988 to 1997.

[Read *NCR's* previous review of "Sun Come Up"]

After the screening Oct. 2, campus ministers led a group discussion, talking about the choice the Carteret Islanders faced "leave a home, or choose to stay." Some students asked what they can do, a question with possibly overwhelmingly large "and unmanageable" answers for people separate by an ocean.

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But Misleh said those simple individual and collective acts of ecological stewardship "recycling, conserving water and energy" do directly help people like the Carteret Islanders through addressing the root problem of uninhibited increase of greenhouse gases.

"Such efforts, done with serious intention and persistence, may be the best way to help because in the end we all must dramatically lower our carbon footprint if climate change is to be slowed and eventually reversed," Misleh said.

While the campus's own sustainability efforts are growing, Imler said becoming aware of present-day climate refugees tied into the university's emphasis this year on the value of compassion.

"The film was perfect to draw us simply to feel their suffering," Imler said.

An empathetic connection with Carteret climate refugees was part of what Misleh and the climate coalition had hoped the film screenings would bring about, while also recognizing climate change isn't an in-the-distance problem, but one impacting today's environment and animals "and people.

"Putting a human face to the problem of climate change certainly helps to motivate our Catholic faithful, if not our political leaders," Misleh said.

While uncertain that the stories of the Carteret people, as well as the dire situations facing other island people in the Maldives, Kiribati and even parts of Alaska, will spur global action but was confident that coalition's climate partners "including those who have signed its St. Francis Pledge" are spreading the message.

"As our network builds and as other networks grow, more pressure can be brought to bear on our leaders to do the right thing by God's creation and the poor and vulnerable people most impacted by climate change," he said.

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