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High tide for blessings in oceanside California diocese

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Eco Catholic

Surfers won't be the only ones waiting for the first waves Sunday morning at southern California's Huntington Beach.

So, too, will a throng of thousands from area faith communities.

The sixth annual "Blessing of the Waves" will bring together swimmers, beach-lovers and, yes, surfers to pray and show spiritual appreciation for the ocean, its resources and all its inhabitants.

"In Orange County our beaches are more than simple geography; they are a cultural and spiritual center of our community. It is important that we recognize this common element in all our lives, regardless of faith tradition," Franciscan Fr. Christian Mondor, founder of the event, said in a release from the Orange, Calif., diocese.

The diocese began the blessing in 2008, but beginning this year, has turned over its organizing to the Greater Huntington Beach Interfaith Council. Before last year's blessing, a diocesan spokesman told the *Los Angeles Times* that the idea emerged from seeing people holding hands near the water in the morning, a seemingly spiritual gesture.

The "Blessing of the Waves" Facebook page describes its mission as one that brings surfers and ocean-minded people together at one place and one time "regardless of their faith tradition and to show spiritual appreciation for the ocean resource and all that it gives the planet and its population."

In 2012, more than 3,000 people joined the blessing, held near the Huntington Beach pier. Notable participants included Tom Morey, inventor of the boogie board and member of the Baha'i faith, and Dean Torrence, half of the Jan and Dean musical duo who performed the 1963 chart-topping "Surf City."

This year's blessing will begin with an opening prayer service, followed by a pledge to protect oceans and beaches. Speakers will include Mondor, Torrence and surfing legend Rick "Rockin Fig" Fignetti.

Afterward, the blessing of the waves will follow, along with an additional blessing for those in attendance. To close the event, surfers and others will take to the water in a ceremonial paddle-out.

Looking toward Sunday's blessing, Mondor said, "I am excited to join with members of our diverse faith community here in Huntington Beach to bless waves, those who ride on them, and the lifeguards who protect ocean goers."

In the past the event has been held in conjunction with the Feast of St. Francis (Oct. 4). In the press release, Mondor referenced Popes Francis and Benedict XVI in restating calls to protect creation for present and future generations, particularly against human-caused destruction.

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"As we give thanks for this natural gift we must recognize that climate change disproportionately affects the economically disadvantaged. Environmental protection and curbing climate change is a matter of social justice that demands immediate action," he said.

But the Franciscan priest doesn't just speak up for the ocean's waves - he's also a frequent rider of them. Though he didn't begin surfing until age 70, Mondor, 88, has made it a new hobby, one earning him the nickname "the Surfing Priest." The new pastime, along with his work in organizing the Blessing of the Waves, led the Huntington Beach Surfing Walk of Fame to place him on its 2013 honor roll, a recognition of individuals who have contributed to the surfing culture.

"The time between the waves is a wonderful time to pray and be thankful. As you rise and fall with the swells, there's a real beauty and peacefulness to it. It's just a terrific feeling," he told a California travel website last year.

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