

Organization Works to Connect Catholics' Faith with Care for Natural World

MADLINE ZUKOWSKI
CATHOLIC HERALD STAFF

Throughout his childhood, Joe Meyer had a passion for two things: ecology and his Catholic faith. But those two passions often felt separate, and at times, seemed to oppose each other.

"Diving deeper into my faith, I found that at the heart of the Church's teachings those two things are integrated," he said. "The love and passion for the natural world that was given to me by God I can use to be a better steward and a good caretaker of it."

He was inspired after discovering the many ways Catholics have been called to care for their God-given home, from the life of St. Francis of Assisi to the words of St. John Paul II.

In 2015, when Pope Francis published his encyclical "Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home," Meyer, now a science teacher at Marquette University High School, formed and is now the executive director of the Laudato Si' Project. Officially created in 2016, the project is focused around connecting people to the natural world through education, stewardship and recreation.

Meyer, along with his team of volunteers and other partners, have created programming to educate the young and old about the importance of the Earth's natural systems and how to best ensure the systems last. They also help organize stewardship activities to restore natural places as well as connect people to the land and their faith. Meyer said the project has worked with 20 schools and parishes, including several within the Archdiocese of Milwaukee.

The Laudato Si' Project will often conduct presentations for a parish or school, but some schools like to get involved and participate in stewardship activities, which include invasive species removal, tree planting and trail maintenance, among other activities.

Cristo Rey Jesuit High School has partnered with the Laudato Si' Project, said Meyer, planning stewardship work days both in the fall and in the spring. In the past, students have done woodland restoration and invasive species removal on the lands of the Schoenstatt Retreat Center in Waukesha.

Other schools, like St. Jude the Apostle School in Wauwatosa, has taken advantage of the retreats the Laudato Si' Project provides. The day retreats allow students to grow in their faith, grow in love for one



▲ Eighth graders from St. Dominic School in Brookfield plant an educational butterfly garden outside of the school offices. (Submitted photo)

another, participate in hands-on-service work and see their faith in action.

"Students nowadays don't really have as many opportunities as maybe myself growing up to connect with the natural world," Meyer said of the retreats. "Students can take time outside, time that they may not make on their own with all the distractions that we have today. They're connecting with nature, falling in love with the small things and really finding God in that beauty that he imparts in us through the natural world."

While connecting with nature can and should be fun, interacting with nature in an intentional way through stewardship and faith sets the Laudato Si' Project apart.

"People aren't going to care for something they don't understand," Meyer said. "We provide those encounters (with the natural world) and frame it with faith and stewardship. This is different than telling people all the problems and why they should care. Seeing it through a moral and virtue lens keeps it long lasting."

Meyer and his team hope to keep providing these opportunities to the community, but are looking for a place to center their educational, recreation, retreat and stewardship activities. They hope to create a Catholic Ecology Center on land with certain ecological attributes to amplify their programming and invite people in. They are still in the beginning stages, and looking for key supporters to help get their place off of the ground. Interested parties can visit www.catholicecologycenter.org.

While care for the environment can be a politically charged topic, Meyer and his team see it as caring for the most vulnerable, with the Earth being vulnerable and neglected. When we realize that the Earth is not earned, that it is a God-given gift, it changes how we care for our environment, Meyer said.

"(Caring for the Earth) is not an ideology thing; it's a virtue thing," he said. "It's part of the whole package of our faith. Our faith and caring for the creation are intertwined so beautifully."