

Earth Day Celebration at St. Camillus Church in Silver Spring, Md.

By Jacek Orzechowski, OFM

Surrounded by fragrant white lilies, hydrangeas and azaleas at the foot of the altar, parishioners were immediately struck by a large painting depicting the earth teeming with diverse creatures. Right above it, a sign heralded an important message written in many different languages: “God’s creation: handle it with care.”

Such was the liturgical ambiance at St. Camillus Church’s annual Earth Day celebration, prepared by the Latino members of the Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation Committee. The group worked hard to help ensure that the April 22 Sunday liturgies clearly reflected the theme of caring for God’s earth.

“We thought it was important that the music, offertory procession and prayers of the faithful that Sunday integrated the call to environmental justice with our Catholic faith,” said Sandra Perez, one of the members of the Latino JPIC. Another opportunity was created during the Mass: When the people received Communion, the church’s lights were turned off. Then afterwards, projected on the wall, right behind the altar, was an amazing video called “Creation Calls.”¹

A number of parishioners commented on how much this unique Communion meditation meant to them. “It’s awesome that we could celebrate, here in the church, the many ways God speaks to us in and through God’s creation. This is how I often experience God — out in nature as well as in the church,” said one young adult after the Mass.

He and close to 300 other members of St. Camillus Parish stopped by the Earth Day table at the back of the church. There, they signed Catholic Climate Covenant’s St. Francis Pledge² to care for God’s earth. They also received materials on specific ways they could live a more sustainable lifestyle. On a green paper in the shape of a leaf, they wrote their particular commitments that were then attached to a paper tree on display in the church.

Otto Perez, Esther Reyes and Sandra Perez were among those who took the lead in organizing this parish-wide initiative.

Mr. Perez said, “I was deeply moved by the positive responses we received at the English, Spanish and French Masses. It was especially heartening to see the enthusiasm for the environment from the children and young people. This gives me a lot of hope.”

Esther Reyes, a member of the Latino JPIC and of the Secular Franciscan Order spoke glowingly about the event: “I and other members of JPIC committee were amazed and filled with joy to see how well the entire community of St. Camillus responded to our Earth Day celebration. Our many different customs and languages spoken at the parish presented no barriers. The empty branches of

¹ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LwGvfdtI2c0>

² <http://catholicclimatecovenant.org/the-st-francis-pledge>

the green paper tree became by the end of the day completely filled with the parishioners' written commitments to care for our sister, Mother Earth."

It's worth noting that Earth Day is by no means the only time that St. Camillus' Latino community has engaged in the issue of environmental justice. Recently, close to 50 members of Latino JPIC participated in a rally in front of the State Capital in Annapolis, Md, to advocate in support of MD Offshore Wind Energy.³

The members of the Latino community are currently organizing a special musical concert, "Celebrating God's Creation: Defending the Life of Our Children," that will be sponsored and promoted by the local Hispanic radio station. "Last year, at a similar event, we had over 300 people participating. I know that this year, we're working to make it even better. We are collaborating with the young people of the Archdiocese. As they learn about what is happening to our planet and about the close connection between our faith and the environment, they get fired up and ready for action," said Mr. Perez, who coordinates the Latino JPIC efforts at St. Camillus.

³ A short video of the event is available at <http://www.stcamilluschurch.org>