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The Challenge of Reducing Waste

A Parish Guide

A reporting series by Brian Roewe



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Can we cut our plastic waste?

The problem of single-use plastics and other quickly disposable items isn't an easy one to solve.

At times it can seem impossible to escape the products, so prevalent they are in daily life in what Pope Francis has termed the "throwaway culture," from plastic foam cups and plastic-lined coffee cups, to straws and paper sacks and leftover food, to plastic lids, plastic wrappers, plastic wrapping and plastic bags.

For Catholics seeking to reduce their own con-

sumption, the parish often provides a first area. Hospitality gatherings after Mass and other social events offer a chance to not only recognize how much waste a community regularly produces, but also an opportunity to do something about it.

This three-part series looks at the challenge posed by plastic pollution — the theme of Earth Day 2018 — and how Catholic parishes and communities are taking steps to reduce the waste and change lifestyles.

– Brian Roewe
Staff Writer

'Throwaway culture' in spotlight as Earth Day targets plastics

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They're gone, finally.

It took nearly nine months, but at long last for Betsy Zolper the thousands of plastic foam cups that once filled the pantries at St. Mark Catholic Church, in Arlington, Virginia, are no longer there. In their place sit stacks of compostable and biodegradable paper cups, a first step by the parish's nascent creation care team toward reducing waste while at the same time increasing consciousness of how much they throw out.

Eliminating the plastic foam cups — an extremely cheap, but environmentally hazardous beverage option — became the first focus for the Care for Our Common Home ministry, which formed in January 2017.

It also proved more difficult than it seemed.

The backlog of already-stocked foam cups meant any environmentally friendly substitute would be on hold until those ran out. Rather than donate them to another organization, the parish decided to work through the stash themselves. And so the waiting game began.

"It sounds silly, but every month on our agenda — 'Foam cups?' When will we see the paper cups?" said



Water bottles are set out for the taking at the Society of St. Vincent de Paul dining hall in downtown Phoenix June 4, 2016, when the temperature reached 115 degrees. (CNS/Nancy Wiechec)

Zolper, co-chair of Care for Our Common Home.

It became the task of fellow co-chair Annette Kaine to keep checking with the parish office manager for a foam cup count, and also to provide an alternative. "Because of course it was one of our main areas of focus, but it wasn't for the office," Zolper explained.



One of the paper cups now used at St. Mark Catholic Church in Arlington, Virginia (Betsy Zolper)

“They’re busy doing important things for the parish.”

When “day zero” finally arrived, some time in the fall, the eco team was able to bring in the EcoChoice paper cups. For their efforts, they received some positive feedback, even from the office manager herself, who confessed to her own un-

successful efforts to rid the parish of the foam cups for 10 years, but was unable to overcome the cost issue (the paper cups cost \$67 for 120, whereas plastic foam ones are available on Amazon for \$30 for 1,000).

The foam cup purge took longer than expected, but it represented a start.

“One thing we’re stressing is just making one small change and getting people to notice it,” Zolper said. “That’s how you get people to start changing their consumption and consumption in their lifestyles.”

The problem with plastic

The challenge of reducing waste has been one taken up by many parishes for years.

It aligns with this year’s theme for Earth Day (April 22): ending plastic pollution, with a particular aim to reduce the use and quick disposal of single-use plastics. According to a 2017 study in *Science Advances*, cited by the Earth Day Network, of the 9.1 billion tons of plastic produced since the 1950s, a mere 9 percent of it has been recycled, with 79 percent becoming plastic waste in landfills and littering the landscape. That latter number is projected to grow to 13.2 billion tons by 2050.

The problem with plastics draws from its difficulty in decomposing. Some materials used in their production can last for decades or centuries, and they end up littering land and water. There are believed to be five massive marine garbage patches, with

the Great Pacific Garbage Patch probably the most notable — floating between California and Hawaii, it is composed of an estimated 1.8 trillion pieces of plastic, cumulatively larger than the state of Texas. Another garbage patch, this one in the South Pacific, was discovered last year, estimated to be larger than Mexico.

Plastic in Earth’s waterways are harmful to animals, who can die after eating or getting caught in them. It can be harmful to humans, too, as it enters the food chain. Certain plastics also contain chemicals harmful to human health, such as phthalates and BPA, and can lead to a variety of medical issues. In addition, the poor are impacted by plastic pollution disproportionately, with 2 billion people lacking access to waste collection, and landfills and waste management facilities more likely to be located near low-income communities.

For 12 percent of plastics incinerated for energy production, in the process they release harmful gases into the atmosphere. Along with that, as a petroleum product, plastics helps fuel climate change through the burning of fossil fuels in its production, with plastic production expected to grow from 8 percent of oil production today to 20 percent by 2050.

Committing to lower consumption

“The earth, our home, is beginning to look more and more like an immense pile of filth,” Pope Francis now famously observed in his 2015 encyclical “*Laudato Si’*, on Care for Our Common Home.”

In bemoaning “once beautiful landscapes are now covered with rubbish,” the pope rebuked “a throwaway culture” where, in a consumerist mindset, goods, food and even people are discarded after their perceived use and worth wears out.

“We have not yet managed to adopt a circular model of production capable of preserving resources for present and future generations, while limiting as much as possible the use of non-renewable resources, moderating their consumption, maximizing their efficient use, reusing and recycling them,” Francis wrote in *Laudato Si’*.

While solutions to dealing with already disposed plastics are being sought — scientists recently discovered a “plastic-eating enzyme” that could be used to break down many commonly used plastics into more recyclable materials — that addresses only part of the throwaway culture the pope routinely critiques. On the other end is examining the commonness of purchasing so much plastic and other hard-



Women hold children while sifting through plastic bottles at a recycling factory in Mohammadpur, Bangladesh, Oct. 26, 2016. (CNS/Abir Abdullah, EPA)

to-recycle-or-reuse materials in one moment, only to discard most of it minutes or hours or days later.

“Many times we’re doing it unconsciously,” said Paz Artaza-Regan, program manager for Catholic Climate Covenant. “How many times I’ve brought home something because of convenience, and I look at it, and I go, wow, did I really need that two green peppers packaged in a Styrofoam little basket with plastic wrap on top of it? But that was what was available at the supermarket that was on sale, so I picked it up.”

The push from plastic isn’t meant as a full-out abandonment of the material pervasive in so many aspects of daily life. Artaza-Regan and others acknowledge there are instances and situations where plastic use can be necessary, if not vital. Hospitals rely on numerous plastic products, such as straws to help patients eat, drink and at times, breathe, and other quickly disposed items, like gloves and protection gowns. And during natural disasters or times of unsafe water supplies, such as in the case in Flint, Michigan, bottled water can become a literal lifeline.

To help Catholics engage the Earth Day theme and reflect on their own relationship with plastic and quickly discarded items, Catholic Climate Covenant created a program called “Beyond a Throwaway Culture: Reduce Waste, Grow Community.” Approximately 1,500 parishes, prayer groups and individuals have downloaded the program, designed in a way not to limit its use solely to Earth Day festivities.

As part of the program, Catholic Climate Covenant is inviting groups to commit to an activity between Earth Day and the beginning of the Season of Creation (Sept. 1) toward reducing their use of single-use plastics. Those projects would later be

shared throughout the month of September to promote what steps Catholics are taking.

“For Catholic communities, we have to start thinking also how we use plastics, not just at home but after church, for example, during our coffee hours, during our community get-togethers. Is there a way to change that culture of convenience where we’ve got plastic cups and Styrofoam cups and plastic dinnerware?” Artaza-Regan said.

Small, successful steps

During Lent in 2016, roughly 400 parishioners at St. Columbkille Parish, in Papillion, Nebraska, outside Omaha, joined a plastic fast challenge initiated by its creation care team. Participants were asked to focus specifically on reducing their use of plastic bags and plastic bottles.

“We were very encouraged by it because a lot of the young folks that came by [at Mass] told us that they were already doing that. So that was very uplifting,” said Sr. Jean Marie Faltus, a member of the parish creation care team.

This Lent, the St. Columbkille creation care team asked the leaders of parish ministries to ask their members to bring their own cups, glasses and mugs to meetings. They have moved the parish away from plastic foam cups to biodegradable paper versions, but even those are in the crosshairs for future elimination, with the ultimate goal moving away from all litter and turning their kitchen into a designated eco-friendly space.

For Earth Day, St. Columbkille has adopted the Catholic Climate Covenant program, asking families to commit on paper to saying no to plastic in some way, be it declining a straw or plastic bag, choosing glass over plastic, or avoiding items wrapped in plastic. Participants will receive a sign to hang in their window at home through the summer, to hold themselves accountable but also let neighbors know, and maybe even encourage them to take part, too.

“We’re taking baby steps, and we’re [saying] okay, use the biodegradable but eventually we’re going to get rid of that, too,” Faltus said.

Even with their successes, they’ve faced their own challenges.

The organizers of the parish fish fry continue to use a lot of plastic foam products. Already short on volunteers, they say they value the convenience of being able to throw everything away and carry a few trash bags to the dumpster, rather than take the time to use and wash and put away the parish’s



Volunteers stack water bottles in Lansing, Mich., Feb. 15, 2016, to send to Flint residents, whose water became contaminated with lead. (CNS photo/courtesy FAITH Catholic)

dishes. And while the Knights of Columbus pancake breakfast has adopted the use of biodegradable cups for coffee — a fair-trade variety Faltus suggested to them — they still use foam cups for juice for the kids.

“It’s just the way people were thinking years back, and now we have to reprogram that thinking,” Faltus said. “And it just takes time.”

Back at St. Mark, the Care for Our Common Home ministry has taken numerous steps to educate and

raise awareness, including hosting a speaker about living a zero waste lifestyle and screening the documentary “Bag It” about plastic bags. Eventually, Zolper hopes to create a sustainability guide for the parish’s ministries to use.

On Earth Day, they plan to host an astronomer from Catholic University of America for a tour of the Milky Way galaxy; they’ll also take up a collection to buy the parish school a composter for apple cores and banana peels.

At some point, the creation care team wants to bring composting to the parish, too, and eventually move away from disposable cups entirely and rely primarily on reusable dishes and their commercial dishwasher. As it stands, the new paper cups, though not harmful to the environment like plastic foam, just go into the trash.

Even at times when it feels like an uphill climb, Zolper doesn’t give up hope, drawing spiritual resilience from a passage in *Laudato Si’* where Francis stated, “There is a nobility in the duty to care for creation through little daily actions, and it is wonderful how education can bring about real changes in lifestyle.”

“That’s really the first thing,” Zolper said, “to recognize where you can make small changes. Where you can make small changes, but why you’re doing it. I’m doing it as part of my Catholic faith.”

Catholic parishes, hospitals see results from efforts to reduce and recycle

APRIL 23, 2018

Jeffrey Grosscup can vividly picture the numbers. Six hundred to 1,200 people at two Sunday Mass services at St. Joan of Arc Church, in Minneapolis. Many joining for coffee and hospitality afterward.

“Let’s say there’s 1,000 Styrofoam cups used every Sunday, and that’s just going into the trash and it’s being incinerated. And it was really unconscionable that we were continuing to operate that way,” said Grosscup, a parishioner at Joan of Arc since 1971 and member of its Eco Spirits ministry.

That thinking roughly a decade ago led the parish to make their own transition away from cheap plas-

tic foam cups to corn-based compostable coffee cups.

The move didn’t take much convincing, with the parish already thinking about sustainability through the addition to its parish center. A long heavy wooden beam salvaged from the bottom of Lake Superior in the new space serves as a symbol of the parish’s commitment to reuse.

But the parishioners involved in Eco Spirits didn’t stop there.

With their annual Cabaret, a three-night fundraising arts showcase held each fall, all the elements for a “perfect storm” of potential waste were present:

servicing dinner and drinks to a large number of people, an outside professional caterer, a limited budget, uncountable little details to plan and prepare, dozens of volunteers and organizers, exhaustion by the end of it all just to clean up quickly, get out and get home.

The latest Cabaret, held over three nights in October and drawing 1,500 guests, amassed just 38 pounds of trash.

“It’s a powerful story of what is capable for any organization — a school, Boy Scouts doing the Blue and Gold dinners, whatever it is, an athletic banquet — of what you can do to really cut down on waste if you have a sense of stewardship about it all,” Grosscup said.

Through careful planning on the front end, including purchasing green materials at a local party materials store and using light-focused decorations, and dedicated execution by its members at the event itself, the Eco Spirits ministry was able to manage the 1,109 pounds of total waste generated in a way to ensure 97 percent of it was recycled or composted.

Even with the Eco Spirits’ zero waste emphasis, Joan of Arc isn’t without its own troubles in reducing waste. It’s not uncommon for people, though open and willing to recycle, to toss a coffee cup from Starbucks or Caribou into one of the parish’s recycling bins. But Grosscup, a certified recycler in Hennepin County, sees those items for what they are: trash.

“Any time you get a cup from Starbucks, it’s not a compostable cup,” he said, pointing out the plastic lining on the cup’s inside making it incompatible with paper recycling or composting. In March, Starbucks announced it was investing \$10 million to develop a compostable cup.

Those changes could help stem the trend of increasing plastic waste in the decades to come. Currently, 5.5 billion tons of plastic waste, or 79 percent of the 9.1 billion tons of plastic produced since the 1950s, ends up in landfill or in the environment, according to a 2017 study in *Science Advances*. That total is expected to grow to 13.2 billion tons by 2050 without a change in production or waste management.

In the U.S., about half of the 258 million tons of trash generated annually ends up in landfills, compared to 34 percent of it being recycled, according to the 2017 Infrastructure Report Card issued by the American Society of Civil Engineers.

To help in the education of what is and is not recyclable into the parish’s three bins — paper and cardboard; glass, plastic bottles and aluminum cans and bottles; and organics — Grosscup has on several



Eco Spirits volunteers Pat Ballard, left, and Pat Wasser deposit organic cups, plates, napkins and utensils into a composting bin during the annual Cabaret fundraiser, at St. Joan of Arc Church, in Minneapolis, in October. (Jeffrey Grosscup)

occasions after Mass set up a display where he has people sort through 50 hard-to-decipher items, such as plastic razors, toothpaste boxes and egg cartons, and decide if they’re recyclable or not, and if so, in what bin to place them.

“It’s a real eye-opener for people when they start to look at this. And it just shows how easy we can contaminate that recycle source,” he said.

While single-use compostable materials are better than unrecyclable alternatives, the end goal is substituting those with reusable plates and cups. Already, people are encouraged to bring their own mugs to different meetings, and the parish uses ceramic place settings for smaller events. They’ve taken steps to eliminate water bottles and replace them with water carafes. A future Eco Spirits program will ask parishioners to “take the pledge” to minimize their own use of single-use plastics and materials.

“There’s a shame in that, I think, that all these coffee cups and things that we’re using, though they can all be compostable, on the front end they’re only used once,” Grosscup said.

A key part of our Catholic faith

At St. John Neumann Church, in Reston, Virginia, they’ve attempted to skip altogether the recyclable or compostable options for parish functions and, instead, are opting for reusable dishes, tumbler glasses and a professional-grade dishwasher.

“Our real goal is not to buy all this stuff in the first place, so we don’t have to recycle it,” Ed Sabo, a member of the parish’s creation care team, also called



Care for Our Common Home members from St. Mark and St. John Neumann parishes in March toured the American Recycling Center in Manassas, Virginia, to learn how throwaway plastic items are recycled. (Janet Broderick)

Care for Our Common Home, told NCR.

He sees value for the parish in the savings coming from not continually buying reams and reams of plates and cups. More than that, members of Care for Our Common Home recognize the value in the parish leading by example to make people more aware of the throwaway culture.

“We really consider this a key part of our Catholic faith. We’re just not tree-hugging environmentalists,” Sabo said.

Like its neighboring parish St. Mark Church, in Arlington, the Care for Our Common Home ministry at St. John Neumann formed out of a parish study of *Laudato Si’*, in late 2015. It includes about a dozen active participants, and has a mailing list of 60 to 70 people.

“After reading that, we were sort of inspired to try to do something,” Sabo said. “Not just read and understand what he [Pope Francis] was saying, but take some practical actions to reduce waste or reduce our energy consumption.”

The two parishes have shared knowledge and collaborated on waste-reducing activities. The awareness-building isn’t limited just to their consumption of plastic, but why their faith calls them to limit it.

“Some people are noticing it and saying it’s a great idea. And other people are saying, well this takes too much time to wash these dishes afterward and put them away. It’s just so much easier to throw everything in the trash,” Sabo said.

Parishioners at St. John Neumann have been able to put into action their 250 sets of waste-reducing dishes in a number of their ministries: Lenten soup

suppers with the Boy Scout troop assisting in the cleanup; a large workshop in February that hosted around 300 people; and at the dinners at a hypothermia shelter the parish hosts in the winter, serving about 100 people in all between visitors and volunteers.

After each event, Sabo does some counting of his own.

“That’s 100 people or so who reuse our plates and utensils. So that’s five nights times 100 plates we saved there,” he said.

The last straw

The slurping sounds of emptying drinks are less prevalent in Dignity Health hospitals these days.

Chalk that up to the lack of straws, as they were removed entirely from cafeterias in December in all 39 hospitals within the San Francisco-based healthcare network. That’s 5,500 fewer straws a day, or roughly 2 million a year.

The move, overseen by Dominican Sr. Mary Ellen Leciejewski in California’s largest hospital provider and the nation’s fifth-largest health system, was prompted by a 17-year-old girl. In November, Shelby O’Neil wrote a letter to Dignity Health CEO Lloyd Dean asking why a straw was featured in one of the health provider’s commercials. For a Girl Scout project, O’Neil had organized beach cleanups and educated about the problems single-use plastics, like straws, pose to the oceans.

As a result, gone are the straws, along with plastic stir sticks, which together represent a reduction of



I know it’s a little thing, in a sense, but what it does, it just symbolizes so much more,” Dominican Sr. Mary Ellen Leciejewski, vice president of corporate responsibility at Dignity Health, said of the hospital system’s removal of plastic straws and stir sticks from its cafeterias.



Waste disposal bins for composting, recycling and trash are used at St. Thomas Aquinas Parish, in Palo Alto, California. “You just have to continually remind people,” said Katia Reeves, a member of the parish’s green committee. (St. Thomas Aquinas Green Committee)

11,000 disposable plastics a day and 4 million a year. “I know it’s a little thing, in a sense, but what it does, it just symbolizes so much more... It takes a look at our consumerist lifestyle, our throwaway lifestyle. You know, we use this thing once and throw it away. So it is just something that says okay, maybe we need to look at this, maybe we really do not need this straw,” said Leciejewski, Dignity Health vice president of corporate responsibility.

Opportunities to reduce waste are abundant in a hospital, even more so in a system of three dozen facilities. Within each is a green team that coordinates with Leciejewski on various waste reduction or environmental programs. Those efforts have included reducing the supplies in operating room surgical packs to quantities more in line with what is typically used, reprocessing or reusing surgical instruments and pulse oximeters, and installing water filling stations to encourage reusable bottles.

In fiscal year 2017, Dignity Health recycled 34 percent of its waste. That included recycling 96 tons of “blue wrap,” a material made of polypropylene #5 used to cover sterilized surgical instruments.

In 2014, the hospitals began recycling blue wrap, but it wasn’t until a few months ago that Dignity

Health found a reprocessor able to turn it into new materials, such as tote bags, recyclable bins, bed pans and water pitchers.

“So that’s kind of like the circular economy,” Leciejewski said. “Using the product, then once we’re finished with it send it back and turn it into products, and then we’re working on bringing those products back into the hospitals.”

Still, there are things, like protective gloves and gowns, that simply can’t be redirected from the trash bins because they’re considered medical waste.

“Safety is paramount, that’s first,” Leciejewski said, in particular for the patient.

In the case of the straws, they remain for patients, and if family members request one, paper versions are still available. And while some in the hospitals have said they miss the straws, others have applauded the move, one becoming more common also in restaurants on the West Coast.

The culture in California has ingrained in many residents a tendency away from waste.

“I think it helps a lot, because it’s in everybody’s mind,” said Katia Reeves, a parishioner at St. Thomas Aquinas Parish, in Palo Alto. “... There’s not as much space as other states that are not as densely populated, so it’s even more apparent that something needs to be done.”

Aquinas, a cluster of three churches, began its waste reduction efforts about nine years ago, around the time it first saw the St. Francis Pledge created by the Catholic Climate Covenant. Since then, through its green committee, it’s taken on numerous environmentally focused projects: swapping plastic foam cups and plastics in their kitchen for compostable plates, cups and cutlery, banning plastic water bottles and joining the statewide push for banning plastic bags in California, which voters did in November 2016.

The past two years, they’ve held a “free-cycle” event at the annual parish picnic, where parishioners bring usable but unwanted items that others can take home. Also at the parish picnic and other large events, they only set out recycle bins and compost bins. Inside the parish, landfill bins are present, but are smaller than the others as another effort to encourage a “less trash” mentality.

Since the fall, the smaller garbage bin concept has also been in place at the parish’s school, St. Elizabeth Seton School. At an assembly, principal Evelyn Rosa explained to the students what goes where, demonstrating with a school meal on a compostable tray, and why they were making the shift.

“Way too much stuff was being thrown in land-

fill [bin] that needed to go in the compost,” said vice principal Ellen Maguire. “... They just saw garbage cans the same size, the same color. One said compost, one said landfill, but they were just putting them in whatever they wanted to.”

The students have caught on, even pointing out on field trips when the places they visit lack a compost bin. The visual cues on the bins are essential, the school leaders stressed, as is being deliberate about

them and starting the education process at a young age.

Reeves has taken steps on her own to pass on recycling habits to the next generation. When she goes to the beach with her four grandkids, they bring with them bags to collect trash. She does the same when her nieces from Kansas City visit, who have taken the habit home, where they bring a bag on their jogs to collect items of trash they pass along the path.

Parish change begins with awareness, bins and reminders

APRIL 24, 2018



Green committee members at St. Thomas Aquinas Parish, in Palo Alto, California, hold a water taste test to see if parishioners could tell the difference between bottled and city water in 2011. (St. Thomas Aquinas Green Committee)

What are some first steps Catholic parishes can take toward reducing waste and addressing the throwaway culture?

A toolkit created by the Earth Day Network, which set ending plastic pollution as the theme for the 48th Earth Day celebration, suggests a three-step process that any group or individual can follow: first, learn about the problem; second, examine one’s own consuming habits and look for ways not only to recycle, but more importantly, to reduce your usage; and third, engage others by sharing your own experience and inviting them to do the same.

During a webinar hosted by Catholic Climate Covenant, Valeria Merino, vice president for Global Earth Day with the Earth Day Network, highlighted

the 5 R’s familiar from environmental science classes: reduce, reuse, refuse, recycle and remove.

While recycling often gets the most attention, Merino said it’s reduce that is “the core idea. ... We think that unless we reduce consumption, everything else is minor.” According to a 2017 study in *Science Advances*, cited by the Earth Day Network, there has been 9.1 billion tons of plastic produced since the 1950s, with that number expected to grow to 13.2 billion tons by 2050. Of that 9.1 billion tons of waste so far, just 9 percent has been recycled, while 79 percent has ended up in landfills or scattered throughout the environment.

“You should recycle, for sure, but you should do something more than just recycle. And I think the first thing is reduce,” she added during the webinar.

The Earth Day Network toolkit, along with Catholic Climate Covenant’s Earth Day program titled “Beyond a Throwaway Culture: Reduce Waste, Grow Community,” offer additional tips to get started. One idea they suggest: declining a plastic straw at restaurants, or purchasing a glass straw to carry with you.

Paz Artaza-Regan, program manager for Catholic Climate Covenant, has started doing just that, finding that the “no straw, please” request can sometimes catch servers off guard. She told NCR she has tried to use those moments to spread awareness of the throwaway culture Pope Francis has regularly criticized, and to maybe even help spread the cause.

“As individuals we can start that little bit of that education,” she said.

Be mindful during hospitality

Jeff Grosscup, a longtime parishioner at St. Joan of Arc Church in Minneapolis and member of its Eco Spirits ministry, said a good place to start is looking at a parish's hospitality functions.

"All these things have the same set of issues: You're going to be preparing food, you're going to be generating both trash and organic. And just to be mindful of what you can do to be a steward of the earth," he said.

The Eco Spirits did just that, beginning by moving from plastic foam cups to compostable versions. Eventually, they were able to reduce waste headed to a landfill at their annual three-night Cabaret fundraiser to a mere 38 pounds.

Katia Reeves, a member of the creation care team at St. Thomas Aquinas Parish, in Palo Alto, California, added another first step is to check with your city or county to see what recycling and composting programs they offer. She admits their waste reduction efforts would be hampered without the city of Palo Alto's zero waste program, which provides pick-up for composting and recycling. In addition, California law requires businesses to recycle.

"The policies from the city and the state I think re-



Marcia Kurtz, a member of the Eco Spirits ministry at St. Joan of Arc Parish, in Minneapolis, shops for compostable materials for the parish at Litin Party Supplies. (Jeffrey Grosscup)



Ellen Moore, a member of the creation care team at St. Columbkille Parish, in Papillion, Nebraska, poses with her family in front of a truck the parish and community packed with 2,400 cubic feet of foam packaging materials left over from Christmas and holiday presents. (St. Columbkille Parish)

inforce to the people, to the parishioners, that we're all in this together and we need to do our share to reduce the pollution and the greenhouse gases and all that from the environment," she said.

In Papillion, Nebraska, home to St. Columbkille Church, residents can purchase orange bags in which they can place hard-to-recycle items, such as juice boxes, cereal box liners and empty chip bags, which are collected by First Star Recycling and later converted to energy.

During the Christmas season, St. Columbkille partnered with another local company, Plastilite, to rent a 50-plus-foot trailer where anyone in town could bring leftover plastic foam from presents for repurposing. In announcing the program at Masses, Ellen Moore of the creation care team put the material's long lifespan into familiar terms: "The Styrofoam that you're throwing in the landfill today will be here when Jesus comes again, and he's not going to be happy."

To their surprise, the community with a population of 20,000 filled the truck with ease, to the tune of



Students at St. Elizabeth Seton School, in Palo Alto, California, demonstrate in their schoolyard how to use the various waste bins put in place to help reduce the amount of trash sent to landfills. (St. Elizabeth Seton School)

2,400 cubic feet of packaging foam, or the equivalent of a 12-foot-wide, 40-foot-long, 5-foot-deep swimming pool.

“We didn’t expect that kind of response,” said Sr. Jean Marie Faltus, a member of the Sisters for Christian Community, a non-canonical order, and a member of the parish’s creation care team. Faltus added they were exploring bringing the truck back for the city’s annual Clean-Up Days later this month.

Faltus said she’s learned that giving people direction and an easy outlet to dispose of recyclable and compostable materials — from plastics, to food waste, to old batteries — makes all the difference in keeping it out of their garbage cans.

If you provide it, they will dispose properly.

“People are very willing, they just need to know what to do with it. And they don’t want to be bothered with taking it themselves,” she said.

Ease is essential

Reeves said it took a long time to train people at Aquinas to use the proper bins. Part of that was different rules on what can be recycled from different waste management companies.

To help, they’ve placed signs on the bins as well as hung posters above them with samples of items acceptable for each bin. At the parish picnic one year, they held a game where children had to throw various pieces of trash into the correct bin in order to win a prize, either shoestrings or a tote bag, both made from recycled plastic bottles. Occasional bulletin blurbs also reinforce the behavior:

“It’s not something that you do it once and forget it.

You just have to continually remind people,” she said.

Dominican Sr. Mary Ellen Leciejewski, vice president of corporate responsibility at Dignity Health, said ease is essential to getting the staff, patients and visitors to its 39 hospitals to use the proper bins. That means making sure bins are accessible, such as in patient rooms, as nurses for one don’t have time to walk all the way down the hall to recycle something.

“We move so fast in our culture, we have to make it as easy as possible for people. So whatever we can do to offer an alternative,” Leciejewski said.

At St. Mark Church, in Arlington, Virginia, the Care for Our Common Home ministry has taken numerous steps to educate and raise awareness, including hosting a speaker about living a zero waste lifestyle and screening the documentary “Bag It” about plastic bags. Eventually, Betsy Zolper, co-chair of Care for Our Common Home, hopes to create a sustainability guide for the parish.

One of the biggest hurdles for parishes taking on waste reduction to overcome is changing the culture, doing so in a way that makes it simple for people while avoiding frustration or surfacing Catholic guilt that turns people off altogether.

Zolper found that while sustainability motivated her and others on the green team to substitute plastic foam coffee cups for biodegradable ones, it didn’t strike a chord with everyone. Some were happy with the change because of health concerns with drinking from foam cups, which others found not aesthetically pleasing.



Members of the green committee at St. Thomas Aquinas Parish, in Palo Alto, California, hold a water taste test to see if parishioners could tell the difference between bottled water and city water during the annual parish picnic in September 2011. The parish eventually banned bottled water at its events. (St. Thomas Aquinas Green Committee)

Change is slow, but critical

Ed Sabo, a member of the green team at St. John Neumann Church, in Reston, Virginia, acknowledges that change to the throwaway culture comes slowly. A common word heard in opposition: convenience.

“It’s just so convenient for whoever’s organizing the particular social event ... just to throw everything in the trash and take a couple trash bags out. As opposed to taking the time to collect the cups and plates and run them through the dishwasher and put them back away,” he told NCR.

For the summer, the parish’s Care for Our Common Home ministry is working to set up composting bins during the farmer’s market held in the parish parking lot. They also plan to revamp their recycling bins with the facilities manager to make them clearer — and easier — for people to use, even if that means scaling back what items they focus on accepting.

Both Sabo and Zolper know that such steps aren’t universally viewed in their neighboring parishes as part of what it means to be Catholic — they each only learned in recent years of care for creation’s inclusion in the tenants of Catholic social teaching.

“We’re trying to lead by example, so to speak,” Sabo said. “That if we can show that this is an important part of our Catholic faith, to reduce our waste and that sort of thing, then that visibility that we’re doing at the parish level will filter over to people’s individual actions on the home front.”

Faltus at St. Columbkille said they work to attach all their environmental efforts to what it means to be pro-life, that that worldview extends to “things that sustain life as well as just bringing life into the world.”

As part of its Earth Day program, the Catholic Climate Covenant has asked parishes, school and other



Members of the Care for Our Common Home ministries at St. John Neumann Church, in Reston, Virginia, and St. Mark Church, in Arlington, wash reusable plates, utensils and cups in an effort following dinners they served at a hypothermia shelter in January. (Ed Sabo)

Catholic groups to take up some action throughout the summer toward reducing single-use plastics in their daily lives. They plan to share those efforts on social media during the Season of Creation (Sept. 1-Oct. 4) in hopes of spurring more to follow.

“We have to start thinking also how we use plastics, not just at home but after church, for example, during our coffee hours, during our community get-togethers. Is there a way to change that culture of convenience where we’ve got plastic cups and Styro-foam cups and plastic dinnerware?” Artaza-Regan said.

She knows it isn’t easy to always avoid unnecessary and unrecyclable waste in a world that at times feels like it’s wrapped in plastic. But that’s all the more reason to raise awareness, she said, to take on the throwaway culture one step, one person, one parish at a time.

“It’s hard. But it’s necessary.”