

## If God is giving away electricity, accept his blessings

May 9, 2017

Fr. Peter Daly

It's a beautiful sunny day in Prince Frederick, Maryland. And our solar panels are generating electricity in two of our buildings. I am proud of the fact that two of our seven buildings are now solar-powered. Our rectory has been for more than a year now. The Parish Center is just going on line this week.

The panels cost a lot. But the parish will recover its investment in about eight years. After that, we will have about 17 years of free electricity in those two buildings. The panels have a 25-year life.

We will still be required to pay a \$10 per month per meter connection charge to the electric company, to guarantee power in the cloudy and dark months. But that is nothing compared to the \$200 to \$300 per month we were spending on the rectory and the \$700 to \$1,500 per month we were spending at the parish center, which houses our offices and classrooms.

About a decade ago, I figured that if God is giving away electricity, we might as well accept his blessings. It took a long time to convince the parish council, the finance council and (especially) the archdiocese of the wisdom of accepting God's blessing. I am also proud of the fact that we are the first, and so far the only, parish in Archdiocese of Washington to have solar power. I'm sure that others will follow soon.

The big hurdle is the upfront investment.

The cost of getting the rectory to solar power was about \$25,000. That is a lot of money. But we had the savings in the bank and the money was getting zero percent interest. In a way, the \$25,000 is now returning \$200 to \$300 per month immediately. We also now use less air-conditioning because the solar panels shade the roof of the rectory on the southeastern exposure, the hot side.

In the parish center, we don't have enough experience yet to know how it will work, but our guess is that the electric bill will be close to the \$10 minimum. That would also be an eight-year payout.

Why is this important for Catholics?

Because we are being good stewards of the Earth's resources and caring for our common home, as Pope Francis said in *Laudato Si'*.

Our parish has not confined itself to solar power in our care for the environment. We have done other things to go green. These include:

- Setting aside more than 40 acres of woodland for permanent conservation with the local land trust. We also worked with the trust to create a 7-mile trail from our property to the Chesapeake Bay that is open to anyone who wants to hike it.
- Replacement lighting with LED lighting in our parking lots and buildings. This cuts our lighting bill by at least half.
- Conversion of all seven of our buildings to natural gas heating from fuel oil. Gas is cleaner and it reduces our carbon footprint. It also cuts our heating bill dramatically.
- We now use goats to maintain one of our storm water management ponds weed-free, instead of weed whacking. The animals cost us nothing since they eat the weeds.
- Establishment of a compost pile for organic waste from our kitchens.
- Reduced watering of grass and reduced use of fertilizer on our lawns and athletic field.
- Banning the use of Styrofoam. We substituted paper cups and plates. We also use washable coffee mugs for small meetings.
- Recycling of all trash, including waste metal, when we replace equipment.
- Reduced use of air-conditioning and heating. We now regulate our thermostats and set them on timers.
- Use of motion detectors in some rooms to put out lights when the room is empty.
- Sale of reusable parish grocery bags.

Most of these initiatives save us money as well as save the environment.

The Catholic Church is a large institution. We have nearly 18,000 parishes nationwide and hundreds of high schools and colleges and other institutions. With a concentrated effort, we could really make a difference.

Just as important, we could lead by example. When people drive onto our property, they see the solar panels on our roofs. They make a statement.

We are trying to be good stewards, not just of money but of our common home, the Earth.