Produce stand offers community a lesson

Group wants to raise environmental awareness

By JOLI SPENCER
For The Salinas Californian

A farm stand is offering not just fresh produce but lessons in stewardship of the Earth on Sundays at Sacred Heart Roman Catholic Church in Salinas.

Begun last month and held from 9:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. each Sunday, the produce stand is the result of a multifaceted effort by Sacred Heart, the Diocese of Monterey, Santa Clara University in Santa Clara, and the Agricultural Land Based Training Association (ALBA) in Chualar.

Organizers are quick to point out that the event is not a farmers market and is not in competition with the Oldtown Salinas Certified Marketplace held Saturdays on the 100 block of Main Street. The purpose of the produce stand is to raise awareness about the environment and the value of organic produce, organizers say.

The produce is grown on ALBA land 10 miles south of Salinas by local farmers, some of whom are members of Sacred Heart who sell their wares to fellow parishioners.

Deborah Yashar, program coordinator for ALBA in Salinas, cited a community food assessment in which the organization examined the access to healthy produce within Salinas.

"We found there is very little availability of organic produce, especially in low-income families," Yashar said. "This development is a grass-roots way of getting locally grown organic food to the community. People in Salinas don't buy organic produce, and many Latinos don't know about organic."

ALBA farmer and Sacred Heart parishioner Alejandro Sancen of Salinas said the plan is to educate and inform parishioners about the importance of eating locally grown organic produce.

"This will be a wonderful opportunity to bring organic produce from our land to the table of people who go to our church," Sancen said.

A spiritual lesson
Five farmers participate in the farm stand, on a rotating basis with two selling their wares each week.

Income from the stand goes directly to the farmers.

"They (parishioners) know how much small organic farmers struggle," Yashar said.

Much work occurred behind the scenes over the past year before the produce stand's June 25 debut. The project, conceived by Franciscan friar Keith Warner, who teaches in the environmental sciences department at Santa Clara University, brought food and nutrition interns to the church. Youths from Sacred Heart also visited ALBA produce fields.

Patrick Mooney, youth and adult ministry director for the Diocese of Monterey, said the project gives young people a chance to learn about safe growing practices, the health benefits of organic produce, and how to be an advocate for the environment.

"It's an opportunity for young people to learn more about the local organization of ALBA and what they are trying to do," Mooney said. ALBA trains farm workers and other interested people how to become small-farm proprietors.

What Sacred Heart's youths learn about growing produce also has applications to their vocation as Christians and to Catholic social teachings, he said.

"Young people have an opportunity to learn about human dignity," Mooney said. The principle of local people of all walks of life helping each other is an important aspect of Catholic social teaching.

"They learn about how to help locals and keep it local," he said.

**Link to Earth and the divine**

ALBA stresses the importance of developing relationships between growers and produce buyers. The young people also learn that lesson. But, said Mooney, the project brought home two other significant relationships: those of our planet and of our souls to the divine.

The relationship between the human and the natural world is another aspect of Catholic social teaching, he said.

"Learning about our relationship with the Earth and our interconnectedness to it relates to our faith, particularly the Eucharist," Mooney said. "What we experience in part at the Mass, what we eat, is the work of human hands."

The Eucharist is bread, which comes from grain grown from the Earth and is produced by human beings, he said.

"The experience of the Eucharist calls us to be connected to all of creation," Mooney said.

*Originally published July 8, 2006*