

California mission's switch to solar power saves energy

PALA, Calif. - If parishioners at Mission San Antonio de Pala seem to have a sunny disposition these days, perhaps it's because for the first time since the old mission's founding in 1816 much of its electricity is coming from solar power.

In 2007, solar panels were installed in the picnic area behind the parish's Juan Diego Center, and the parish has spent six months "trying to work out the details of getting us connected to the grid," said Father Luke Jauregui, pastor of the Pala mission, which is in the San Diego Diocese.

The project involved the installation of 216 solar panels, which are divided among 18 solar arrays. Each array includes 12 solar panels, measuring 26 inches by 52 inches and generating 130 watts of electricity. The panels are mounted on an aluminum frame, which is supported by a steel tube set into a concrete foundation.

The panels, which are connected to the electrical circuit that powers the center, are expected to provide a financial boon to the mission, which Father Jauregui said "struggles to keep up with all its bills."

Without the solar panels, the parish spends about \$1,000 in monthly electricity bills for the center alone, Father Jauregui said. But with the new solar panels, he expects the parish to produce about \$2,000 worth of electricity each month, more than enough to keep the lights on at the Juan Diego Center.

The excess power will be returned to San Diego Gas & Electric, which will credit the parish for the unused power. Father Jauregui told *The Southern Cross*, San Diego's diocesan newspaper, that the credits might be enough to cover the utility usage for the other parish buildings.

But in addition to the savings on electricity bills, the priest said, the new solar panels will also make the parish more environment-friendly.

"It makes good environmental sense," he said of the parish's reliance on solar

power, adding, "I think it's a responsibility of the parish and all of us to try to do our best to have less impact on the environment."

The idea of bringing solar power to the Pala mission came from parishioners Willard and Christine Schmidt, who have been members of the parish community for about five years. The Schmidts made their own home solar-powered in 1999 and later assisted various religious communities in Mexico with similar projects.

Willard Schmidt first discussed the notion in the winter of 2006 with Father Dave Leon, who at the time was parish administrator.

Since that time, Schmidt has worked with a solar engineer on the design of the solar arrays and with his pastor on determining a suitable location for installation. He also acquired all of the necessary materials, worked on the installation himself and supervised the other workers.

"It will serve the mission well for many years to come as the cost of energy continues to rise," Schmidt predicted of the new solar panels, which he said also will allow parishioners to be "good stewards of God's creation."