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Catholic Environmentalism: *Families Care for Creation in Everyday Ways*



Kevin and Mary Ford with daughters – Topeka, Kansas

Last year Kevin Ford quit his job teaching theology at a Catholic high school in Wichita, Kan., and moved himself and his family in with his in-laws. With three acres of borrowed land from his father-in-law, he quickly went from full-time teacher to full-time farmer.

While the move happened overnight, it took time and many prayers for the Fords to realize God's call in their hearts. Kevin longed for a small-scale, slower-paced life, but wasn't attracted to "large tractors, large landholdings and large debt." He felt drawn to rural life, but didn't understand why. Kevin, who has two daughters ages three and under, eventually discovered homesteading, the Catholic Land Movement and NCRLC. He also read church documents on agrarianism and farming and came across "Green Thomism" (the idea of finding man's place in the created order), all of which led him to organic and sustainable practices on a small family farm.

"I wanted a way of life and a way of farming that would improve the land and make me truly a good steward because a steward is someone who takes care of something that doesn't belong to him," said Kevin, 27. "That's what I realized with the land – I might call myself

an owner of it, it's my own farm, but it's something that God has given me and I'm obligated as its steward to take the best care of it that I can."

The Fords, who will be moving to their own farm in November near Kevin's hometown of St. Leo, Kan., don't use pesticides or herbicides on their produce and plan to have some pasture-raised animals on their new property. The six-and-a-half acre farm will have one half devoted to vegetables, which the Fords will sell through a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) in Wichita.

For Kevin's wife, Mary, growing organically isn't just important environmentally, but also benefits their family's health. Growing organically and sustainably uses what God has given them, she said.

"It just makes sense," said Mary, 27. "You can argue it out through reason, but really it's been in my heart more than anything else – an understanding that goes deeper than reason that this is the way God intended it to be."

Besides not using chemicals on the land, the Fords said they care for creation by working toward simplicity in their home. They don't watch television, rarely listen to the radio and process much of their own food to eliminate packaging and dependence on outside food sources.

"We want a way of life that is sustainable, that we can pass on to our children that they can continue and their children can continue and their children can continue, rather than degrading the land," Kevin said.

A CATHOLIC ETHIC

Like Kevin and Mary Ford, the desire to be a good steward of creation is rooted deeply in Kyle Kramer's Catholic faith. Kyle, who lives on a 27-acre farm in southern Indiana with his wife, Cyndi, and three children, said his connection to the natural world is essential to his spiritual life because it reveals God to him.

"God made us to enjoy the world and to belong fully and wonderfully in it and that's not only an ecological task or invitation, but it's also a spiritual invitation,"



Kyle Kramer and kids – Southern Indiana

said Kyle, 38, who directs the graduate ministry program at St. Meinrad School of Theology in Indiana and is a climate ambassador for the Catholic Coalition on Climate Change. “Particularly as Catholics, with such an incarnational and sacramental faith that we have, you can’t connect with God but through the world. If you are busy making the world diseased and degraded, how can you connect with God through that kind of world? God wants us to love and enjoy the world and love and enjoy God in the process.”

From papal writings down to USCCB publications, Kyle said the Catholic Church has given a clear message that good stewardship must be practiced. So for over the past 12 years that the Kramers have owned their farm, they’ve worked hard to regenerate the land through organic and sustainable practices. They farm without the use of chemical fertilizers, herbicides and pesticides, and are experimenting with no tillage practices and generating their farm’s fertility on their own property. Kevin also built the family’s home as sustainable as he could make it, incorporating many local materials, he said. The house is solar powered, has a windmill and is heated entirely with wood from the property, which also has a pond used as a water supply source.

“We have no heating bill and we very rarely use our air conditioning,” said Kyle, who chronicled his experience in the book “A Time to Plant: Life Lessons in Work, Prayer and Dirt.” “There’s so much insulation in the house that we practically have non-existent utility bills. We are connected to the grid as backup, but all year round, particularly in the summer months, we are using our solar power. We also heat all of our own hot water with an active solar system.”



Matt and Sorena Maes – Kansas City, Missouri

Kyle not only wants to stop the land from degrading, but wants to make it better. He’s found that good farming practices aren’t only good for the land, but also for his community. The family sells vegetables and free-range eggs through a CSA and is very mindful that food connects them to their customers, Kyle said.

Kyle believes much of the land’s degradation and peoples’ lack of good stewardship won’t change unless people can again connect with the natural world.

“We live in ways right now where so many of us are divorced from utterly anything resembling the natural world that it’s hard for us to feel any connection, and therefore any affection [for creation],” he said.

COMMONSENSE STEWARDSHIP

For Matt and Sorena Maes, living good stewardship is a commonsense practice. While they don’t live like the “Amish,” they don’t abuse modern conveniences either, which so many people take for granted today.

“We do the things my grandparents did out of necessity, that now today are more of a choice because we have so much at our fingertips,” said Matt, 27.

Recycling, turning off the lights, opening windows when it’s cool outside, not leaving the water run and using their more fuel-efficient car when possible, are everyday ways they try to care for creation.

The couple, who are expecting their first child in October, also own Little Sprouts Farm, located 35 minutes north of Kansas City, Mo. The Maes bought the 10-acre piece of land in 2010 while honeymooning in Spain.

They've spent the last year trying to revive the nutrient-deprived land and next year hope to successively plant and harvest 50 different kinds of vegetables throughout the growing season to sell through a CSA. Not wanting to take the risk this year with sterile land, they decided to only sell at the farmers market.

Matt said their decision to grow organically and sustainably is for many reasons. Not only was it more realistic for him to make a living and avoid large debt, but it's also based on his family's views on how the earth should be cared for, family life and culture. He longed for a holistic lifestyle, where work, play and prayer were integrated.

"When I go out into the backyard to work on the garden, I can walk in for lunch and then I can walk back out to work," he said. "When I have kids running around they can learn the value of work and prayer all in the exact same environment, and I can be a part of their lives as a father. I'll be here, I'll be home."

TEACHING OTHERS

Matt knows that his family's good stewardship practices won't have a large impact on the world, but he said he hopes that through their small example, others will follow.

For the Kramers, they've made it a point to instill in their children a love for the natural world by including them in the life of the farm. The kids help pick vegetables, pull weeds and learn about trees and flowers.

"We're trying to raise them in such a way that they know the meaning of good and hard work, but they're not overwhelmed by it so that this kind of life might actually be appealing to them when they can choose it for themselves as adults," Kyle said.

Kevin Ford's oldest daughter is already showing signs of loving the outdoors. This past winter she loved going out to the greenhouse with him and this spring planted her own little garden with watermelons.

"Whether or not the land passes on to her or to another child, I hope that her time on the farm will be meaningful for her, that it will be something that forms her later in life for whatever God chooses for her to do," Kevin said. "Whether it's a religious vocation or married life, I hope her time on the farm will be one where she understands that her actions have consequences and that what she does is meaningful."

The Fords also plan to start an apprenticeship program in the next year or two for young singles or couples to not only learn how to farm, but to be schooled in family life and in a rural culture – what Kevin calls the "art of Catholic rural life." Already this fall, close family friends with no farming experience are buying land near the Fords' new place, forming a farming partnership.

"I think it's essential for the church in the future that rural life not be extinguished," Kevin said, "but that it be maintained and continued in ways that are sustainable." ■

What about you?



Not everyone has the ability to start their own farm or make drastic changes to their lifestyle right away. Still, there are ways everyone can begin to practice good stewardship and appreciate agriculture right where they're at.

The simplest way is to try to grow something yourself, said Dr. Christopher Thompson, NCRLC Board Member.

"You'll see how marvelous it is and you'll see how difficult it is," he said. "You'll also appreciate how much you participate in God's Providence, how much the miracle of creation occurs in your own backyard."

Families can also be more thoughtful about where their food comes from, how it's produced and the quality of it, he added. Make homemade food together, including bread, and be more conscious about how resources are being spent. Some foods may be more expensive, but Dr. Thompson

encourages families to think about tithing a portion of their grocery bill to purchase something that's more thoughtfully prepared.

Parishes, too, could be more thoughtful about where they get food for parish occasions. Dr. Thompson recommends that urban parishes link up with rural parishes or organic Catholic producers to draw on resources.

"If we can demonstrate that we want to spend money on food that's thoughtfully prepared, more sustainably prepared and respectfully prepared, then that economy will develop," he said.