

# The Kingdom of Heaven

## Farming and the Good Life

By Shawn and Beth Dougherty



Even after almost 40 years on our small, some would say “microscopic,” northern Appalachian farm, we are still sometimes surprised to find ourselves where we are. Thirty-odd acres of eastern Ohio, on which we produce all of our own food and animal feed, is a long way from our fathers’ small cattle operations in Texas and Oklahoma. The holistic, regenerative practices we use today are also far different from those conventional grazing and farming methods.

Yet, we never set out to reform anything. We grew up loving farm work, and all we wanted was more of the same. Back then, the word “organic” wasn’t a virtue-signal, and Roundup was the farmer’s best friend. But fast forward to today, and our small herd of Jersey/Dexter cross cattle, holistically-grazed pasture, and the tilled acre where we grow chemical-free vegetables and animal feed, are generating a joy, beauty, and resilience we never could have imagined.

### The Good Life

It was farming that drew the two of us, students at a small Catholic university, together. We had a shared agrarian background and a love of farm work. But commodity farming was out of the question for us, partly because we didn’t have the land, but more because we wanted our hands in the dirt, not our jeans on a tractor seat. We wanted our kids to grow up with gardens and farm animals, seeing the work of their hands



become food on the table—to farm on the human scale, like our grandfathers, who raised their families on what they could grow, what they could graze, and what they could make for themselves.

We knew ahead of time that this wouldn't mean much money, if any. All around us, farmers were going bankrupt every day, despite the fact that most had second incomes: "To support my farming habit," they would say, only half-joking. But we had only one idea of "the good life," so Shawn took a teaching job in order to have summers for the farm. We found an old house and a few acres no one wanted and rented some grazing land from a Franciscan convent just up the road. Then we settled down to grow some food.

This was in the 1990s, so we'd heard of "organic" farming, but it didn't have anything to do with us. We weren't thinking about food quality; as far as we were concerned, a carrot was a carrot, however it was produced. We were raising eight children on a teacher's income, so *frugality* was the primary concern. The less money we had to spend, the more time Papa could be at home. Scrounging barn litter and rotted sawdust wherever we could find them, watering the gardens with rainwater, and feeding garden and canning wastes to pigs and chickens wasn't "organic" in our eyes, it was just obvious—and free. Tethering goats in the big patches of briars that covered our little farm and milking the does

made good economic sense. Only slowly did we begin to realize that the methods we were using—methods our grandparents must have employed, but which our parents' generation had abandoned or forgotten—were beginning, in the public arena, to have a name: Regenerative Agriculture.

### Best Practices

Ideas take time to sort out, to judge, and to accept. People busy with the practical, day-to-day concerns of just *living*, don't usually have the leisure to stand back and critique the methods they have inherited. Fortunately, God speaks in our hearts all the time, drawing us toward Himself, and His creation, which farmers have the privilege and

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responsibility of caring for, also speaks to us. All God asks is that we do our best with what we have.

And “our best” turns out to be pretty amazing. In just a couple of years, browsing goats had reduced our billowing briars to little shoots. Grass grew in, so we traded the goats for a Jersey cow, which put gallons of milk on our table every day. Deep mulch in the gardens, applied to reduce weeding, increased the organic matter, water-holding capacity, and nutrient levels of our soil; as a consequence, our vegetables became disease- and pest-resistant.

Best of all, rotational grazing with daily paddock moves was working wonders in our pastures. Grazed holistically, our rocky slopes, tangled with blackberry cane and poison ivy, grew back in orchard grass and red clover. Manure was spread evenly, increasing pasture productivity, eliminating summer hay feeding, and extending our winter grazing

period until, today, our cows are on pasture all 12 months of the year. “Pasture wisdom,” or livestock’s intuitive knowledge of medicinal plants, means our Jersey/Dexter cross cows no longer need routine worming or vaccination, while they turn native forages into milk and meat to feed us and the Franciscan Sisters.

We see God’s provision every day, all over the farm. Grass feeds cows, and cows feed the soil, while their milk feeds not only our family but the rest of our livestock as well. Surprised? Skim milk, buttermilk, and whey are traditional foods for farm hogs, poultry, dogs, and cats. With milk protein as the foundation of their diet, pigs and chickens thrive on farm surpluses, like garden wastes, plus easy crops we grow for winter feeding—things like corn, sorghum, sunflowers, winter squash, and fodder beets. Feeding the soil isn’t overlooked, either; pig and chicken litter are

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spread on the gardens, returning fertility to its original source where it can grow more food crops for everyone.

### **Regeneration**

In agriculture, “regenerative” means self-fruitful, self-healing, and abundant. In God’s plan, if we farm with restraint and respect, we can meet our local requirements; build health in soil, plants, animals, and people; and pass the land on to our children in a better condition than we found it.

But nature isn’t designed to generate nutrients in wild excess of local need—like corn,

soybeans, hogs, chickens, and milk in quantities so great they become a toxic threat. That kind of production requires heavy machinery, toxic chemicals, and lots of petroleum. It also comes with a consequent reduction in food quality. The nation's health, both rural and urban, argue that we have already reached this point. If we insist on managing for this kind of excess, we must expect the results to be dangerous.

Over the years we've learned that to enjoy the blessings of health and abundance, we must practice simplicity and frugality. Or, to say it another way, we must embrace reverence. Chemical agriculture is not the only option; we can only ask God to bless our work if we respect His design. Cows were made to eat grass, and when we feed them grain—to make them grow faster and fatter, or to fill udders so enormous they can barely walk—we cause health and reproductive problems. Healthy plants can only be grown in healthy soil. Healthy soil, full of living organisms, can't thrive if we saturate our gardens and fields with chemical fertilizers, pesticides, and herbicides.

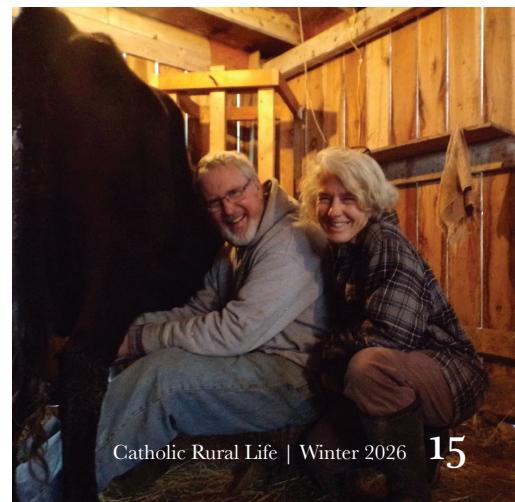
### **The Kingdom of Heaven**

This brings us back to our tiny Appalachian acreage. We believe good regenerative farming is only possible on relatively small acreages, on what we would call the "human scale." Justice to the land requires regular, attentive maintenance, with eyes, hands, and boots on the ground where people can see the results of their actions. We can't plow miles of row crops, fence thousands of acres, or

confine hundreds of animals in battery houses and hope to give them respectful care. Reverence requires restraint.

Its small size turns out to be one of the best things about our little farm in other ways, too. On the ranches where we grew up, we had no close neighbors. Friends and church were miles away. Anywhere we wanted to go, we had to take a pickup. Little farms, on the other hand, have room for lots of neighbors, with other farms just a short walk or drive from home. Help, when we need it, is at most a few miles away, and can reach us in minutes. We see one another almost every day—at Sunday or daily Mass, we nod at one another at the sign of peace. With work scaled to match our family size and capacity, we have time to help each other at harvest and butchering time and to gather regularly for meals, play, and conversation. Farming on the human scale allows us to be available to one another as humans.

Which, somehow, reminds us of the Beatitudes. Perhaps reverence for God's creation is a kind of poverty of spirit, requiring, as it does, the acceptance of simple, natural limits: our own, and those of the land we care for. Certainly, our small farm has opened to us a kind of beauty, community, and contentment we never imagined, giving us the gifts of good food, good sleep, good friends, and good health. Christ says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven." On this earth, at this time, might little regenerative farms be the nearest we can come? ■



Photos from the Dougherty's farm in eastern Ohio.