

# Catholic Rural Life

Winter 2019  
Volume 61  
Number 1



**The Future of Family Farms**  
Stories of Family, Faith and Farming



# CATHOLIC RURAL LIFE

Winter, 2019  
Volume 61 Number 1

*Catholic Rural Life Magazine*  
(ISSN 1089-6570) is published by  
Catholic Rural Life (CRL)

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*Catholic Rural Life is a 95-year-old non-profit organization. We work to revitalize Catholic culture in rural America. We believe that it is an important, God-given call to live a rural life: one centered on faith, community and care for creation. Our work—in ethical agriculture, rural ministry & outreach, and care of creation—supports and builds the Church by educating priests, religious and laity through various programs and resources. Become a part of our mission by becoming a part of our member community.*

*Catholic Rural Life Magazine is a resource produced by CRL on a quarterly basis. We strive to educate and inspire through informative articles and telling of stories about people and their real-life experiences.*

## FROM THE EDITOR

In this issue of CRL Magazine, we ask the question, "What is the future of the family farm?" There are various thoughts on this topic, and so we gathered personal stories from across the country.

I want to thank many of you who have sent me letters and written me emails over the past year. The thing I hear most often is, "Keep telling people's stories!" I couldn't agree more! And so, we look forward to bringing you more stories featuring authentic rural lives: all of the challenges and successes, trials and faithfulness.

Enjoy!





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## Contributors

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### **Dr. John A. Cuddeback, PhD**

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### **Original Photography**

Xavier Tavera Castro, Pg. 19

### **Black and White Photo**

CRL Archives, Marquette University, Milwaukee, Wisconsin

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### VAL Presentation — Effingham, Illinois

CRL Executive Director, James Ennis, presented at the Illinois Farmers Union Annual Convention on February 2, 2019 in Effingham, Illinois. Ennis's topic was *Vocation of the Agricultural Leader - Faith, Food, and the Environment*, the same title as CRL's popular publication. Ennis said, "The purpose of the presentation was two-fold: 1) To affirm and honor the significant role farmers, ranchers and food leaders serve in providing food for the world; and 2) To provide a resource offering key principles for agricultural leaders, showing how to apply the ethical principles in day-to-day operations."



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### Why Eating is a Moral Act — Ames, Iowa

CRL Executive Director, James Ennis, presented at the Iowa State University campus in Ames, Iowa, on February 12, 2019 on the topic, *Why Eating is a Moral Act*, one of CRL's popular educational programs. The presentation focused on the role and responsibility of consumers to support farmers and all who involved in the production of food.

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### Catholic Social Ministry Gathering

Every year Catholic Rural Life collaborates with 15 other Catholic organizations led by the USCCB to present the Catholic Social Ministry Gathering (CSMG). The CSMG brings together Catholic leaders from all over the country to build knowledge and skills for social ministry. The theme for this year's gathering, *Let Justice Flow: A Call to Restore and Reconcile*, focused how to cultivate justice and heal the brokenness in our communities caused by racism, incivility and poverty.

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### Research for Thriving in Rural Ministry

The first phase of CRL's new *Thriving in Rural Ministry* program launched with CRL conducting focus groups with priests and parishioners in rural parishes around the country. The focus groups are informing a national survey of priests that will be conducted this winter. Results of the surveys will inform retreat content for pastors serving in rural communities that CRL will be facilitating over the next five years. CRL also interviewed bishops around the country and will be conducting a national survey of bishops and parishioners.

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### Native American Scholarship Recipients

CRL gave out over \$30,000 in scholarships this past fall. CRL's Earl and Kathy Hoagland Sacred Manoomin Scholarship Fund is committed to supporting ongoing efforts of Native Americans in Minnesota to gain academic expertise in their effort to preserve manoomin (wild rice) in its natural state as found in lakes, rivers and streams. The scholarships support environmental and leadership education opportunities for Native Americans in the Upper Midwest.



### Annual Mass for Farm Workers in Arizona

On Dec. 7, 2018, Most Rev. Edward Weisenburger, Bishop of the Diocese of Tucson, Arizona, and CRL President, celebrated the annual Mass for farm workers in San Luis, Arizona, on the Mexican border. The event consisted of a 4 a.m. Mass, followed by breakfast. The day-laborers are then hired around 6 a.m. The annual Mass for farm workers began in 2002 in the Diocese of Tucson. In his homily this year, Bishop Weisenburger alluded to the dignity of creation as taught in Pope Francis' encyclical, *Laudato Si'*. In calling to mind his own family's humble farming origins, he also spoke of the exceptional dignity present in those who cultivate the earth.

### Welcome to Our Newest Members

Don Brock — El Centro, CA  
 Christian Casper — Ann Arbor, MI  
 Msgr. Rick Colletti — Adrian, MN  
 John Cronin — Joliet, IL  
 Mr. and Mrs. George DePalma — LaTrobe, PA  
 Thad Geiger — Troy, KS  
 Julian Heron Jr. — Washington, DC  
 Holy Family Catholic Church — Wharton, TX  
 Ken Johnson — Delaware, OH  
 Emily Klement — Wichita Falls, TX  
 Fr. Brian Lager — Plainville, KS  
 Joseph Larson — Bowlus, MN  
 Fr. Tom Lequin — Starks, ME  
 Ellen Linderman — Carrington, ND  
 Jeremia Markway — Eugene, MO

Gerald Marnell — Hereford, TX  
 John Meinert — Baton Rouge, LA  
 Mother of Christ Foundation — Bostic, NC  
 Thomas Murtha — Perkasio, PA  
 Martin Primus — Sauk Centre, MN  
 Dan Schippers — Victoria, KS  
 Geoffrey Suiter — Boonsboro, MD  
 Mary Thomas — Rapid City, SD  
 Most Rev. Gerald Vincke — Salina, KS  
 Chris Walchuk — Elysian, MN  
 Karen Wetzel — Riverview, FL  
 Wyoming Catholic Ministries Foundation —  
 Cheyenne, WY  
 Daniel Yingst — Chicago, IL  
 Seth Zilverberg — Holabird, SD

# The Future of Family Farms

## Stories of Family, Faith and Farming

By James Ennis, Executive Director

This past December I traveled throughout the San Joaquin Valley of California and visited with four CRL members. I sat down and talked with each of these CRL members and personally heard their stories. Each of these CRL members leads an agricultural operation that is multi-generational, and each of their stories is powerful and inspiring. And their Catholic faith has played a significant role in how they live and do their work on their farms and in their businesses. They told me about the changes they have had to make on their farms or in their business operations to be able to survive in very challenging and competitive environments. Each of them wants to pass their farm or business on to the next generation; and they are each doing their best, using their wits and their faith, to be the best stewards of all that God has given them, so that they can pass it on. I was moved by each of their great love for the land and love for their families.

And they are not alone. I hear from CRL members from all over the US who share a similar faith and vision, a desire to pass on their farms and businesses to the next generation, and a love for the land. But many farmers are facing very difficult and challenging

environments within which they work. They love what they do, even when the circumstances are very difficult. For example, there are many members who are dairy farmers and are struggling to survive because of the low cost of milk over the past several years. Add on poor weather conditions or disease or contamination in herds, and the stress can take a toll on the family and on the business.

*"I hear from CRL members from all over the US who share a similar faith and vision, a desire to pass on their farms and businesses to the next generation, and a love for the land."*

Pope John Paul II's words ring as true today as they did in 1979 when he first spoke to farmers and agricultural leaders in Iowa saying, "To all of you who are farmers and all who are associated with agricultural production I want to say this: the Church highly esteems your work...You cooperate with the Creator, the 'vinedresser', in sustaining and nurturing life...It is the dignity of those who work on the land and

of all those engaged in different levels of research and action in the field of agricultural development which must be unceasingly proclaimed and promoted."

All of us must continue to "proclaim and promote" the importance and necessity of family farms and family-owned and operated agricultural businesses—not only for the health of rural communities, but for the health and welfare of our nation. Whether in advocating on behalf of all farmers at local, state or federal level, or in promoting the support of farmers and local food systems, we each must do our part to support all of those associated with agricultural production.

Archbishop Edwin V. O'Hara, founder of Catholic Rural Life and a life-long advocate for family farms and rural communities was fond of saying, "The farmer pursues the most fundamental, the most dignified profession in the world. The farmer is the primal producer...the type of citizen which has been in every civilization the substantial foundation of stable social order." In this issue of Catholic Rural Life, we visit with CRL members from across the country who share personal stories about their families and their farms—a glimpse into the heart of a truly noble vocation.



## Notes From a Rural Pastor

"God made a farmer"

By Fr. Jacob Schneider

How my childhood as a "farm kid" has, is and will continue to help me as priest.

I grew up across the section from our family farm in central Kansas. I treasure the memories: the cuts, the scrapes, and the sore backs from those fields, corals, and granaries. We were by no means a large farm, but there was plenty to do every day to stay busy, as a child and especially as a young man. I loved it!

There needs no explanation for the love that was fostered in my heart for the life of the farm. Something like Paul Harvey's "God Made a Farmer" plays in my mind on those days that I long to get out of my office and get my hands dirty. One who has lived this life knows that words can only go so far in explaining the surge of heart for farm life. Whether it was working with the livestock, preparing for harvest, or being heartbroken after a hail storm, farm life transforms those involved in it. Farming has been one of the most holistic experiences that I can discern in my life.

I can say with complete certainty that all the farmers, would-be farmers, and want-to-be farmers reading this article have different ideas of what makes up their farm. By that I mean our farm, the Schneider Farm, was differ-

ent than every other farm in the county, and truly the country. There is something about the way in which we went about farming that was as much a part of us as our last name. You know what I am talking about. All of us have neighbors who do "odd things," things that we would never do! Whether that is the tradition of how they begin planting, work the ground or how they stack their bales on the edge of the field. That

ing one's eyes fixed on what was coming, the primary goal, while making sure the necessary tasks were being completed in the here and now to get the job done. I like the image of cultivating milo. You have to stay focused on a fixed point ahead of you, but if the sweeps aren't in the ground behind your tractor, you are just on a joy ride. You need both!

As a priest of two parishes now in southwest Kansas, the reality

"There was almost a solemn rite of how one properly starts the tractor to feed each morning, and if the routine was disrupted, then nothing seemed to go right."

particularity of how the work was accomplished displayed something about the person. For us on the farm, how the work was done was just as important as that the work was done. It became truly like a ritual. There was almost a solemn rite of how one properly starts the tractor to feed each morning, and if the routine was disrupted, then nothing seemed to go right. It wasn't superstition; it was a combination of keep-

of needing to have a fixed point on the horizon while making sure the day-to-day necessities are in place is incredibly helpful. It keeps me from thinking that everything is an emergency while acknowledging that there are times when you drop everything. The fixed point now, however, is not a fence post but Christ our Lord, while the day-in and day-out tasks are as different as each person that walks through the door.

# "Milk is Everything"

EVERYDAY MIRACLES ON A FAMILY DAIRY FARM

By Brenda Rudolph

My son, Everett, was only 3 years old when he walked his winter calf, named "304," into the ring for the very first time.

Now, by show-ring standards, "304" was not a show cow. Yet, Everett was dedicated to her, and she trusted Everett. One year when my pride got in the way, my husband, Nathan, and I tried to talk Everett out of taking her to the county fair. But Everett simply replied, "I won't go then. If she doesn't go, I don't go." No whining, no crying—just firmly stating he will stand by his cow no matter what.

This is the heart of every farmer—dedication to farm and family. My children see that. Every day Everett, now 9, and Vivian, 4, are with Nathan and me on the farm. I take my children everywhere and tell them everything I do. When Dairy

Day is at the state capitol, I take Everett with me so he knows the decisions we make today affect him. I want him to know his voice is heard—that even in a rural community, his voice matters.

He's already speaking up.

Last summer, while Everett and I were talking with legislators in Washington he said to them, "Milk is everything." Milk is everything. As dairy farmers, our entire world revolves around milk. It matters.

Many times my husband Nathan and I have said we are farming on faith and love. The last couple of years those words have been tested. It is an understatement to say surviving for the last four years on milk prices lower than the cost of production is stressful. The countryside of central Minnesota is filled with barns, many of which no longer house

farm animals. Hard conversations are being had at kitchen tables where families celebrate birthdays and family meals together. Giving thanks each and everyday for a life they have dreamed about, these families are silently asking themselves: *At what cost? What can we do? Are we next?* It is hard to have faith when a new bill comes in the mail not knowing how it will be paid. Praying doesn't

make money, but it's money that keeps the lights on and our homes heated. Praying brings something different, though. Praying allows us to think clearly when difficult decisions need to be made or when worry steals from us our peace. Prayer helps us discern what I can do, but also what I need to surrender to God.

When fear and what-ifs consume us, it is hard to love farming and have faith. However, this is when we need faith and love the most! This is when we need to take those few extra minutes a day and thank God even if just for the breath we are taking. We need to remember *why* we're doing this. For us, our children are part of the reason.

On our farm our children learn the value of life and hard work. Everett and Vivian witness the everyday miracles of God: a newborn calf learning to walk, a cool summer breeze, even saying goodbye to a beloved cow, like "304." We teach our children to love big. To love big brings us closer to God. Loving big can be feeding their rabbit, helping with chores, and singing on Sunday at church.

I do not know if farming will be in our children's future. I *hope* it will be. I *pray* it will be. Long ago when I lost my mom to breast cancer I didn't know what else to pray for besides a miracle, so I'd pray, "Give me the strength I need to get through this."

Little did I know how powerful those words would be for my life.





# THE 11TH COMMANDMENT

## "THOU SHALT FARM"

By Meg Moynihan Stuedemann

On a family farm, everyone's a farmer. Some of us spend most of our days doing farm work, especially those of us who have livestock. Others go off to work in town, contributing their salary and, more importantly, health insurance, to the farming enterprise. They come home at night to do evening chores or sit up late keeping the farm accounts. The shorter family members go off to school, doing chores before or after, helping more on weekends or during summers and school breaks. Still others may be wrinkly enough to *look* retired, but still farm through a truck windshield, sharing opinions on which hayfield should be first, or phoning in from a new house in town with weather reports, or to take a sandwich order for the harvest crew. Farming is both life and livelihood. But there are fewer and fewer of us on the land these days, and that is taking a toll on our identity and on our spirit.

My farm family is a comparatively tiny one—my husband and I own 170 acres with 70 organic dairy cows, 10 or 20 steers, five sows and a boar (plus their rotating offspring) and some chickens. We rent 25 acres here and there from other landowners so that our young animals and the pregnant or "dry" cows getting a break before they have their next calf, can go to what we call camp. We rent another 100 acres about 15 miles away, where we mostly grow corn and hay. We start work about 5:30 each morning. On good days, we end at 9:00 p.m.

It wasn't too long ago that every farm in our area looked pretty much like ours, with a variety of interdependent enterprises. Now Kevin and I are a little odd, compared to our neighbors, who took the experts' advice in the 1970s, 80s and 90s about expanding, specializing and scaling up to maximize efficiency. But what's not at all odd about us is the tenacity and persistence that we share with every other farmer I have ever met.

I was at a talk about farm stress the other day and heard a guy from North Dakota State University Extension describe the 11th Commandment: "Thou Shalt Farm." It is so true. So very true. Right now, the farm economy is disastrous. Prices for the crops and livestock that most of us raise—corn, soybeans, wheat, milk, beef—have been at or below the cost of production for three years or more, which means farmers have eaten any savings they had, taken every loan they could, and may now be selling land or assets just to stay afloat, hoping that we're just about to turn the corner. On top of myriad day-to-day farm stresses—weather, pests, disease, low prices, unpredictable markets, tariffs, school consolidation, health insurance costs, consolidation of seed and machinery dealers—the farm financial crisis is pushing farm families to the edge.

I think the 11th Commandment is so compelling, in fact, that it can create profound crisis of spirit. Farming isn't just what you

do. For most farmers, it's *who* you are, how you have always perceived yourself, and how you fit into the world. The thought of losing what your forebears created and handed down to you, of losing what you were determined to pass on to your own offspring, feels unbearable. The thought of not being a farmer is unbearable. The idea of quitting is unbearable.

From the couch, where he's drinking coffee and warming up after morning chores, my husband just said, "Well, April 1st is only 70 days away." This is the other core truth about so many farmers. Much as they may grumble and complain about weather and politicians, most of them are optimists and all of them are ingenious. Some will replace their dairy herds with beef—because they can't bear not to have livestock on the place. Some will be able to rent out land to other farmers as they wait for better times. Some will be able to switch to raising higher value crops or livestock on less acreage. Some will get a paying job in town and feel amazement at the fact that a paycheck arrives every two weeks.

No, it shouldn't be this way. It isn't fair. It's nearly impossible not to feel bitter when you have sunk every bit of energy, money and will into making a go of your family farm. It's hard to accept that it's not your fault. The stresses can destroy families, psyches and sometimes even lives.

But April is only 70 days away.

# Life

on the **Family Farm**

FAMILY STORIES FROM ACROSS THE COUNTRY

By Kara Storey



*The human experience—triumph and sorrow, redemption and suffering—coupled with an unshakable faith in Christ, never ceases to amaze me. That's why asking questions, hearing stories, and allowing my curiosity to run wild is my favorite part of writing. As I listened to the farmers you'll meet in the next several pages, I couldn't shake the truth that their story was my story.*

*From the outside, it can appear that there is no future for family farming. But after talking with farmers from across the coun-*

*try, I'd argue that the naysayers don't know who they're betting against. These farmers are dedicated, loyal, self-sacrificing and ingenious. Not one of them would roll over just because it gets hard. It is evident they love what they do, for while they'd much rather have been in bed after a long day of fieldwork or milking, they made time for a journalist in Des Moines in order to share that love of family and farming.*

*As you'll discover, their stories are real and honest, sometimes heartbreaking and sometimes hopeful. Just like all of ours.*

# The Eggemeyer's

"There's no better life than to raise your family on the farm," Diane said, reminiscing about days spent praying the rosary with their four kids amongst rows of cotton. "It's a totally different way of living."

At 6 a.m. Billy Eggemeyer Arises, fills his cup of coffee, catches a few minutes of the news and waits for his wife, Diane, to join him a little later. Together, the couple, both 63 and from Midkiff, Texas, ask the Lord's blessing on their day by praying the Liturgy of the Hours.

By 7 a.m., Billy grabs some crackers, an orange and a jug of water, and hits the road for a 16-mile drive to his farthest piece of land where he works for the day. He returns home a little over 12 hours later.

"I don't have any trouble sleeping!" he laughs.

Billy, who grew up farming, traces his farming bloodline all the way back to his great-great grandparents who moved from Germany to Texas to farm. Then, as a sophomore at Texas Tech University, he got a call one night that his dad had been killed in a harvest accident. So he dropped out of school and took over the family farm. He was 19.

In the early 1980s he began buying land and hasn't stopped, he said. The couple own 6,000 acres—1,200 is farmed by Billy and 2,500 by two of his sons. They grow cotton, corn, wheat and milo. While no longer on the

homeplace, the Eggmeyers live only a mile and half from where Billy grew up.

"There's no better life than to raise your family on the farm," Diane said, reminiscing about days spent praying the rosary with their four kids amongst rows of cotton. "It's a totally different way of living."

That way of living includes a complete dependence on God.

"If you're a farmer you have to believe in the above," Billy said. "Everything we do is a roll of the dice. You put a seed in the ground and who makes it come up? It's not me, and it's not my wife or anything else. It's the dear Lord above."

That's why Billy enjoys the quiet of being in the tractor all day. At different points he'll grab one of the rosaries hanging in the cab to pray, or listen to the Chaplet of Divine Mercy on Catholic radio. But mainly, he just has the whole day to speak to God about what's on his heart.

"If I have a problem, I ask God how to fix it," Billy said. "He made this world and I just want to give it to my kids and the next generation better than I had it. God doesn't make land anymore."

That next generation includes

his two oldest sons, who not only farm part of his land, but have bought some of their own as well. There's still a chance the Eggmeyers' youngest son, a sophomore at Texas A&M, will join the farm one day, too.

But in some ways, having the kids decide to come home is the easiest part. Billy questions how long family farming can last with the rising costs.

"You've got to farm a thousand to two thousand acres to make ends meet with the price of equipment and everything else," he said.

But where there's a will there's a way, he added. Already he is seeing neighbors share the cost of harvesting equipment that they use on a rotating basis.

"My dream is that my sons and all the young people that are coming out here now can make it," Billy said. "I want this community to last where their kids can grow up like my kids did."

If Billy has his way, well, his farm will last for generations to come.

He said, "I've threatened my kids that if they sell this stuff I'll come back and haunt them for the rest of their lives!"



# The Blom's

"They follow the Golden Rule, never asking their employees to do anything they wouldn't do themselves, and 99 percent of the time no work is done on Sundays."

Nestled in the Central Valley of California, Nick Blom Jr., of Modesto, can't imagine a better place to farm. Two hours from the mountains and two hours from the beach, plus sun almost every day of the year, makes for a very happy farmer.

"There's no place like this in the world for me to be able to farm and do what we do," he said.

That's exactly what Nick Blom Sr., thought when he arrived in America in 1963 from Holland with only \$22 in his pocket. He was convinced he'd become a farmer in California. Lured by the land's beauty and the promise of a job working for his uncle's dairy farm, there he met and married his wife, Els, also a Dutch immigrant. Together they raised four children. In 1969 Nick Sr., finally had a chance at his own land and bought 45 acres of grapes. Six years later he bought a larger parcel two miles down the road and moved his family there.

Today, the farm encompasses 1,200 acres of farmland and another 300 acres of wetland pre-

serve. While Nick Sr. passed away in October 2018, his legacy lives on through his family, particularly his sons Nick Jr. and Pete, who grow almonds, peaches, grapes, walnuts and alfalfa.

Nick Jr. credits his father for teaching him how to run the farm, from learning how to drive a tractor at the age of five, to the responsibility as a 13-year-old to tell a group of peach pickers to go home after they argued for more money. More importantly, he let his sons fail at things he had already tried himself.

"He would say 'Well, go ahead and try it and see if it works,'" recalled Nick Jr. "He knew long ago that the best way to keep the ranch going was to let us learn how to do it."

## KEEPING IT GOING

Nick Jr. had always wanted to farm, but after high school, he first went and earned an agricultural degree to become a teacher. Then in 1996, while he was getting his master's degree, his dad mentioned that a neighbor was

selling 55 acres and that Nick Jr. and Pete should buy it.

"And I told him, 'Well, the bank account doesn't say I can do that,'" Nick Jr. said.

So Nick Sr. loaned them the money and thus began the adventure of Nick Jr. and Pete farming together. The brothers divide up the duties, with Pete spending more time in the field and Nick Jr. taking care of the business side of things. Their dual roles lead to more flexibility for each of them to take vacations or attend children's ball games, Nick Jr. said.

But when harvest time comes, it's all hands on deck.

"There's nothing more exciting than seeing a full bin of peaches or the harvester picking up almonds," said Nick Jr. "Yes, it's risky. Farmers are the biggest gamblers there are because we're susceptible to so many things."

## FAITH AND FAMILY

Even with that risk, Nick Jr.'s mother, Els, believes there's nothing else as wonderful as running a family farm and the family



togetherness it creates. Besides, greater risk only means they must rely that much more on God. She remembers the struggle during those first few years of farming, always praying for a good crop, and attending Mass on weekends.

"Nick [Sr.] and I always prayed the rosary every night, accepting whatever God had in store for us," she said. "During Easter Nick would put a palm branch in each corner of the field and we would pray with the kids hoping for a good crop."

Their Catholic faith also spills over to how they incorporate their employees into their family. One of the incentives for working at Blom Ranch is living in one of a handful of homes on the property nearly rent free. They follow the Golden Rule, never asking their employees to do anything they wouldn't do themselves, and 99 percent of the time no work is done on Sundays, said Nick Jr. The Bloms have even been invited to the weddings and quinceaneras of employees' children.

"We consider them a gift to us,

too," said Els. "It's a team effort all the way around."

Nick Jr. said his personal faith has also been enhanced by being out in creation. He specifically thinks of early mornings, sulphuring rows of grapes.

"You turn the corner and all of a sudden you see the sun peeking out over the top of the Sierra Mountains, and boy, that hits you real quick and makes you think, 'Man there's got to be some creator making that,'" he said. "It's so beautiful and powerful."

## FUTURE FARMING

Nick Jr. estimates that in his area, the days of family farms less than 100 acres are gone. With all of the California regulations and high-priced living, a family farm needs to be around 200 to 250 acres to succeed as the sole income, he said. But he's liking the future prospects of his own farm. Already Pete's 24-year-old son has had some involvement in the operation and Nick Jr.'s 16-year-old son has wanted to be a farmer since he was five.

"We told him he must get a college degree because he has to prove to us that he can educate himself," he said. "Plus, if something were to happen with the ranch, he would then have an education to fall back on."

Els would love it if her grandkids took over the farm someday. She finds satisfaction having the family close by. Nick Jr. and his family live next door to her and Pete is just down the street. A daughter also lives on the farm with her family and there's already a spot waiting for their final daughter's family who currently lives 40 minutes away.

"We always gave the kids the opportunity to go to school, which they did, but they came back on their own," she said. "I never forced them back, but they evidently liked what they saw."

Just like Nick Sr. liked what he saw when he came to that land over 50 years ago.

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# The Fairfield Carmelites

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The cow was coming in two weeks and Mother Thérèse of Merciful Love, OCD, then a novice, didn't have a clue what to do.

"Mother handed me a book and said, 'The cow is coming and you're going to milk it, so learn how to do it,'" Mother Thérèse recalled.

It was at times a daunting task for a teenage girl whose only animal experience up until then was riding horses back home in Cape Cod, Massachusetts. But living in a Carmelite convent, at that point on the Nebraska prairie, meant embracing a new life in more ways than one. Plus, her sisters were counting on her for their milk.

With the aid of that book, after many months she did finally get that full pail of milk. And it came with a revelation.

"[The experience] made me grow in confidence that I just had to walk along a path that God was telling me to do and that if I just stayed faithful to it there would be something good on the other

end and I would not regret it," she said.

It's a life lesson that she has applied to everything else she's experienced as a Discalced Carmelite nun for the past 16 years, from going on multiple new foundations to helping oversee her order's current project of building a monastery.

**"[Work is] designed to be something that doesn't occupy the mind, so that our minds are left free while our hands and bodies do the work."**

## THE NEW MONASTERY

In 2009 Mother Thérèse, together with 10 other sisters, arrived in Elysburg, Pennsylvania, from Nebraska to establish a new foundation. Less than 10 years later, their numbers jumped to 28. According to Carmelite constitutions, the ideal size of a com-

munity is 21. So in July 2018, nine nuns, again including Mother Thérèse, now sub-prioress and in charge of the novices, moved to Fairfield, Pennsylvania, to establish a new monastery.

The monastery, located about 10 miles outside of Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, in the Diocese of Harrisburg, will be comprised of nine buildings including a chapel, novitiate, infirmary, dormitories, a guest cottage and barn. There will also be walkways, gardens and a small farm. The monastery will be built to last, only using authentic craftsmanship and materials, such as stone masonry, timber framing, slate, plaster and reclaimed wood. All of it will be as locally sourced as possible.

But not everyone has shared the community's ambitious vision for the monastery. In the early planning process, they were continually told that they would have to settle for something less beautiful, something they could dress up later to look like rocks or wood. The sisters weren't satisfied. They pressed the architects



and eventually learned it wasn't that their ideal building couldn't be done, it was that the architects didn't know anyone who could do it.

So the sisters went out and found the professionals, some coming from as far as Scotland to give workshops to locals on stone masonry. The barn was the first to go up, which temporarily serves as their chapel. Mother Thérèse estimates it will take another eight to ten years to complete everything. While they wait for their living quarters to be constructed, the nuns are living in makeshift cells in a mobile home on the property.

Young and old have participated in the process through time, money and sweat. Men's groups, locals, skilled professionals, even one sister's brother, who sailed solo across the Pacific Ocean from Australia, have helped with the work.

With the process taking longer and costing more, many might wonder, "why"? But the use of authentic materials and practices teaches the whole community a lesson, Mother Thérèse said.

"We can see now that a building that is true to itself can teach its inhabitants to be true and faithful to who they are and not be a facade of virtue or holiness, but to take the work and trouble it takes to do it the real way," she said. "That's why we're building with real materials—in the end it will help us to be more real ourselves."

## AUTHENTICITY

Mother Thérèse believes it's precisely authenticity that's attracted so many young vocations to the order—the average age of the Fairfield Carmelites is 26. It's

ultimately what attracted her.

"I wanted people who, if they were going to do it, they were going to do it the whole way and not by halves or by compromising," she said. "I wanted the whole cake."

Following in the footsteps of St. Teresa of Avila, the nuns follow the traditional Carmelite austere practices of prayer, fasting, enclosure and union with God. They avoid as many distractions as possible by putting up a big wall around the property and never leaving except for medical emergencies. There's no internet, TV or newspapers for perusal. A sister gets one call each year to her family on her birthday, and families can visit once or twice a year, but are separated by a grill in a speak room.

Most of the day is spent in silence, speaking heart-to-heart with God to further their union with Him. Mass and the Divine Office are chanted in Latin. Two separate hours are for recreation where the sisters can laugh and tell stories. The rest of the day is for working, such as sewing by hand or outdoor work.

"[Work is] designed to be something that doesn't occupy the mind, so that our minds are left free while our hands and bodies do the work," she said. "We like to work where God works, which is in nature."

## GARDEN OF GOD

The term "Carmel" actually means "Garden of God." With the establishment of the new monastery, the sisters hope they can create their own "Garden of God" in Fairfield where "man and nature together praises its Maker," Mother Thérèse said.





The monastery is, in essence, supposed to be a small family farm. Already, the community has chickens and a couple of work dogs. They're also nearing the completion of a fencing project around their forest so that in the spring they can release goats inside it to start taking care of the overgrowth. Their goal is to add a cow, sheep, ducks, and even a donkey or carthorse. When they arrived last July they put in a small winter vegetable garden and have started some winter sprouts inside.

Working in the natural world is essential for the formation of the postulants and novices, said Mother Thérèse, as many of them have had little contact with nature.

"Having one's roots solidly in the ground and being able to work with nature and get one's hands dirty is going to be a way for them to grow into the full," she added. "A saint isn't just someone who

is holy on the tip-top, but they're holy all the way down into their gut."

Mother Thérèse, herself, has experienced firsthand how God communicates through nature. Once viewing life as "one long

**"The monastery is, in essence, supposed to be a small family farm. Already, the community has chickens and a couple of work dogs."**

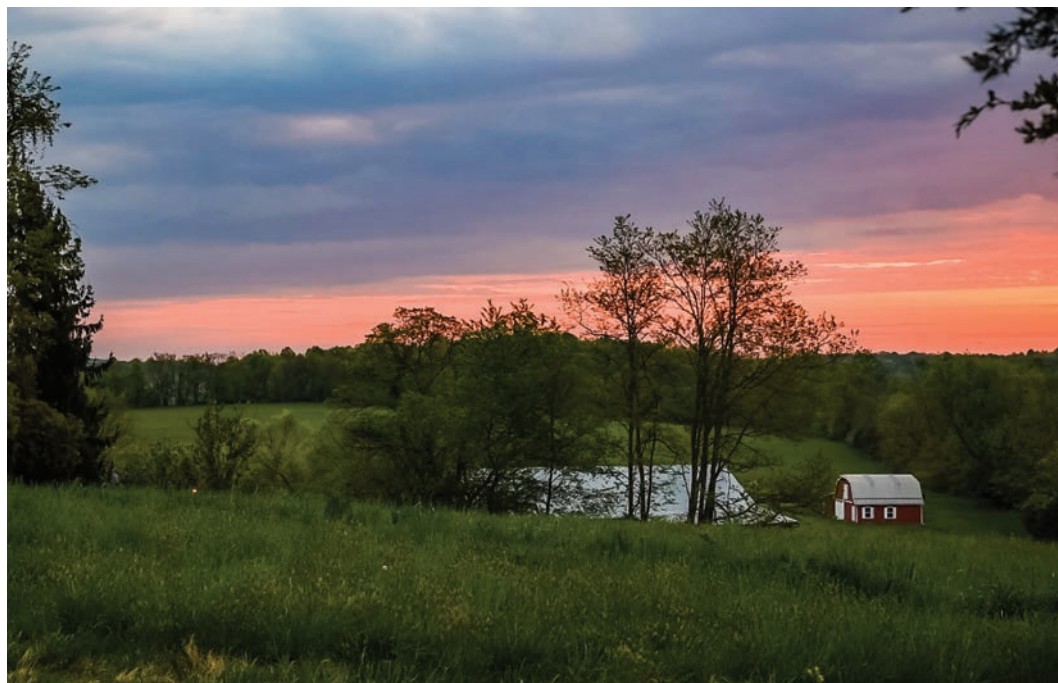
intellectual exercise," she came to the realization that God doesn't speak to her only through books, but also through nature. That discovery led her to a newfound docility to the Lord's will.

"For me, to be able to tame a

piece of land is also to be able to learn from it and to allow God to teach me through that piece of land," she said. "In a way I'm trying to bring heaven onto this physical earth where Jesus can walk and feel that he is the king of this little plot of land. The world might be against him and against his kingdom, but here I have worked to make him a kingdom."

As the Fairfield Carmelites do the tedious work to build that little kingdom, they find joy knowing it will last for hundreds of years to come and be enjoyed by their community long after they're gone. But they have a long way to go before feeling settled.

"We won't begin to be who we want to be for 100 years," said Mother Thérèse. "Right now we are in the preface, the introduction of the story of what is going to be the Fairfield Carmel. In 100 years we'll begin the story. Right now we're laying the groundwork for those who will come after us."



# The Schreiner's & The Kremer's

There are wedding anniversaries, baptism anniversaries, death anniversaries. But Jim Schreiner marks a different anniversary every January 26th—the anniversary of the day he began milking his own cows.

“I got the barn ready to milk and in January 1996, a month after my daughter was born, I started milking my own cows on my own farm,” said Schreiner, 50, of Athens, Wisconsin. “That’s probably my fondest memory.”

It was his fond memories of driving tractor and working the ground as a kid on his parents’ dairy farm that made him believe he would one day have his own family farm. After working on his parents’ farm for eight years after high school, in 1994 he bought his own farm adjacent to his homeplace. Today, Jim and his wife, Tammy, milk 70 cows, raise another 70 young stock cows and grow corn, oats, hay and alfalfa on 400 acres.

But in recent years those memories have been replaced with hardships. Schreiner says the last four years have been the toughest he’s ever experienced. Dairy prices are low. Crop prices are low. Sacrifices must be made.

“There isn’t money to upgrade equipment or fix things like you’d like to,” he said. “You have to budget [wisely] and look at where you

can afford to spend a little money for upkeep. I haven’t bought any equipment now for three years. For a lot of farmers, their equipment is wearing out and there’s no money to replace anything. It’s a pretty stressful environment.”

Challenges aren’t anything new for farmers. Schreiner said he’s always had to stay on his toes and pay attention to detail to be successful. He takes comfort knowing he’s doing what he loves.

“In reality, farmers are probably as close to God as you can possibly get, when you think about the land and the animals and working with what God gave you,” he said.

As he works in creation day in and day out, he worries family farms are a way of the past in his area. As a child riding the bus five miles to school, he’d pass 11 dairy farms. Today along that same route, only two remain. It’s a sad reality for Schreiner, who believes that family farms, big or small, play a vital role in society.

“Family farms hold the community together by supplying business to the feed mill and the hardware store—the more family farms you have, it helps the whole community,” he said. “Corporate farms don’t shop local, so the community part is lost.”

## THE LOCAL APPROACH

Dan Kremer, 55, of Yorkshire,

Ohio, has a unique way of keeping his fourth generation family farm relevant during this time of uncertainty. Though he only owns 140 acres and 13 dairy cows, he directly sells his products to 100 local consumers every week. Marketed under E.A.T. Food for Life, Kremer sells non-GMO, grassfed, chemical-free raw milk, eggs, chicken, beef, pork and other products such as pizza crust, bread and cookies, made from his own spelt and wheat. It’s been a team effort with his wife, Nancy, and six kids, who help package the items. His brother-in-law even helps by doing the milking. E.A.T. Food for Life teams up with a CSA garden to provide vegetables to their customers as well.

“In a world where the big box store reigns, connecting with the consumer is a challenge,” he said, “especially because they value convenience.”

So Kremer has altered his approach throughout the years to making his food easily accessible. First, for eight years he sold his goods on Saturdays at the Dayton Farmer’s Market, located about an hour from his farm. But the days were too long, so four years ago he opened the Farm House in Dayton, a private facility from which he sells his products from 8 a.m. to noon each Saturday. As of the first of the year, E.A.T. Food



for Life has also branched out to home delivery, where customers living in a 15-mile radius from downtown Dayton can order things online that Kremer delivers to them himself.

“There’s a whole revolution of the consumer wanting local, nourishing, healing food and having it come right to their front door,” he said. “I’m convinced the only way to grow is home delivery because the consumer demands convenience.”

## NOURISHING THE PERSON

Although Kremer grew up on a farm five miles from where he currently lives, his lifelong battle with hemophilia led him to believe life as a farmer wasn’t possible. So he worked in the corporate world for 12 years instead. Upon discovering that his deteriorating health could be helped through whole, raw foods, he and his wife returned home in 1997 to take over his grandfather’s farm. Everything about the farm is done intentionally, from how the animals are raised to how the crops are grown, to the name of the farm. E.A.T. stands for “Eucharist, Agrarian, Truth,” which signifies that Kremer’s food is meant to nourish body, mind and soul.

Kremer describes his farming style—that of not using chemicals and allowing animals out to pasture or free range—as “pro-life.”

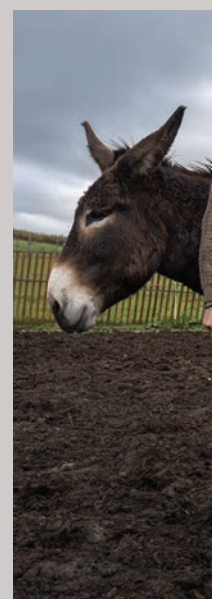
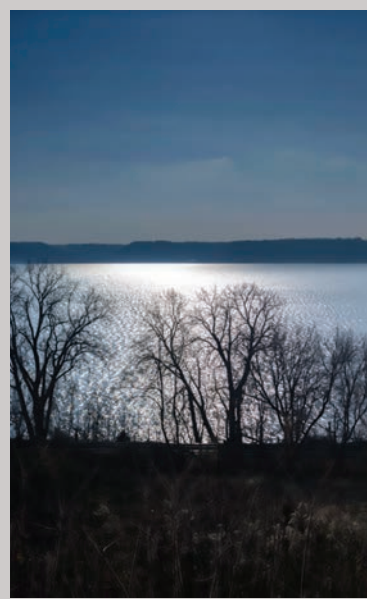
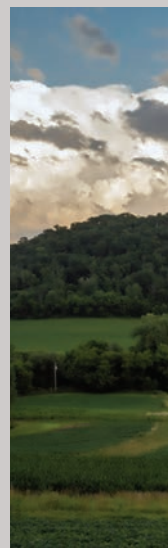
“We don’t want to bring anything into our body that is polluted or toxic,” Kremer said. “We wrap it all up into natural law. When you put cleaner food into your body, then you experience the result of that. If you put unclean food into your body, you experience the result of that. Our faith says the way we grow food matters, and we have a duty to grow clean, nourishing and fresh food because families will eat it.”

## THE FUTURE

Kremer isn’t sure if one of his kids will someday take over the farm. He sees the potential in a couple of his youngest who are still at home, but time will tell, he said. Regardless, he believes that for small family farmers to survive the future, they need to embrace technology by establishing their own websites to directly sell to consumers.

Back in Wisconsin, Schreiner said his 16-year-old son has expressed interest in farming, though doesn’t know if he wants to dairy farm. He plans to wait until his son graduates to decide the future of his farm. Until then, he’s going to keep doing what he loves.

“It’s a struggle, but I consider myself blessed to be farming,” Schreiner said. “That’s what keeps your sanity in these tough times, knowing that everything you’ve got is from God. It gives you hope for a better day. As bad as it is out there, there are people in worse situations. I’ve been farming for 31 years, and we’re going to keep pushing forward, my wife and I and our two kids.”





# THE ART OF SURPRISE

## Photographing Family Farmers

By Morgan Smith

When I heard about a project that portrait photographer, Xavier Tavera Castro, had undertaken, I knew I needed to know more about it—I needed to know all about his experience. I met with him in his office at the University of Minnesota, where he teaches photography. I sat down facing his desk, a large window, and surrounded by equipment. Sitting there, I felt the magnitude of his work, the physicality of it: cameras, tripods, lights.

Xavier is a gentle and passionate man who moved to the US from Mexico City in 1996. His projects reflect the lives of Latinos in America. Xavier passionately explained, “Every project that I take on has the purpose of ‘trying to understand.’ It’s about talking to people, to really know them. Photography is an excellent excuse to learn—to learn about anything and everything.”

The Pepin Portrait Project came about because of an incident of racism against a Hispanic man in Pepin, a small Wisconsin town on the Mississippi River. Xavier and his friend (who has a home in Pepin) wanted to go deeper into the issue. And so Xavier decided to get to know the people who live in the community, people he described as, “white dairy farmers and brown dairy workers.”

I was interested in what Xavier thought and how he was changed by getting to know the farm families. “I would make an appointment with the dairy farmer. It takes about an hour and half to get there. The whole way, I’d be thinking about the conversations I would have with the white dairy farmer, and all of the preconceptions I had about who these people are. It’s white, its rural, and I am the other, I am a Mexican,” he explained.

He went on to describe one of his encounters: “As I arrived, I was greeted by the workers, and I made portraits of them, with the permission of the farmer, of course. And

then it was time to photograph the farmer. We had close to an hour of conversation, talking about his upbringing, how his farm has been in his family for 140-something years, the struggles of the farm, and trying to keep afloat.”

He asked the 80-year-old dairy farmer: “Do you have a son or a daughter who wants to take over? and he said, ‘no, my wife and I don’t have kids, so it’s only us.’ What’s going to happen to your farm? What are your plans? ‘I am structuring everything so that the workers will have ownership. These are people who want to farm—who want to do the labor of a dairy farmer—nobody else here wants to do that.’ The care that he has for the Latino workers is incredible. They are like his family.”

Xavier continued with a playful smile, “It is quite incredible when all my preconceptions (racism and preconceptions go both ways—they are not just one direction), when those get shattered and realigned into something that is more real, more human.”

He continued: “This is not a ‘job’ for them—from four in the morning to 11 at night, everyday, all year—this is what they do, this is what defines them, this is who they are. Every trip I make out to Pepin, I spend a couple of hours getting lost on the rural roads. I shut down my phone and GPS and just drive until I find the highway. And, I am photographing everything that comes in my path, as a way to understand the land and the attachment to the land that the farmer has.”

He does everything he can to understand. And, in my effort to understand him and his work, I am filled with amazement at his experience. Surprise is beautiful. It is beautiful when we make an effort to try to understand—to understand the depths and dignity of the human soul next to us.

Please visit [www.gruposoadelcorazon.com/the-pepin-portrait-project/](http://www.gruposoadelcorazon.com/the-pepin-portrait-project/) to learn more about the project.



## Bring Up a Child

### The Challenge of Farm Succession

By Lochiel Edwards

As recently as 100 years ago, nearly all farmers depended entirely on their farms to provide for their earthly needs. Their work was a family endeavor, blurring the lines between genders and generations. This immersion in the family business, along with the ambient farming society, meant that farmers' children usually became lifelong farmers themselves. It was a culture with

the imminent changes.

That is an overly condensed history of how we got here, but the important question is, where is our farming community going in the future?

I propose that a society with direct connection to the earth and its fruits will care for the planet and, in turn, its people. This is certainly true for the family farmers in my neighborhood.

“Nearly every older, full-time farmer has poured their life and heart into the farm. Sometimes they cannot let go, even a little, when their children come home to farm.”

thousands of years of precedent.

Beginning in the 1920s, industrialization, communication and the resulting urbanization of developing nations, sparked an upheaval of the traditional farm model. Farm children went off to war, or to work in factories, or perhaps to college where a big world of possibilities was revealed to them.

“How ya gonna keep ‘em down on the farm, after they’ve seen Paree’?” This was the chorus of a popular song in 1919, and foretold

Maintaining a solid base of farmers with direct reliance on nature seems to me to be a good thing.

To maintain this base, we will have to attract a new generation. Our farmers have become long in the tooth, and have not done well at bringing their grown children home. I see two major hurdles to getting this done, but it can be done!

The good news is that we are seeing increasing interest from younger people in making farming their vocation. A big part

of this interest stems from the change in lifestyle from the drudgery of 100 years ago to a quality of life comparable to the lives of our urban cousins. Technology, communication and mobility have smoothed many of the rough edges from the farm life.

There are a couple of deterrents, which cut to the core of the challenge of farm succession. The first is a financial issue.

Full-time farmers tend to reinvest their financial progress back into the farm. This grows the business, keeps up with inflation, and gives them a steadier base in times of bad weather or low crop prices. It is common for an old farmer to have large assets but a very modest amount of cash.

This means that bringing in the next generation increases the households supported by the farm, as the old or retiring farmer must still draw sustenance as well. This is a common problem for families who did not dedicate their careers to building or saving enough to make room for an extra family or two. Just plain bad luck with natural disasters or medical expenses can also come to play.

My father (and his father) helped me become a farmer in



many ways. Most valuable were the guidance and wisdom and lessons taught, but the financial subsidy was huge, too! They sold me pieces of farmland at prices below market, allowed me to use machinery I had not paid for, and folded me into the infrastructure as a full partner. This all adds up to the largest subsidy I ever received, and is typical of what it takes to build the next generation of farmers. And, this is why a society is well-advised to care for its family farms, to ensure the ability of old farmers to guide young ones on the path.

While that first hurdle is financial, the second is emotional. Nearly every older, full-time farmer has poured their life and heart into the farm. Sometimes, they cannot let go, even a little, when their children come home to farm. All too often, I have seen young men and women who have been farming with their parents for twenty years and have yet to be given ownership or even responsibility. They sometimes lose both heart and passion, as they find themselves little more than a hired hand at age 50.

This second hurdle is the dark side of this conversation, but this situation affects a smaller percentage, and there is hope. Spirituality and our religion have a role to play in this. Our faith teaches the care of others, letting go of self, and the bigger, Christ-like picture of our purpose on earth. These are powerful forces in the important process of bringing new farmers to care for the earth and to feed God's people.

I welcome the young farmers who hold a passion to feed our people. My prayer is that we teach them well.

## The Family Farm and Church Social Teaching

By Dr. John A. Cuddeback, PhD

A farm, it seems to me, is a project of stewarding the earth in a particular place, with specific harvests or produce in mind. A farm has a definite economic purpose—starting with the support of those working it, and then also the support of the community. And yet this economic valence remains contextualized by the farm's even broader role in the human community, as a place of stewardship and connection to the earth, as well as of human formation and fraternity.

I will specify that by “family farm” I mean one that in some meaningful way is the project of a family household: a project contextualized by this family's long-term commitment to living on and from this particular piece of the earth, in this particular community.

In his landmark social encyclical *Centesimus Annus*, St. John Paul II wrote: “God gave the earth to the whole human race for the sustenance of all its members, without excluding or favoring anyone. This is the foundation of the universal destination of earth's goods” (31, emphasis original).

St. John Paul II emphasizes the principle of the universal

destination of material goods, a principle which in another encyclical he significantly calls “the first principle of the whole ethical and social order” (*Laborem Exercens*, 19). Vatican II’s *Gaudium et Spes* elucidates this principle in explaining how the use of privately owned goods is also conditioned by the needs of others: “In using them, therefore, man should regard the external things that he legitimately possesses not only as his own but also as common in the sense that they should be able to benefit not only him but also others” (GS, 69).

The foundation of this principle is God’s gift of the earth to the human race for our sustenance. This sustenance requires work—a specifically human response through which man enters into a special relationship with earth, a relationship of lordship and ownership. Yet the very nature and intention of the original gift requires that this lordship be a stewardship, one oriented toward the general welfare of human communities, and toward the long-term health and fruitfulness of the earth.

Now the universal destination of goods sounds simple enough in the abstract. But in the concrete it is a challenging principle with serious moral implications, especially in the economic realm. An economic culture that emphasizes competition and the primacy of profit will tend to militate

against the universal destination of goods, making people suspicious, resentful, and resistant to it. Anything that serves to encourage and cultivate a sense for the universal destination, especially in our current economic culture, will certainly promote the understanding and practice of Catholic social teaching.

My assertion is that the family farm is a privileged context to gain an understanding and practice of the universal destination of goods. St. John Paul II regards

"The foundation of this principle is God's gift of the earth to the human race for our sustenance. This sustenance requires work..."

this as the first principle of the social teachings of the Church. And the foundation of this principle is God’s gift of the earth to us for our sustenance through work. The work of raising and harvesting food from the earth puts one in direct contact with food as gift. Of all the gifts of the natural world, food most obviously is one that must not be kept from others or be used as a tool for mere profit.

Family farmers are more likely to realize this. The family farm

will tend to be more oriented toward people and land, than toward profit. Here, raising food is less a job than it is a way of life. Family farmers tend to see themselves more as food-producers than as money-makers. And again, while money is easily seen as simply mine, food naturally bespeaks its common destination. Further, on the family farm the relationship with the land is more obviously long term—as it should be, and thus there is special motivation to exercise care and stewardship in its use, keeping in mind future generations.

Obviously, I am not making an assertion of fact about particular “family farmers” and their dispositions, any more than about “non-family farmers” and their dispositions. Some of the former can, and certainly have, fallen prey to temptations we all face toward various forms of selfishness. Some of the latter can exhibit an exemplary practice of justice and husbandry.

My assertion here concerns the general fittingness and thus desirability of family farms. At issue is not simply a nostalgia for a “dying way of life,” one left behind by economic progress. Rather, there is ground here for an urgent consideration of just what we mean by a “family farm,” and why their preservation and promotion is a matter not only of economic and political, but also moral and religious significance.

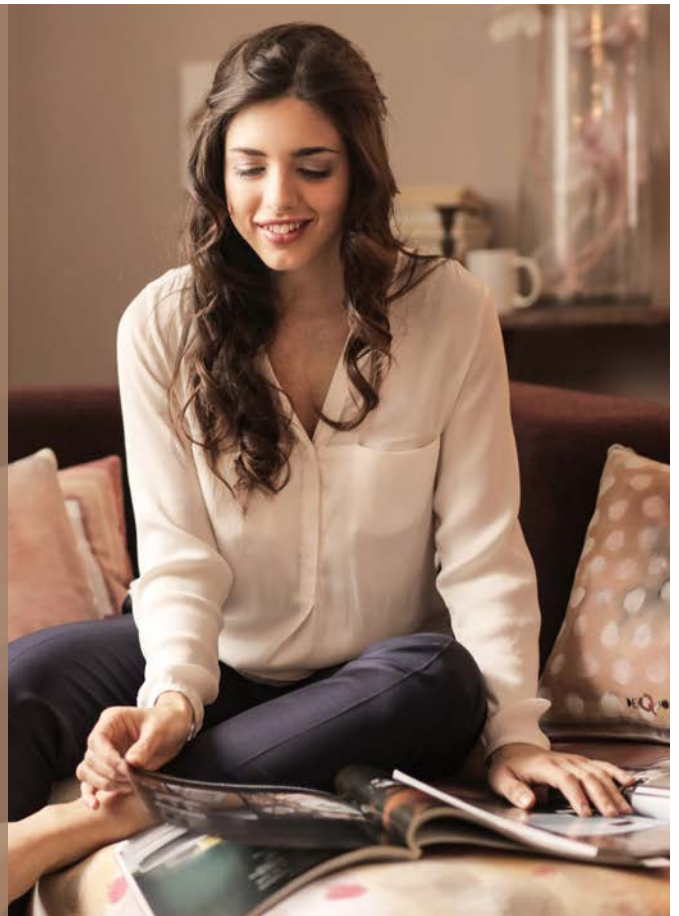
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