

Led By Faith



Wisconsin Family Chooses Sustainable Farming

By Denyse Shannon

*“It’s not our land, it’s
God’s land that he’s
entrusted to our care.”*

The belief that what they do as a farm family deeply rooted in their Catholic faith means Ben and Erin Klinkner are naturally going to practice sustainable farming. The couple, who operate a small dairy farm in Cashton, Wisconsin, is the sixth generation of a family recognized for putting faith first in their labors.

Though the children may look at the farm as chores, Ben and Erin see their work as passing on the legacy they were given. “It’s also about the food that you produce being wholesome and clean for our family as well,” said Ben. “You’re trying to preserve the health of the next generation by keeping their food a clean source.”

Their farming practice means taking into consideration low soil erosion, not spraying pesticides and herbicides, keeping carbon emissions low, and rotating crops for soil conservation. “Obviously, we have enough pride in the legacy that we wanted for future generations, for my kids to have good soil to work with,” Ben said.

They believe so strongly in sustainability and regenerative practices that Ben and his family took on the rental of another farm where the soil had been

Left: The Klinkner Family on their farm in Wisconsin.



depleted. Year after year, acres of corn had been planted without any rotation of crops or leaving the land fallow. "We're still working on the fertility of that farm 20 years later, to get it back up to speed because it was depleted," he said.

To keep from depleting their own land, the Klinkners are organic farmers. "I believe that by farming organically, we are sustaining this for the next generation," Ben said. "We're not pounding out corn after corn after corn on this ground and then putting so much synthetic fertilizer and herbicide and pesticide on our land to get a good yield."

It is through these practices, along with minimal tillage and contour stripping to preserve soil from erosion, that they're able to produce a good crop. "From the organic standpoint and preserving the land that God gave us, I feel more confident that we're leaving it, our soils, healthy for future generations," Ben said.

The Future

The next generation is already in the works. Ben and Erin are teaching their children not only about sustainable, regenerative farming practices, but also how their faith plays a role in those methods. They are raising their six children to be good stewards of what God has entrusted to them through their work and their example. Their kids, ages 10, 8, 7, 6, 4, and 20 months, are homeschooled by Erin, and the older children help with the younger.

"Having the older kids help with the younger ones makes a big difference to them," said Erin, adding that when there are chores to do, having one of her sons entertain his younger siblings is still part of the

family work. "Maybe he's not as involved with the direct chores of helping out with the actual farming per se, but he stays with the little kids, which is a big help, too."

The older children also help out with feeding the animals and collecting eggs. They're all learning lessons in stewardship, as well as what it means to be part of something greater than themselves. Through their time together, the children learn that they can rely on each other. They also witness this through their grandfather's constant presence on the farm.

"We don't hire help around here," Ben said. "My dad is here all the time helping us, and between Erin and me and the kids, that's basically it."

The Klinkners attend Mass regularly at St. Patrick's in nearby Sparta, with Erin also taking the children to daily Mass during the week. The family prays together and deepens their faith through bible study and reading about the lives of the saints each night before bed. Through their faith efforts, they're creating sustainability not just on the farm, but by keeping their "eyes on things above."

Last September, the Diocese of La Crosse recognized the Klinkner Family with their

Strangers and Guests Award, given to families committed to farming according to God's plan outlined in Leviticus, where He tells the people, "The Land belongs to me, and to me you are only strangers and guests" (25:23).

Deacon Bob Zeitlow, liaison to Bishop Gerard Battersby for the Rural Life Committee in the Diocese of La Crosse, said the committee looks at a family's stewardship of their land, how a family works together to practice that stewardship, and their involvement in the local community. He added that the Klinkners were nominated by their pastor, Father Eric Berns, because of their commitment to faith, generosity, hospitality, and servant leadership.

"This family very well answered all those questions and filled in all those spaces," Deacon Zeitlow said.

With higher education degrees in animal science, Ben said they could have chosen any number of career paths besides the demanding life of dairy farming, but their faith is what led them to where they are.

"Our faith is what drove us to want a family," he said, "and in order to spend time with our family, this career choice fits that." ■



Bottom: The Klinkners receive the Diocese of La Crosse Strangers and Guests Award from their bishop. (All photos submitted by the Klinkners)