

2016 - Issue Two

The Family Farm

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Since I didn't grow up farming, and since my wife did, the story of how I started farming is a love story. Elisa, my wife, is the fourth generation on the land purchased by her great-grandfather in 1916 in the heart of Amish country in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. We met when we were 17 years old, and at the time neither of us imagined we would continue her parents' farm. Our sights were set on college and the limitless possibilities of the future.

When I say "the farm" what I mean is a beautiful 112 acres of cropland and pasture, on which we milk 25 cows and raise steers for beef. We have a few chickens and pigs for our own use, and a few goats who specialize in lawn care and/or destruction. The business is rounded out with a thriving Bed & Breakfast—hosting about 30 people each night over the summer—along with guided farm tours in order to share what we've learned about food, farming and family work to anyone who's interested (and, of course, to provide an opportunity to milk a cow by hand).

But Elisa and I did not imagine we'd end up here. It was not until I started reading Wendell Berry, G.K. Chesterton and the "distributists," Leon Kass' *Hungry Soul*, among others—that the possibility of going back to the farm became something real for both of us. We were attracted to a vision of an integrated life blossoming out of the home; we were attracted to combating the sense of alienation—from our bodies, from rooted community, from the sources that sustain us—that seems to pervade modern life; and we were attracted to escaping the sterile world of cubicles in Washington, DC.

So our love story took us back to the farm. Wendell Berry has written that there are only two reasons to farm, given the many challenges a farmer faces (from the uncertainty of weather, to the low prices of most agricultural products, to the daily grind of the work): "Because you have to, or because you love to." [i] Several years ago, a guest on the farm was taking our farm tour—he was clearly a banker type from New York City—and he asked me why I was farming. I told him this line from Berry about necessity and love. He replied to me, in a heavy New York accent, "Don't talk to me about love. I wanna know about the *money*."

Suffice it to say, after looking at the accounting ledgers, both my wife and I are still farming for love. Not necessarily because we love farming itself every day of the year—it's easy to romanticize, and I want to avoid that—but because we love family and many of the goods associated with farming.

In what follows, I hope to outline a few of the benefits of a farm for the family; in turn, the benefits of the family for a farm; and finally to address how recovering a sense of the world as *created* has practical implications for food production.

The benefits of a farm for the family

What are the benefits of a farm for the family? I'll mention three.

1. A farm benefits the family by reminding us of the dignity of manual labor. A farm helps parents and children alike to turn off the smart screen, to leave the virtual, disembodied reality behind, and fix our attention on the tangible, living, breathing world that's in front of our eyes. To borrow a phrase from David Crawford of the Pontifical John Paul II Institute, an authentically Catholic anthropology is no "angelic anthropology,"^[ii] but recognizes bodily goods as true goods. And manual labor is not merely mindless, but engages the whole person as a body-soul unity.

Working with the body is also related to the natural rhythms of farm life, which recur on both a daily and a seasonal basis. These rhythms are natural and bodily—rhythms of reaping and sowing, waiting and fulfillment, fasting and feasting, which fit well with the rhythms of the liturgy and the Church calendar.

I don't intend to romanticize farming at the expense of other trades. Learning about the importance of bodily work and engaging in natural rhythms doesn't just happen through agriculture. These patterns of waiting, fulfillment and seasonality can be learned in a family setting through gardening, yard care, cooking, baking bread, brewing beer—all of these being excellent activities to do with one's kids.

2. And this leads me to a second benefit of a farm for the family, namely, a farm provides meaningful work that involves children. It's a rare thing today that parents can work alongside each other, let alone with their children. If we are attracted to a vision of the good life blossoming out of the home—as Elisa and I were, when we contemplated leaving DC—then a farm offers one such way to live this life. When I asked Elisa what she thought were the benefits of farming for the family, the first thing she said was "being able to work together." Growing up, she worked alongside her parents, particularly her mother, and this instilled in her a love of work. From what I've seen, this willingness to take on hard work is not uncommon among people raised in farm families.

And it is not just about meaningful work for children. A farm can also provide meaningful work that involves grandparents, friends and neighbors. In fact, one learns pretty quickly in farming the tremendous practical benefit of working together with people you care about. My Amish friend and neighbor, Chris, once explained to me, "You don't need to be smart, if you have smart friends."

He's absolutely right. Family and friendship are not just necessary to fulfill emotional needs—though they are—but are also practical and economic, producing tangible results. A farm reminds us of this simple fact of life on a daily basis, providing meaningful work that can involve the whole family, indeed the whole neighborhood.

3. Finally, a third way in which a farm benefits the family is that bonds of affection are strengthened within a household that is productive, not just consumptive. This is one of Wendell Berry's points, and it resonates with me deeply.^[iii] Households today have become almost exclusively places of consumption. The previous productive capacities of households, including the education of children, have almost all been outsourced one-by-one. And so all that's left today are bonds based on consumption, or affective bonds. Families come home from work and say hello; perhaps eating together, perhaps not; perhaps watching TV or Netflix; and then sleeping in the same house. And Berry's point is quite simple: witnessing the state of families in our culture today, perhaps family bonds based only on consumption are not strong enough! Affective bonds come and go, they have ups and downs. And when they are down, it is the productive bonds—the common project—that can carry a marriage and a family through. With a common project, you realize that your family is part of a larger picture, a larger "task," and each member is needed to complete it well. Of course, affective bonds can

be *very* strong, and are irreplaceable. It helps to *like* your family. But the unity that comes from sharing a common project is perhaps more consistent. Family unity is strengthened within a household that shares a common productive project, not just consumptive interests.

The benefits of the family for a farm

If a farm is beneficial for the family, what can we say about the value of the family for a farm? As you've probably noticed already, *not every farm promotes the goods mentioned above*—the dignity of manual labor, meaningful work that involves children, and the strengthening of household bonds. In fact, it will come as no surprise to say that not even every *family* farm promotes these goods!

The reason for this is that it takes a conscious effort to achieve these goods. When you farm, and especially when you own or operate your own small business, it is easy to become a slave to activity. Then too there is the pervasive influence of the broader culture which tends to denigrate manual labor, separate the work and leisure of adults and children, and promote an economic system in which the “consumptive household” is the norm.

To achieve the goods mentioned above, it takes intentional effort. And in this regard a family offers irreplaceable gifts to the farm. I'll mention just three.

1. The first gift of the family to a farm, is the gift of keeping the farm centered in prayer. It is a certain type of family that makes all the goods just discussed possible. And it seems to me that a farm that is *not* centered in prayer will likely miss out on these goods, in the pursuit of expanding production, or simply staying afloat. The gift of elevating the farm in prayer is a benefit of the family for a farm—and it's a gift that only a family can provide, not a corporation, not an LLC. This in turn makes all the other goods we discussed possible.

2. Second, the family benefits the farm because it gives the farm an end other than profits, namely the flourishing of the family members, and the continuation of a way of life. With a family, there is a recognition that a farm's value is more than what it will bring for sale—it is a setting for family life. This is why the Amish, for example, never sell their farms to developers. The farm is not just seen as a resource, or an asset, but a setting for a particular kind of life, one which they see as very fitting for the continuation of their faith and culture. A family provides to the farm an end that is not just profit, but a way of life.

3. Third, a family farm exhibits intergenerational concern for a particular place. And now, we are touching upon not just a benefit of the family to a farm, but a benefit of the family to the land itself, to the health of our “common home,” as Pope Francis would say in *Laudato si'*. The idea of love and care for a particular place, spanning multiple generations, is a profound point, and one that's often lost in our highly mobile culture. Why does this matter? I'll just note that we cannot love in the abstract. Wendell Berry writes that we cannot love women, in general, without loving a particular woman. Similarly, we cannot love friendship, without having particular friends. And similarly, we cannot love the land without loving a particular piece of it.^[iv] If we are to be good stewards of the land, and properly care for it for the sake of future generations, it seems to me this can only happen when we have intergenerational connections to a particular place—and I think history bears this out. Care for future generations, and the “health of the land,” is no longer an abstract idea, but something concrete and visible.

These are three benefits, at least, of the family for a farm. But we should deepen the first point. Why does it matter for a family to elevate a farm in prayer? Because it helps to recover the idea of *creation* (and stewardship of creation), which is essential for the health of agriculture and food production today.

Agriculture in the “grammar of Creation”

Recovering a sense of Creation involves discerning a meaningful order in the world as it’s given. There is a *logic to nature*, a language of the body, a “grammar of creation.”^[v] And if these are to be more than poetic metaphors, it is only because the world was first thought by an intelligent Creator, and not merely the result of a confluence of random forces. When faced with the profound mystery of our origins, we are left with a choice. Is the world the result of a loving decision, or is it not? Is the world, and each of our lives, the result of a blind interplay of chance and necessity,^[vi] or is it not? The way we answer this question changes everything.

Some of the most profound elements of Pope Francis’ recent encyclical on ecology, *Laudato si’*, are precisely concerned with this idea of recovering a sense of Creation. Francis writes that we are to discern “a message contained in the structures of nature itself” (LS 117). He writes about living in harmony with “a reality which has been given to us, which precedes our existence and our abilities” (LS 140).

A farmer understands this. When walking outside at 6:00 AM, on a bitterly cold morning, to discover the pipes in the barn are frozen and you can’t open the door because of a snow bank—you sometimes wish to shout “Yes, I get it! There’s a larger reality that precedes me!” Sometimes you want to argue with the “message contained in the structures of nature.” But you know it’s in the interest of your long term beatitude to cooperate. As farmers, rather than “foolishly beat[ing] our head against the way nature likes to work,”^[vii] it is better to pay careful attention to the order and logic at the heart of creation.

So what is the practical significance of all of this for food production? Several things come to mind.

First, with a sense of Creation you view the value of your work, and what you produce, *intrinsically*, and not just instrumentally. The products of farm work include living beings—plants, animals—and the food that sustains us. To quote Joel Salatin, a farmer must learn to respect the “pigness of a pig,” and the “cowness of a cow.” In other words, there is an intrinsic quality and way-of-being for each animal or plant, which can guide our agricultural decisions. This provides another criteria for thinking about food production—along with the conventional criteria of productivity and profits—that promotes the long-term health of a farm and a community. Moreover, the quality of the bread itself matters, and not just, as Adam Smith would say, the baker’s regard for his own self-interest.^[viii] Bread—like each type of food—has an integrity of its own, that you can honor (or not) through your work.

Second, a sense of creation arouses in the farmer an attentiveness to the logic of nature. One begins to notice, for example that, in nature, herbivores are constantly on the move. Might this be healthy for them, for the soil, and for the plants they eat? The practices of rotational grazing and mob grazing grew out of this attentiveness to the natural behavior of animals. One notices, too, that animals move to stay ahead of bacteria (thus preventing the need for lacing animal feed with antibiotics, and thereby protecting the efficacy of antibiotics for when they are truly needed).

The list could go on: Creation provides non-arbitrary criteria for making a distinction between a farm and a factory, an animal and a machine, what’s natural and artificial... But a full treatment of the

practical implications of Creation for agriculture will need to wait for another day.[ix]

To conclude, I've lately been thinking that the most important practical significance of Creation for food production—particularly in today's economy and culture—is *the indispensable value of the Sabbath*. One of the aforementioned differences between an animal and a machine, or the natural and artificial, is that nature has the capacity to heal. If a cow is sick, and you give her proper care and an opportunity to rest, her body will heal. Her body *wants* to heal. The same can be said for the land. The same can be said for our own bodies. But if your tractor is broken, you can let it rest, talk nice to it, give it lots of tender loving care, but it will be just as broken as when you started.

And so rest, the Sabbath, remains an integral part of food production—for the sake of the healing of animals, land, and people (the enduring significance of Leviticus 25:4; 2 Chronicles 36:21; among others). There comes a time when all our work and toil has run its course, and the most fundamental act of freedom is a simple and prayerful *letting be*.^[x] A time when our own work of harvest must halt in absolute deference to the Kingdom of God.

...

The themes of farming and the family are connected in intimate ways in human culture. A farm provides real and not just sentimental benefits to a family: by reminding us of the dignity of working with our bodies and detaching us from the disembodied reality of the smart screen; by allowing parents and children to work together in meaningful ways; by rooting the affective bonds of a household in a common productive effort. And families can provide enduring benefits to farms and to any culture's food production system: by centering the farm in prayer and a sense of stewardship of creation; by providing criteria other than profits for agricultural decision-making; and by exhibiting concern for particular places that extend beyond a single lifetime. Given this mutual support between a farm and the family—support that existed through much of human history—it is perhaps no coincidence that the farm household and the family in general have declined in tandem. Our task is to renew a culture of permanence and an attentiveness to creation in both our families and the sources of our food.

[i] Wendell Berry, *Hannah Coulter* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2004), 129.

[ii] David S. Crawford, "Of Spouses, the Real World, and the 'Where' of Christian Marriage" *Communio: International Catholic Review* 33 (Spring 2006): 100–116, especially 116.

[iii] Wendell Berry, "Feminism, the Body, and the Machine," in *The Art of the Commonplace* (Emeryville, CA: Shoemaker & Hoard, 2002), 67–71. See also the essay "The Body and the Earth" in the same volume, in particular pp. 108–111.

[iv] Wendell Berry, "The Body and the Earth," in *The Art of the Commonplace* (Emeryville, CA: Shoemaker & Hoard, 2002), 117–118.

[v] David L. Schindler, "Habits of Presence and the Generosity of Creation: Ecology in Light of Integral Human Development," *Communio: International Catholic Review* 42 (Winter 2015), 574–593, especially 577–81.

[vi] Joseph Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004) [originally published in 1968], especially p. 151–58.

[vii] *Communio: International Catholic Review* 42 (Winter 2015), 791.

[viii] Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, Book 1, Ch. 2, “Of the Principle which gives occasion to the Division of Labour.”

[ix] In the meantime, see Jesse Straight’s recent article in *Communio*, 789–95, for how attentiveness to the logic of creation can be manifested on a farm.

[x] “Habits of Presence and the Generosity of Creation,” 578, and footnote 13.

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