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Cows are pictured in a file photo grazing on a farm just outside Postville, Iowa. For the past 100 years, Catholic Rural Life, based in St. Paul, Minn., has ministered to Catholics who live and work in a rural setting. (OSV News/CNS file/Bob Roller)



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April 15 was an unusually warm spring day in Belle Plaine. Jim Glisczinski's worn farm boots compressed the soft, freshly unfrozen ground as he walked toward his new John Deere planter. The complex machine will help him plant his 1,700 acres more precisely and with less seed and fertilizer, if it works.

"This is one of the times you pray," he said as he passed a barn housing heifers and hay bales. Behind the barns, soybean and corn fields spilled beyond the horizon. The steeple of St. John the Evangelist of Union Hill punctuated the landscape. Glisczinski attends Mass at St. John when he doesn't go to his longtime parish of Our Lady of the Prairie in Belle Plaine.

For the past 100 years, Catholic Rural Life has ministered to Catholics like Glisczinski who live and work in a rural setting. As part of his involvement with the organization, Glisczinski hosts seminarians at his farm every fall to learn about farm equipment. The St. Paul-based national organization receives support from 80 dioceses.

Although it now has members in 45 states, CRL began with just one man. Fr. Edwin O'Hara grew up on a farm in southeast Minnesota, near Lanesboro. O'Hara attended St. Paul Seminary in St. Paul and was ordained in 1905 by Archbishop John Ireland.

As a young priest, he was sent to France to serve as a chaplain during World War I, where he met many young American soldiers from rural communities. O'Hara realized that although they said they were Catholic, they did not know their faith. He returned to the United States with the conviction that rural communities needed to be evangelized, said James Ennis, executive director of Catholic Rural Life.

"Our organization was founded by someone who had a real passion and vision for rural ministry," Ennis said. "Since 1923, the organization has been promoting Catholic faith in rural America."

Ennis said that over its century-long existence, the mission of the organization has not changed — but the way it ministers has evolved. While it focused on establishing Catholic schools in rural areas in its early days, it now has many apostolates, such as providing retreats for rural priests, seed for farmers in need, community for college students with a rural background and educational opportunities for Native Americans.

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The shortage of priests has taken a toll on rural America, with many parishes combining with others into "parish clusters" under one pastor. This forces rural pastors to travel between multiple communities for their ministry, Ennis told *The Catholic Spirit*, newspaper of the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis.

"(Rural) priests are stretched very thin," Ennis said. "They're feeling a little isolated."

To help overworked rural pastors, CRL hosts retreats to share best practices and provide rural pastors with a community.

Fr. Stan Mader, pastor of St. Joseph in Waconia, has helped lead retreats for rural pastors since 2020. CRL received a grant from the Indianapolis-based Lili Endowment, a private philanthropic organization, to start the program.

Loneliness is "one of the many concerns" that rural pastors bring up at the retreats, Mader said, along with finances, parish staffing, not understanding farm life and not having an internet signal in extremely rural areas.

"Some of these priests (on retreats) had not seen another priest for six months," Mader said, due to the COVID-19 pandemic. "It is just amazing how isolating that is."

The retreats remedy that sense of isolation by providing time for fellowship among the priests and by encouraging participants to attend several follow-up web seminars in the year after the retreat.

In addition to fellowship, the retreats center on prayer and panel discussions about best practices in rural ministry. In past retreats, Christopher Thompson, academic dean and professor of moral theology at St. Paul Seminary, has spoken about how the theology of creation relates to farming.

Mader encourages rural priests who do not know about farming to take a ride in a combine or tractor to get a sense of farm life and talk to farmers. He said that participants in the retreats often say, "I wish I had known this from day one."

Mader said that it is often difficult for priests to step away from their ministries to attend the retreats in person, since there is not another priest in their area to fill in for them. To make the retreats more accessible, there are plans to deliver the retreats online in the future with an annual in-person gathering in the Twin Cities.

"We just feel that this is an opportunity to really help the local farmer continue with his mission as well as our mission of sustaining the Earth."

—*Deacon Bob Zietlow*

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Deacon Bob Zietlow, who serves St. Teresa of Kolkata Parish in West Salem, Wisconsin, grew up on a farm, so he knows that farming requires faith.

"You till the soil, you put a seed in the ground, and after that, the only thing you can do is pray — pray for the rain, pray for the proper sunshine, pray that there's no hail, pray that there's no (damaging) wind," he said. "All the things that can go wrong, it is mind-boggling."

When things do go wrong, Zietlow is there to help farmers recover. He heads the CRL chapter in La Crosse, Wisconsin, and leads an initiative to distribute discounted seed to small farmers. For about 15 years, the La Crosse chapter has set up seed distribution days at rural Catholic parishes, which they advertise in parish bulletins. By cutting out the salesperson and distributing the seed directly to farmers, they can sell seed at lower than market price.

Zietlow said the program recently helped a farmer struggling with erosion on his land. He could not pay the full price for grass seed, so CRL supplemented the cost, and he was able to stop the erosion.

Although the chapter distributes the seed at Catholic parishes, it assists farmers of any religious affiliation.

"We just feel that this is an opportunity to really help the local farmer continue with his mission as well as our mission of sustaining the Earth," he said.

This year, the pastor of each local parish will bless the seed before it is distributed. Zietlow blesses the land of any farmers who ask.

When Jenna Reinert, 21, arrived at Kansas State University in Manhattan, Kansas, in fall 2021, she felt overwhelmed. The campus was four times the size of her hometown of Colby, Kansas, where she grew up on farmland and attended school with the same cohort of peers from kindergarten through high school.

"I don't feel like I belong," she recounted thinking. "I just wanted to find my people."

Throughout her first year of college, Reinert connected with other freshmen from rural settings who felt the same way. With the guidance of Fr. Gale Hammerschmidt, the pastor of St. Isidore's Catholic Student Center, Reinert decided to begin a CRL campus chapter.



Jim Glisczinski looks over his new planter on his farm near Belle Plaine, Minn., April 15, 2024. Farmers like him can receive material and spiritual support from Catholic Rural Life, which celebrates 100 years in May. (OSV News/The Catholic Spirit/Dave Hrbacek)

Reinert, who serves as the chapter leader, hopes that the chapter will provide a faith-based community for students who come to the university from rural settings.

"One of our long-term goals is building the community and allowing these kids that are coming in as freshmen to feel seen and understood," Reinert said. She hopes the Catholic center, where the CRL chapter meets, will be "a place where you can feel seen, known and loved" by others from a rural background.

Reinert's chapter is one of 31 chapters across the U.S. — a figure that Ennis hopes will double in the next five years.

Ennis hopes that these chapters will encompass the diversity of rural populations.

"There's a real need to also understand the diversity in rural (life). We have Native American populations. We have Hispanic populations, we have all kinds of different ethnic groups ... and we need to reach out to (them)," Ennis said.

To assist Indigenous populations, CRL provides scholarships for students with a Native American background through White Earth Nation, an organization that uplifts Native Americans. CRL has awarded 166 scholarships through the organization over the last 11 years.

CRL diocesan chapters around the country have a variety of events and initiatives. The CRL chapter at St. Martin Deanery in Cincinnati recently held an event about African American farmers in Appalachia who settled there after the Civil War. The chapter in Lincoln, Nebraska, regularly organizes Mass at tractor shows, according to the CRL website. The chapter in Salina, Kansas, recently had an event called "Rural Life: Tending the Land, Mind and Spirit," addressing mental health in rural life and how to handle anxiety and stress.

The need to evangelize rural areas is "needed more now than it was 100 years ago," Ennis said.

"Secularization has impacted rural (life) as much as it's impacted urban areas, so there is a real challenge there; rural areas need to be re-evangelized," Ennis said. "The need today could not be greater for ministry in rural America. On this hundredth-year anniversary, the emphasis is around celebrating the 100 years of ministry, but also sharing a vision for the next 100."