Voices of Sisters

Environment



Ursuline Sr. Amelia Stenger teaches students from Sts. Peter and Paul School in Hopkinsville, Kentucky, about growing a garden sustainably on the grounds of the Mount St. Joseph motherhouse in Daviess County. (Courtesy of Ursuline Sisters of Mount St. Joseph)



by Sr. Amelia Stenger

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Someone once told me, "If you take care of the land, the land will take care of you." The Ursuline Sisters of Mount St. Joseph have been taking care of 750 acres of land here in western Daviess County, Kentucky, since Aug. 15, 1874. That's when five sisters came down the Ohio River on a flatboat from Louisville to Owensboro, then traveled the last 13 miles by horse-drawn wagon to the land that has been taking care of us since then.

During those first years, as we ministered in rural areas and small schools, the land was all our sisters had to keep them alive. They took care of the gardens, milked the cows, and got eggs from the chickens. They replenished the soil so it would continue to produce the next year.

From the time our community arrived here, one family in particular has journeyed with us. Louise and Aquila Blandford welcomed the sisters and gave them their first meal — watermelon and buttermilk! That family has been a part of our history for 149 years.



Ursuline novices and postulants working in the Mount St. Joseph dairy in 1948 (Courtesy of Mount St. Joseph Archives)

Mark Blandford, our most recent farm manager, retired in 2022 and there wasn't a Blandford to take his place. In 2016, our community had decided that when Mark retired, we would lease the farm. And now we have neighbors who are taking care of the farm as if it were their own. They have been our neighbors for many years — two have had relatives in our community.

Leasing the farm was not easy because the farm was in our blood. Most of our sisters helped in the gardens or in caring for the produce — even the ones who had never worked in a garden or knew much about farming. In the spring, I imagined our blood would turn green because we were in the garden so much of the time.

I didn't mind the work because I had worked on our family farm, and when it gets warm in March, I still have to get outside. The soil is in my bones.

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Over the years, our farm managers had worked hard to keep our soil as clean and fertile as possible. We did no-till farming. We protected riparian zones near the creeks. We used natural fertilizer from our barns, used no chemicals on the fruit trees, and raised grass-fed cattle.

When Mark told us he was ready to retire, we carefully planned questions for interviewing farmers who applied to lease the farm. We took care to treat them fairly, but our questions centered on protecting the land.

We interviewed 17 farmers. Some owned large farms and worked thousands of acres. Some were just starting to build up their acreage. We were so inspired by the farmers we interviewed, and the choice was hard.

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In the end, we chose three farmers we felt would take care of the land the way we did. They aren't big farmers, but they believe that the land is special and must be preserved for future generations.

One of our sisters works in the local parish attended by several of the applicants. One commented to her that he didn't realize that the sisters knew so much about farming. She assured him that we were very involved in the farm and several of us had grown up on farms.

We had asked questions about new farming methods like regenerative farming. We named specific herbicides and pesticides that we did not want to be used on our land. We expressed our love for the land and our expectations of the farmers who leased the land. He was surprised that we knew so much.



Most of the sisters pitch in when there are apples to peel or corn to shuck! (Courtesy of Ursuline Sisters of Mount St. Joseph)

The first growing season proved that the farmers who leased our land have kept to their word. They had a successful planting and harvesting season. They are caring

for the land — even testing the soil while it is resting. Samples are taken from all over the fields, and lime or other natural supplements are only put on the areas where they are needed. Fuel is saved, money is saved and the land gets what it needs.

For many years, as director of our retreat center, I was privileged to take children on field trips around the farm. We would visit the bee tree where a hive of wild bees kept their honey. We visited the cows and pigs. We let the children hold little squealing baby pigs. They could pet baby calves. Many of the children had never been so close to these farm animals.

They planted cabbages in the garden and picked blackberries when they were in season. We let them touch the dirt and talked about all the good nutrients that were in that little bit of soil.



Students from Christ the King School in Madisonville, Kentucky, visit the cattle at Mount St. Joseph in Daviess County. Only the land that is too hilly to till sustainably

is used for pasturage. (Courtesy of Ursuline Sisters of Mount St. Joseph)

Telling them about the abundance of the Earth, I showed them a package containing about 50 tomato seeds. That one package that cost $2 would produce enough tomatoes to feed our whole community, and we would have tomatoes to give away. This abundance is God's gift to us.

One group came from a classroom for children with autism. One little boy was in a small wheelchair. The teacher pushing him had pads on her arms and legs because she said he bit and kicked. On our trip to see the cows, he was looking in all directions. I talked to him as we got closer to the field with the cows, but he didn't say anything.

Usually, the cows would run away when they heard a group of children coming, but this time they didn't run away. The teacher pushed him up to the fence and one of the cows came up and touched his hand with her nose as he stuck it through the fence. It was a solemn moment of peace as we all watched this interaction of touch. Nature is healing. The land is healing. (And not once did this child kick or bite.)



The Mount St. Joseph cemetery is a good place to sit and look out at part of the farm. (Courtesy of Ursuline Sisters of Mount St. Joseph)

Our land is holy ground. Besides taking care of our sisters for 149 years, it has helped feed the world as the grain is harvested each year. The nut trees planted as windbreaks feed the wildlife. The acreage left as wooded areas provides habitat for animals like deer and rabbits. And it educated thousands of youngsters who went on the trips around the farm.

God allowed us to steward this land, and we have been blessed to share this land of plenty, considered some of the best farmland in Kentucky.

Sometimes, when I want to get away from the office, I get one of the "Gators" — a small John Deere four-wheeler — and drive to the top of Daisy Hill, which overlooks our farm. It is a quiet time to view this blessing that has been a part of our

community for so long.

I thank God for the ancients who once lived here. I thank God for the sisters who worked so hard to bring it to life. I thank God for all the Blandfords and other families who have helped us take care of this land, and I thank God for allowing me to be here with all my Ursuline Sisters on this precious land.

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