

Wendell and Mary Berry bequest farming legacy to small Catholic college

by [Judith Valente](#) in the [March 16, 2016](#) issue

The family of writer and farmer Wendell Berry has lived among the hay fields and rolling knobs of central Kentucky for nine generations. Now, the 81-year-old writer wants to pass on his farming legacy.

He has selected a small Catholic liberal arts college about an hour's drive from Louisville, run by the Dominican Sisters of Peace. The sisters have been part of this community since 1822, teaching and farming on their own 550-acre stretch of land. That impressed Wendell Berry's daughter, Mary Berry.

"When I went to St. Catharine's, their first question to me was not about my father's reputation and how it might serve their desire to raise funds," Mary Berry said.

Instead, the school asked how the Berry family's work fits with the four pillars of the Dominican life: prayer, study, ministry, and community.

"The Berry Farming Program really maximizes each of those," said Claire McGowan, an environmental activist and Dominican sister.

Berry proved a good fit for the sisters, too.

"Wendell Berry is a deeply soulful man," McGowan said. "He lives his life out of deep spiritual convictions and always has, and has a simplicity and a love for everything that's wild, everything that's natural, and at the same time for people, particularly simple people who are trying to build a relationship with the natural world."

The Berry Farming Program offers an interdisciplinary approach to agriculture, combining fieldwork with philosophy and studies in agricultural science and agribusiness with classes on literature, history, and culture.

"In our thinking we often have silos," said the program's coordinator, Leah Bayens. "Agricultural economics [is] one area. Agricultural production is another area, another silo. Community leadership, that's another silo. So when Wendell says things like, 'You can't take the culture out of agriculture,' ultimately what I think he means is you can't . . . minimize it into one particular scientific study."

For Berry, the heart of agriculture springs from a spiritual kinship with the land, he told Bill Moyers in a rare interview he gave three years ago at the opening of the Berry Center: “I believe the world and our life in it are conditional gifts. You have to take good care of it. You have to love it.”

The Berrys hope the program will help curb the trend over the past century toward ever-bigger industrial farms. Instead, they want to encourage young farmers to grow products for local markets on midsized parcels of land that don’t depend heavily on chemical fertilizers and herbicides.

Mary Berry said she’s thrilled that many of the students want to farm in communities where they were raised. She half-jokingly said the farming center offers degrees in “homecoming.”

“It doesn’t mean people have to go to the place that they were born,” she said. “The concept of homecoming, I think, is simply to take root someplace, and care about a place, not just for a short amount of time, but forever.” —*Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly*

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