

Holy Cows: Partnership in Howard County aids those in need in Baltimore City

ELLICOTT CITY - Driving through the 310 acres of the Shrine of St. Anthony in Ellicott City on his way into work, Joseph Hamilton began thinking.

Hamilton, the shrine's director of mission advancement, was participating in the Baltimore Food and Faith Project at Johns Hopkins University, learning how religious institutions can play a part in solving environmental, food and health issues.

Driving past the farmland, Hamilton wondered, "What're we doing here?"

His questions sparked a new initiative - Little Portions Farm, a collaboration between the Conventual Franciscans at the Shrine of St. Anthony, a local farmer and the Franciscan Center in Baltimore, whose food program will receive the fresh produce grown on three acres of the shrine's farmland.

Part of the shrine's acreage was leased for farming that used pesticides. Upon re-evaluating, the friars determined that the current usage was not cohesive with the message of the Franciscans on being stewards of the land.

"We talk about stewardship," said Conventual Franciscan Father Michael Lasky, the order's director of justice, peace and integrity of creation ministry. "It's an environmental justice issue."

"Laudato Si: On Care for Our Common Home," Pope Francis' 2015 encyclical on the environment, came out after the initiative for Little Portions Farm began, but Father Lasky said it served as another driving force to make change.

Thomas Cunningham was happy to provide expert advice. A parishioner of St. Louis in Clarksville, Cunningham and his family regularly attend daily Mass at the shrine.

Cunningham owns Mary's Land Farm, a permaculture farm dedicated to working with nature to create high-quality food, just a few miles from the Shrine of St. Anthony.

Not only did Cunningham help plan the design of the shrine's farm, which includes a rotation of crops throughout the year, but he also brought a herd of his Red Devon cows to help return the fields to their native state after the prior use of chemicals.

Cunningham said his farm caters to many affluent people in Howard County, but he is excited to help those who are less fortunate. "The people who need it the most do without the nutrition they need," Cunningham said.

Jeff Griffin, Franciscan Center executive director, said the partnership will allow the center to serve fresher meals and add fresh produce to food pantry bags at a lower cost. Savings will be used to hire additional personnel to teach cooking lessons to the guests.

The best parts are "bringing fresh food to a community that is not used to having easy access to fresh produce and seeing all these communities come together to help those in need," said Griffin, a parishioner of Immaculate Heart of Mary in Baynesville.

The Franciscan Center provides meals to up to 700 people daily, many of whom live in "food deserts" - areas where it is difficult to buy affordable or fresh food.

Griffin grew up in Dundalk and, after his parents' divorce, his family ended up food-deprived for three years, relying on their parish, Our Lady of Hope, and other services. Now, he enjoys seeing the change that comes from families utilizing food, essential supplies and resources from the Franciscan Center to learn skills and create better lives.

Before the farm's dedication, the friars worked with partners Interfaith Power and Light and Franciscan Action Network to host the Spirit of Assisi Symposium on Environmental Justice and Service to Vulnerable Communities, which used "Laudato Si" as a guide.

Hamilton, who was involved in the symposium, said he saw how Catholics and the

pope are taking a lead in the talk on environmental issues. With the farm coming to fruition after four years of planning, he can see how this particular partnership is making a mark.

“Whatever story is told 100 years from now, we’re part of it,” he said. “It feels providential and blessed.”

Click here for a reflection by George Matysek about a close encounter he and some priests had with some Frederick County cows.

Email Emily Rosenthal at erosenthal@CatholicReview.org.