By Benjamin Wideman

Newton — Considering Jim and Sandie Fitzgerald grew up on nearby dairy farms in Manitowoc County, it was only fitting that their rural roots go back to St. Isidore Catholic School.

“St. Isidore is the patron saint of farmers, so I always thought that was so neat we both went to that particular school,” said Jim, noting the couple first met as 6-year-olds and later began dating as high school seniors.

“Our families always went to Mass at St. Isidore Church when we were younger. At least half the kids in the school were farm kids. It has just always been a great farming community with people who follow their faith. And it’s still that way.”

Today, the Fitzgeralds, both 73 years old and active retirees, attend St. Thomas the Apostle Catholic Community in Newton, not far from their home. The parish was formed in July 2000 from the merger of four rural churches: St. Isidore (Osman), St. Joseph (Alverno), St. Casimir (Northeim) and St. Wendel (Cleveland).

The couple’s faith foundation and rural roots have been interwoven their entire lives. Jim and Sandie were baptized and received First Communion at St. Isidore Catholic Church, which still stands (although it no longer serves as a church). The adjoining school, which housed grades 1-8, was led by teachers from the Bay Settlement Sisters. The school has long since been torn down, but the fond memories remain.

“It was a great school,” Sandie said. “It was a small school and everybody knew everybody. It was a good experience for me. I liked having other farm kids as classmates in our Catholic school. I really have great memories from our school and church. Our family never missed a Sunday Mass. We were always there.”

When they weren’t faithfully attending Mass, Sandie’s parents, Herbert and Veronica Stahl, were busy raising eight children and milking 32 cows, while Jim’s parents, John and Genevieve Fitzgerald, raised six children and milked 46 cows just three miles away.

“We would help with stone picking and tractor driving, but my brothers and sisters and I didn’t really get too involved with the milking,” Sandie said.

Although their families lived near each other, Jim (Kiel School District) and Sandie (Valders School District) attended different high schools after graduating from St. Isidore. As high school seniors, they worked together at Pine River Pre-Pack (a cheese business) and began dating. They married in 1968 at St. Isidore and began farming together a couple of years later.

“When I grew up, I said to myself that I’d never marry a farmer because I knew all too well how much work was involved in farming,” Sandie said. “It’s something I just never thought would happen.”

“But,” she added with a laugh, “I guess things change when you fall in love.”

Now — five children, 11 grandchildren and two great-grandchildren later — Jim and Sandie still lend a helping hand at the family’s 2,100-acre Soaring Eagle Dairy while incorporating their Catholic beliefs into everyday life.

For example, they have donated thousands of gallons of milk as well as multiple cull cows to Peter’s Pantry in Manitowoc. And they make financial contributions to Catholic charities.

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Phone: (920) 272-8321 or (877) 500-3580, ext. 8321
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Rural Life Mission
We, the Green Bay Diocesan Rural Life Committee, rooted in the Gospel and realizing our interdependence with all creation, strive to bring this awareness to all people.

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RURAL LIFE DAYS 2022

The Fitzgeralds’ faith is part of their approach to farming

“We feel we need to give back for all the blessings God has given us”

Photo by Benjamin Wideman
Sandie and Jim Fitzgerald at Soaring Eagle Dairy.

FITZGERALDS | P2A
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Jim, who prays every morning, has devoted countless hours and additional resources to helping those in need. For four straight years, he spearheaded an effort to gather and ship more than 70 tons of much-needed items to impoverished areas of Haiti and the Dominican Republic. Materials contained in the 40-foot shipping containers included school desks, educational supplies, hand and power tools, over-the-counter medicines, baking equipment and clothing, to name a few, as well as agricultural devices like an irrigation pump, potato planter, potato harvester and tractor. One year a school bus was donated. The items were sent to Fr. Mike Seis in the Dominican Republic and Sr. Maria Marciano in Haiti. Fr. Mike ministers to 90,000 people, including 1,000 Catholic school students. Sr. Maria’s work impacts about 160,000 people.

“We live in the richest country in the western hemisphere and Haiti is the poorest country in the western hemisphere,” said Jim, whose most recent trip to the island of Hispaniola concluded in March 2020 as COVID-19 began making news. Since 2011, Jim has made 14 two-week trips to Haiti for mission-related efforts. His most recent trip to the island of Hispaniola concluded in March 2020 as COVID-19 began making news. Since 2011, Jim has made 14 two-week trips to Haiti for mission-related efforts.

The Jim and Sandie Fitzgerald family.

Jim and Sandie Fitzgerald's grandsons with a newborn calf.

The Jim and Sandie Fitzgerald family.

The Fitzgeralds have led by example at both St. Isidore and St. Thomas the Apostle.

Sandie served as a liturgy coordinator for 20 years and now visits with and brings communion to elderly parishioners who live in nursing homes or are unable to leave their homes.

“Throughout the years my passion has changed, and I really enjoy working with the elderly,” she said. “There’s a real need for people to come visit them and know they’re part of the parish.”

Over the years, Sandie also has served as a sacristan and eucharistic minister, chaired the St. Thomas the Apostle worship committee, trained sacristans and lectors, participated in the women’s Bible study group and made mission trips along with Jim to Brazil.

In addition, Sandie taught religious education classes and she completed the Diocese of Green Bay’s Commissioned Ministry Leadership Formation Program.

“We are blessed to be in a very welcoming parish community with great parish leadership,” Sandie said. “People come from all over to be at St. Thomas the Apostle. The entire community is very welcoming and very involved. So many people do so many things for other people.”

Jim served on the parish building committee when plans were being discussed to merge the four rural parishes into one. And he was on the snow shoveling committee. When asked how being Catholic and working as farmers helped shape who they are today, Jim replied: “I give a lot of that credit to Sandie. She has always been very interested in helping others. When we started farming, for those first 25 years we never really had any extra funds to help others. But as our kids got involved with the farm and we backed away from the farm a little, we realized we could use some of our extra funds for helping others. Sandie got that started.”

Jim and Sandie farmed with Jim’s father and two brothers — Julie, Kelly, Stacy and Nick. (Their other daughter, Tammy, works off the farm.) Julie also is president of the board of directors for the Farm Wisconsin Discovery Center, an agricultural learning center and area visitors’ attraction located just south of Manitowoc.

All five Fitzgerald children attended Catholic grade school at either St. Isidore or, after that school closed, St. Gregory in St. Nazianz. “We really believe in Catholic education,” Sandie said.

Soaring Eagle Dairy has about 20 full-time employees, including several Hispanic workers who are fellow parishioners at St. Thomas the Apostle. “Having great employees is a huge part of the success of our farm,” Jim said.

Indeed, the Fitzgeralds view their employees as an extension of their own family. They support the parish outreach to the Hispanic community, especially promoting bilingual Masses and special activities in which the Hispanic community is involved.

Jim and Sandie also care about the environment. For the past several years, Soaring Eagle Dairy has converted more than 1,000 acres to cover crops and no-till land. In addition, they have 11 acres in buffers along waterways. They could harvest that land for additional revenue, but they opt to let the grass grow. Any farmland runoff will get slowed by the grass and absorbed into the soil.

“We want to take care of the environment and look out for our neighbors,” Jim said.

Sandie said it takes an entire family, an entire parish and an entire community to be successful.

“The farm wouldn’t function without every single person working together,” she said. “We are so fortunate to be caretakers of the land and animals we were blessed with. And it’s the same with the people of St. Thomas — they all work hard together to make the church the best it can be to help everyone. And I’m so pleased to be a part of the work we all do. I feel I am who I am because of so many other people around me.”
Join Us for Our Rural Life Day

By Bishop David Ricken

Almost exactly two years ago, the world shut down due to the COVID-19 pandemic. As we all remember, many events were canceled abruptly, including Rural Life Days. Last year, we were able to gather again for our Rural Life Mass, but we did so in a scaled-back way, with no luncheon or speaker. Friends, I am so happy to be able to invite you once again to join us to celebrate Rural Life Day this year! It will take place on Thursday, April 7, at St. Thomas the Apostle Parish, 8100 Brunner Road in Newton.

This year we will once again celebrate Mass and offer a blessing over seeds, soil, animals and equipment. In addition, we will gather for a luncheon and hear from Corey Geiger, a speaker who has strong roots in our diocese and whose family has been a longtime participant in Rural Life Days.

It is fitting that we gather in the Spring, as life is beginning anew in our area. Not only is this a time to ask for God’s blessing over our growing season, but, given the last two years, this Spring’s gathering marks a beginning of new life. Just as the seeds and flowers lay dormant in the ground during the winter months, only to burst forth in their beauty and glory in the Spring, we too have been dormant through the pandemic which has meant that all of us have had to limit our gatherings with others. Now we once again have the opportunity to come together and celebrate a new beginning, one that is filled with hope.

How appropriate that we mark this new beginning by coming together for Mass, to turn to God in prayer, asking for his blessing and protection on ourselves, our families and our farms. Gathering for Mass is also an opportunity to give thanks for all that God has given us, and for the new life that is beginning. Receiving the Eucharist nourishes us for the work ahead, which we know will bring difficulties and challenges. But when we start by offering ourselves and our work to God, we can trust that God will be there to carry us through any hurdles we might face.

This is also an opportunity to join together as a community. This has been one of the greatest challenges of the past couple of years, the feelings of isolation and disconnection. This year’s gathering might be a chance for you to reconnect with friends who you haven’t seen in a while. Or maybe it is an opportunity to feel the connection to the rural life community that exists across our diocese. Regardless of the reason, being together in person is something worth celebrating.

Friends, I hope you will consider joining us to celebrate Rural Life this year. You can find all the important information about this year’s celebration by going to gbdioc.org/rurallife.

Whether or not you can join us in person, please take some time to pray for all those people who live and work in our rural communities. They are a blessing to our diocese and a blessing to our state!

May God watch over them and bless them abundantly!
Grades 3-4:
Henry Micksch – 4th Grade
Holy Family Catholic School (Brillion)
Kindness
The best fruit of God’s creation is kindness. To be kind to others is easy, but sometimes it is hard to include people, say good job, and help someone. Kindness includes people in everything we do whether it is playing a board game or playing a simple game of kickball. Kindness should be an act of love that comes from the heart. Kindness shouldn’t be hitting your brother or sister when they win a game. It should be saying good job or you did really well. Helping people is another act of kindness, helping people is how kindness works. Kindness is great when people actually do it. Now think how great our world would be if everyone did acts of kindness every day.

Harper Taddy – 4th Grade
Holy Family Catholic School (Brillion)
Kindness
Do you know what some of the “fruits” of God’s creation are? Some of them are peace, wisdom, love, patience, faith, and kindness. To me, kindness is the most important “fruit” of God’s creation. Kindness is one of the greatest because it is all about love. Kindness means to share and not be greedy. People should be kind to everyone. People else can be kind to nature by not killing insects, like bees, because they give us honey. You can be kind to your neighbors by helping them with outside and inside work. There are many “fruits” of God’s creation in rural life, but one of the greatest is kindness.

Grades 5-6:
Diego Faustino Ortiz – 6th Grade
Holy Family Catholic School (Brillion)
One fruit that God gives us and farmers is free will. He always wants us to do the right thing because he wants us to choose what we do, like farmers choose what to plant and where to plant them, because God believes that we are good people and his children. He also gives us grace. He gives us grace because he wants us to love others. He wants us to love because he wants us all to spread joy and kindness throughout the world. He also gives us the power to be patient and wait. He needs us to do this because sometimes you have to let others go first. Then make them happier than yourself.

God wants everyone to be happy, so we all need to take part in sharing and caring for others. He also wants us to care for all living things, whether they are different, a plant, or even an animal, they all deserve respect. These are some of the ways you can please God, and take part in the fruits of God’s creation.

Paul Nowak – 5th Grade
Holy Family Catholic School (Brillion)
God’s Cycle of Life
The animals and plants provide for the people and the people care for the plants creating a harmonious relationship. The life cycle is a beautiful thing that we take for granted. God made the animals and plants in a way that allows them to support one another and sustain life.

Animals provide food for people. If people did not hunt
of God’s creation in rural life?

If the animals, they would become overpopulated and eat all the plants and the people would get sick. People need protein to survive and have good health. Farmers also raise animals for food. God put all these resources here that we can live off. Plants provide food for animals. Farmers raise crops for animals to eat. In the wild, animals forage for plants in the forest. God gave us many different types of fruits and vegetables. We humans need plants in our diet to be healthy as well. People and animals fertilize the soil so plants can grow. Seeds need soil, water, light, and air to grow strong. It is important for people to take care of the soil so we can grow healthy plants. God is so kind that He made everything in a life cycle so we can survive. God made all these things to live in harmony and bring forth life.

Grade 7-8:
Olive Kolmorgen – 7th Grade
Holy Rosary School (Kewaunee)

The fruits of God’s creation are beautiful things God made for us to see or hear and feel happiness! You can see them in nature, in the beautiful community around you, and in the people you are closest with. Can only very special people chosen by God himself witness God’s gifts? Of course not! God has created special gifts for everyone. Let’s talk more about that!

The fruits of God’s creation are beautiful things like sunsets by the beach and the stars in the glowing night sky. They are things like fresh food and clean water. They are also just the simple things we love, like hot days in the summer, and blankets during the winter. Fruits of God’s creation aren’t always something you can touch or eat. They are things like kindness and generosity towards others, and loyalty and friendship. You can witness the fruits of God’s creation when you see people reaching out a helping hand to others, or comforting them in time of most need.

We as humans can work on appreciating God’s wonderful works, and not taking advantage of them. Just take a moment to look around at our planet and be thankful for all of our blessings.

Monica Behnke – 8th Grade
Holy Family Catholic School (Brillion)

God has blessed us with so many things in this rural community. Some of the “fruits” we use each day are kindness, patience, and gentleness. Patience is important because we have to be patient when waiting for good crops to come in. If we are not patient we won’t have crops to feed others or our animals. Kindness is another great thing to have when it comes to taking care of a farm or animals. When taking care of animals it keeps them strong and healthy. If they are weak they can’t produce the things we need them to. Gentleness is used when it comes to being nice to everyone in our community. Being gentle to our animals is needed when taking care and respecting them, to make them happy. We have to respect all of God’s creations because he created everyone in the image and likeness of him. It is so important to love and care for our rural community as God tells us to.

Thank you to everyone who submitted essays or artwork!
About the Rural Life Committee

The Rural Life Committee is made up of Catholics from rural communities across our diocese (see roster below) and includes members from parishes that have or will be hosting a Rural Life Mass, along with at-large members.

The committee meets a few times each year to plan activities and events related to rural life, including our annual Rural Life Mass, an essay and drawing contest for students in grades 1-8 and a college scholarship competition.

The committee also brainstorms ways to work with parishes to support the needs of people in our rural communities. We are also always looking for parishes who would be interested in hosting an annual Rural Life Mass. If you are interested in being a part of our Rural Life Committee or hosting a future Rural Life Mass, please contact Peter Weiss, rural life coordinator, at pweiss@gbdioc.org or (920) 272-8321.

Thank you to all current and past Rural Life Committee members for your dedicated service to rural life ministry in our diocese!

Rural Life Committee roster:
- Tony Koss — St. Wenceslaus (Neva)
- Deacon Ken Kabat — St. Clare (Greenleaf)
- Kathy Schmidt — Holy Family (Brillion)
- Mary Lou Kugel — Sacred Heart (Shawano)
- David Englebert — St. Louis (Dyckesville)
- Barb Kirk — St. Mary Magdalene (Waupecia)
- Dale Birenbaum — St. Thomas the Apostle (Newton)
- Zach Birenbaum — St. Thomas the Apostle (Newton)
- Ken Norton — St. Anthony (Oconto Falls)

About the Rural Life Scholarship

Each year the Rural Life Committee awards scholarships to students pursuing post-secondary education that results in serving the agricultural community in their chosen profession. Recipients must be active members in their parish community, exhibit leadership qualities and receive a recommendation from their parish staff. The deadline to apply for the 2022 scholarship is April 1. Go to gbdio.org/rurallife to find the application and the pastoral recommendation form.

The funds for the scholarship come from the collections at the annual Rural Life Mass. If you would like to contribute to this fund, but are unable to attend the Mass this year, please contact Peter Weiss, rural life coordinator, at pweiss@gbdioc.org or (920) 272-8321. Thank you to all who have made these scholarships possible.

Rural Life Scholarship recipients

By Kaelyn Sumner
Hello! I’m Kaelyn Sumner, the 2021 recipient of the Rural Life Scholarship. I am from the tri-parish of St. Casimir in Krakow, St. Stanislaus in Hota Park and Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Pulaski. I am a sophomore at Kansas State University, majoring in agricultural education and minoring in food science and entomology.

I absolutely love attending school at K-State, and upon graduation I will be a licensed agricultural educator and am planning to teach in a rural area. I want to help my students understand that the field or farm isn’t the whole picture of agriculture. I come from a non-traditional approach to agriculture, and I am passionate about sharing that side of agriculture with my students.

I found my place in agriculture as an 8th grader, when one of my friends took me to see the honey bees that her mom was raising. I then raised honey bees for all of high school, sold the honey that my bees produced and did research projects on the products of the bee hive. I want to serve rural agriculture by educating my students about the world of agriculture beyond just the field and farm.

Receiving the Rural Life Scholarship has allowed me to attend an out-of-state school for my dream degree and minors. This scholarship also really helped me find ways that I can connect my faith to my passion for agriculture. One of the questions on the application was: “What saint do you relate to? List two reasons why.” While I was researching saints to be my confirmation saint, I found a bunch of saints that I related to, but I eventually chose Saint Abigail, who is the patron saint of beekeepers and honey bees.

Thank you to everyone who donated to make this scholarship possible for me and all the past and future recipients. Your generosity is immensely appreciated!

By Noah Tomaszewski
Hello, my name is Noah Tomaszewski and I was a recipient of the 2021 Rural Life Scholarship. I am from Sturgis Bay and my home parish is Corpus Christi.

I am currently a first-year student at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point and now well into my second semester. I am currently studying for a degree in forest management which I hope to use to protect and maintain Wisconsin’s forests for future generations. My grandfather and great-grandfather both worked in the forestry industry near Tomahawk and I hope to continue in their footsteps. As of now, my plan for my future career is to work as a private industry forester somewhere in northern Wisconsin.

UW-Stevens Point is well known for its strong natural resource program. The forestry, fisheries, water, soil and wildlife majors all have many unique opportunities where students are able to get hands-on experience in their own fields and other areas of study. Here at UW-Stevens Point I have been able to get involved with the school’s Society of American Foresters chapter and Backcountry Hunters and Anglers club. Both focus heavily on the education and protection of Wisconsin’s natural resources, and I have been able to meet like-minded students and build connections for my future career. Both organizations also provide many opportunities to volunteer and become involved in the community.

I have also become involved with our Catholic ministry on campus, Point Catholic. Through Point Catholic, I have been able to continue to keep God as an important part of my life while in college. Retreats, weekly late-night Mass and student suppers are just some of the ways that I keep myself grounded in faith.

Overall, I am enjoying life on campus and feel like I have adjusted fairly well. I am looking forward to advancing into more forestry-specific classes in the upcoming semesters and gaining more field experience.

When I received the Rural Life Scholarship last spring I was so incredibly grateful for the support of my education. My Catholic faith and the outdoors have both always been very important aspects of my life. I am so thankful that the rural life community values the same thing. I try my best to balance my school and faith life so that I might become an example for others in the future. I am so grateful for the opportunities I have been given and can’t wait to see what the future holds. Thank you again for your support.

“The LORD will affirm His blessing upon you, on your barns and on all your undertakings, Blessing you in the land that the LORD, your GOD gives you.”

Deuteronomy 28:8
The Beauty of Sacred Silence: Growing in Faith through Solitude

By Rebecca Sievers

When someone thinks about rural life, summer camp may not be the first thing that comes to mind. Many people might think of rolling hills dotted with cows, rows of corn, wheat or potatoes, or the classic red barn that can be found across the state of Wisconsin. While these are certainly aspects of rural life, they are not all there is in our rural communities. Rural life also encompasses our lakes and forests, and the places where we can go to step away from the noise of life and enjoy the solitude. And in many ways, that is what summer camp offers.

If you have a conversation with anyone who has had the opportunity to step foot on the grounds of Camp Tekakwitha, a common theme that tends to emerge is the overwhelming sense of peace and joy that fills their heart. It is not uncommon for former campers and staff alike to reminisce about the closest encounters they’ve had with Christ being centered on their camp experience.

Something really beautiful happens when we are able to take a step out of the chaos of life and just be. By disconnecting from our constantly plugged-in world, we are more able to connect with the silence and solitude that we desire from time to time. It is during these moments in life that our Lord’s voice seems to heighten. As humans, we long for those intimate revelations of love when our Lord tugs on our heartstrings and reminds us of His presence in our lives.

Living at camp has been one of the most beautifully enriching spiritual journeys that I have ever been on. Every waking second is filled with recognizable moments that our Lord is so magnificent in all His ways. Each morning when I make the 20-step walk from my door to the office, my senses are overwhelmed with the beauty of God’s creation; I smell the fresh pine from the endless acres of woods that surround us and hear the echoes of the loons from the other side of the lake. I know that whatever the day holds in store, God is with me. By naming His presence and recognizing His miraculous work, I make a daily offering of myself and the work that I am doing for Him.

The moment of silence never lasts long as campers and staff members emerge from their cabins and fill the grounds with their youthful exuberance. The typical day at camp is filled to the brim with fun activities, from sailing down on the lake, to archery in the woods, to games in the outdoor arcade; hands are colored from tie-dying and stomachs are full from s’mores and cooking over the campfires. Campers would give anything to extend their day playing games and basking in the sun of the summer glow.

Camp life is so beautiful in so many ways mainly because of the friendships rooted in faith, the unexpected and beautiful daily encounters with Christ, and the connection through a community built on compassion and an uplifting environment. Honestly, I hope that camp life is a small glimpse of heaven here on earth.

What really makes life at camp so beautiful is the striking balance between the chaos and the silence; one minute we’re participating in a high stakes game of slip n’ slide kickball and the next we’re kneeling in adoration praising God for the blessings on our day. One minute a cabin is focused on pulling the perfect prank and the next minute they band together and pray a decade of the rosary for all the other campers in attendance.

The shift towards living a life for Christ is so natural here at camp. Rather than seek meaning and direction in social media, campers find their heart. It is not uncommon to hear God’s voice most clearly and focus on what really matters to one another.

Living your life for Christ can be hard. There are so many expectations and societal pressures that are constantly being thrown at us through social media and news outlets that it can be hard to separate from those. I have learned that I, personally, need to take time to unplug and separate myself from the world from time to time. Thankfully for me, Camp Tekakwitha has provided the perfect environment to really strip away those insecurities and selfish desires that have served as a barrier in my relationship with Jesus and has drawn me closer to living the most authentic life that I am able to for Christ. It is in the silence of intentional social isolation that I have been able to hear God’s voice most clearly and follow Him obediently where He is calling me.

Though the journey of serving our Lord through the ministry of Camp Tekakwitha has had its challenges, I could not be more grateful for the experience. The blessings that He continues to bestow upon my life and in the lives of all those who set foot on the grounds of Camp Tekakwitha have been filled with an abundance of mercy and grace. Although there is no specific path that will lead you closer to Christ, my prayer is that each one of us is able to fully embrace the sacred silence that our Lord leads us to and helps us through. St. Kateri Tekakwitha, pray for us!

Editor’s Note: Rebecca Sievers is the camp director at Camp Tekakwitha in Shawano. If you are interested in learning more about the camp and its programs, or if you are interested in registering for camp, visit camptekakwitha.org.
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