Catholic ecology has a rich intellectual tradition, but as St. Francis of Assisi, the patron of ecology, showed us, it’s a lot more meaningful when it’s put into action. Thankfully, many Catholics across the country are committed to doing just that. Some devote their life’s work to promoting practices consistent with Catholic ecology, while others make conscious decisions in their everyday life to live more sustainably and harmoniously with an order created by a loving God.

We’ve profiled a healthy mix of these folks, ranging from nuns in Ohio to a college professor in Virginia. This diversity highlights that no matter where you are or what you do, you can always take some simple steps to put Catholic ecology in action!

The Sustainable Sisters

In line with their founder, Franciscans are known as the biggest proponents of Catholic ecology, but the Sisters of St. Francis in Tiffin, Ohio, take things to another level. They do this in simple, daily ways—for instance, by composting food, using energy efficient electronics and vehicles, and growing much of the produce they eat in their own gardens. But they also go to great lengths to educate others about the principles of Catholic ecology, its connection to the broader faith, and its critical importance today.

The sisters do this by taking groups on educational expeditions into the 348 acre conservation easement that was established in 2007. They have also built a solar strawbale house as a model for sustainable living, and two nuns who live there fulltime are happy to give tours to the public.

But their most impactful endeavor is the Franciscan Earth Literacy Center (FELC), an organization devoted
to bringing Catholics and others up to speed on the importance of creation and our relationship with it. The sisters are the corporate sponsors of the FELC, which began in the early 1990s, and one of the sisters is currently the primary educator at the center.

The FELC offers educational programming to people of all ages, but serves children more than anyone else. They offer school programs, summer camps, science days, and programming for scout troops, among many other kid-targeted programs.

Sister Shirley Shafraneck says it’s especially important to highlight the connection between people and nature to younger children, who too often nowadays don’t spend time outside. “Many of the fourth or fifth grade students I take on hikes into the woods tell me it’s their first time ever in the woods,” she said. “There’s a disconnect between people and nature, and if we don’t understand our environment, we will not respect or take care of it.”

In explaining what compels the Sisters of St. Francis, community minister Sister Jackie Doepker says that Catholics should not only “make every effort to be good stewards of the [created order] God has given us,” but they need to use resources more sparingly so that others—including future generations—will also have access to them. “Care of creation is one of the main principles of Catholic Social Teaching, and our faith gives us deep resources and strong motivations for preserving and sharing resources.”

The Atypical Agriculturalist

Sure, Tom Giessel could do things a little differently on his farm in West Central Kansas. He could do what other larger-than-average farmers do and maximize production, planting multiple crops per year and pushing the land to its limits. But Giessel bucks contemporary BigAg trends that put production and profit above all else, preferring a method of planting and harvesting that’s antithetical to what he calls “fast-track farming.”

Giessel does this by consciously planting less. Instead of planting, for example, five crops in four years, he’ll plant two in three, giving the land a chance to keep its health. Giessel also uses irrigation sparingly, preferring to think of it as a tool that supplements natural rainfall instead of a mechanized system constantly used that drains the resources of the land. If it’s not forecasted to rain much, he’ll pass on planting that year.

“I have a pretty atypical philosophy about farming the land,” Giessel says. “Don’t overreach, and don’t work it too hard. Everyone needs a rest: people, but also animals and the land.”

Giessel says this approach is not only the right thing to do, but it actually pays off in the long run. The land stays healthier longer, giving a higher yield overtime. Of course, as he acknowledges, too many people involved in agriculture today are producers, not farmers, and they lack a real relationship with the land.

“They’re not on the farm, they’re looking at crop production numbers from a boardroom in Manhattan.”

Giessel a Catholic who says he often connects the weekly Gospel to his work and approach to farming, says there’s a “rebirth of agriculture” on the way, but old-time farmers need to be more conscientious about reaching out to younger and first-time farmers with advice and guidance. Giessel says he wants to identify a new farmer who could potentially take over some of his land, using “slow farming” methods that emphasize working with the land instead of exploiting it.

“We need to leave behind opportunities for those who follow. More importantly than actual things, we need to give them the intangibles, such as ability, knowledge, and desire. We need to give them the idea of a farm.”
The Ecological Abbot

Maybe it’s because he’s a bio-chemist by training, but the Right Reverend John Klassen, the current abbot of St. John’s University, is a big fan of hands-on learning. That’s why Abbot John has been such a big proponent of the St. John’s Outdoor University, a novel approach to ecological education that turns the college’s 2,500 acres of Central Minnesota wilderness into an outside classroom.

Abbot John says many of the students who attend St. John’s University were originally attracted to the natural beauty of its campus, so it’s not surprising that many of them take advantage of course offerings and other activities offered by the Outdoor University. The abbot says that it’s essential that this type of education occurs outdoors because the “whole body” learns, and all five senses are critical to memory and experience.

“One does not learn how to ‘do’ chemistry in a full-bodied manner by reading about it—one goes into a laboratory and does experiments. Here, the laboratory is the ‘outdoor university.’”

And this natural laboratory isn’t only accessible to college students. The Outdoor University also offers programming for preK-12th graders and the larger community around St. John’s. In total, 8,000 students and their teachers annually visit the arboretum on which the Outdoor University sits.

Activities and events include an annual regional conference on environmental issues, a “birding program,” firefighting training for controlled burns, and an introduction to nature journaling. In addition, there are different core programs aimed at the ecology of prairies, wetlands, and the interface between a prairie and a forest.

Abbot John says the Rule of Benedict can prepare Catholics to live a life that is truly sustainable: humility puts us in right relationship with God and with the planet, underscoring our radical dependence. Stability creates the conditions needed to have a greater awareness of the environment in which we live. And frugality helps to undermine what Abbot John called the “dominant culture of consumerism,” that insists that we use too many of the earth’s resources for our lives. These aren’t easy things to do in this day and age, but Abbot John says that’s probably an indication that they’re needed.

“To really understand and live environmental sustainability requires a fundamental conversion: of thought, of the ordering of our values and desires, of our understanding, and of practice.”

The Integrated Oregonian

Ecological challenges of the day, from finding sustainable methods of food production to combating climate change, can be daunting. But instead of performing a grand act, Valerie Chapman says making lots of little ones is the best way to address these issues and to live a life in accordance with Catholic ecology.

But this isn’t just a nice saying. It’s Chapman’s mantra, and she aims to integrate these principles into all aspects of her life. For instance, at home in Oak Grove, Ore., she and her husband make a point to eat foods that are in season and grown locally. That’s the same approach to food taken at St. Francis of Assisi Parish in Portland, where Chapman serves as the pastoral administrator. Composting and recycling are emphasized at St. Francis just as they are at Chapman’s home. To make the importance of living an integrated life even more explicit to parishioners, St. Francis has been trying to chart ways that the community can cut down on its carbon
footprint, both at church but also back at home.

For Chapman, living out these aspects of the faith is key. “I can’t say one thing and do another. If I talk about the value of creation and the need to live simply and then go flying around the world in carbon emitting airplanes I might as well say nothing, for my actions have effectively negated my words.”

Chapman says most people need to see models of sustainable living in order to know they’re achievable, so she considers herself an example for others. She doesn’t eat meat raised unsustainably, only drives her car on Sundays, and has been able to cut back on the amount of energy used at home by installing solar panels. Additionally, Chapman and her husband raise chickens for eggs and have a flourishing produce garden in their backyard.

“It’s easy to think that what one household or individual does can’t affect much change, but the example we give can help others change and together there is hope.”

Chapman also emphasized the need to “think collectively” in order to seriously address present day ecological concerns. She points out that it might not be feasible for an elderly couple or a family with many young children to forgo using their car. So Chapman says it’s all about individuals doing what they can do, and contributing to something larger than themselves.

“This is a situation that needs collective action, not finger pointing. There is no reason to declare superiority or feel guilty, because this is the work of a whole community striving together.”

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**The Philosophical Farmer**

To some, the intellectual musings of the philosopher and the practical work of the farmer are two contradictory worlds that should never meet. But Professor John Cuddeback is just as comfortable in a classroom at Christendom College as he is feeding pigs at his home in Front Royal, Virginia.

The philosophy professor owns a modest homestead of 50 acres, which he and his wife named Fair Knowe. There, Professor Cuddeback and his family raise goats, chickens, bees, fruits, and vegetables, but their main endeavor is raising heritage breed pigs, which they slaughter for themselves and a few friends. The pigs are finished on oak nuts, thus the title of Professor Cuddeback’s blog, “Bacon from Acorns.” Cuddeback says the delicious taste of the acorn-fed bacon provides a lesson that “following nature’s lead in farming practices redounds to the benefit of all involved—land, plants, animals, and especially humans.”

Professor Cuddeback sees his farming and his philosophizing as complimentary activities. He says farming not only gives him time for rejuvenation, but his work at the homestead also teaches him truths about God’s loving providence over the natural world, giving him unique insight into many of the things he teaches about philosophy and the Christian worldview.

On the flip-side, being a philosophy professor helps Cuddeback think clearly about his homestead, family life, and the proper ways of stewarding the natural world. He also said it doesn’t hurt to have willing and able students lend a hand on the farm.

The Cuddeback’s agricultural activities aren’t a huge source of income for the family, but they nonetheless provide ample food and nourishment for them and their friends. And according to Professor Cuddeback, they offer things of even greater value: the opportunity to impart important life lessons to the Cuddeback kids.

“My wife and I are convinced that teaching our children to grow food and tend animals is beneficial to them on many levels. Whether or not they end up being able to do the same things in their own households, they will have the know-how, the discipline, and a love and respect for God’s creation that comes from such practices.”