

Baltimore's Franciscan Center to farm land in Howard County to help feed the city's poor



Fr. Michael Heine, director of the Shrine of St. Anthony, sprinkles Holy Water during the blessing of Little Portion Farm at a ceremony at the Shrine of St. Anthony. The Franciscan Center and the Shrine are partners in the effort to grow produce for those in need in Baltimore. (Kim Hairston / Baltimore Sun)



By **Yvonne Wenger**
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The Franciscan Center in Baltimore is planning to use three acres of farmland in Howard County — plus the sweat and labor of friars and volunteers — to grow fruits and vegetables to feed the city's poor.

Jeffrey Griffin, who runs the 50-year-old Franciscan Center near Charles Village, said running a farm will have a cascading effect on the nonprofit's ability to serve the 500 or more people who come each day to eat. Last year the center served 115,000 meals.

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, the center will hire a cook to demonstrate how to clients' grocery bags and bring fourth-graders from

Dallas F. Nicholas Sr. Elementary to the farm to plant pumpkins they can harvest the next fall when they're fifth-graders.

"We're allowed to dream a little bit bigger now, because we have our own farm," Griffin said. "We shattered one ceiling. What else can we do?"

Organic produce will be harvested beginning next spring. Until then, the soil needs to recover from seasons of chemicals left from the cash crops planted by a farmer who rented the land from Franciscan Friars at the Shrine of St. Anthony. The friars were inspired to change the land's use after Pope Francis wrote a letter in 2015 calling for action to combat climate change and pollution. They decided to turn the three acres over to the Franciscan Center.

Cows can be seen grazing the land off Folly Quarter Road in Ellicott City. Alfalfa and other cover crops have been planted to leech the chemicals from the soil and replace nitrogen. By next year, the center hopes to have sweet potatoes and tomatoes growing. Carrots, onions, beans, squash and broccoli will follow in turn.

The center, which has a \$2 million operating budget, runs one of the city's largest soup kitchens along with an emergency food pantry and other services for the homeless and working poor. It also provides clothing, counseling and emergency health services. The center is located along several bus routes, and last year about 6,500 families from across the city made use of its services.

To get the farm up and running, the center will spend about \$75,000 for fencing, equipment and irrigation supplies and to drill a well. The initial seeding will cost about \$9,000, which the center is hoping to offset with donations and volunteer labor.

The farm is named Little Portion, a nickname, translated to English, that St. Francis gave to the church where he lived about 800 years ago in Assisi, Italy. The Rev. Michael Lasky, a Washington-based Franciscan, said St. Francis' church was the "little portion of the Earth God had given" to him, a place where the saint lived not in a monastery, but close to the people he served.

Lasky, who oversees the farmland as chairman of his province's Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation Commission, said after the pope issued his encyclical "Laudato Si" about three years ago, the friars decided to take a "hard look" at what more they could do to protect the Earth, "our common home."

The pontiff, Lasky said, was also communicating the importance of putting the poor, not profit, first in decisions that affect the environment.

"It inspired us to reconsider, among many things, the farmland we have in Ellicott City," Lasky said. "In true Catholic social teaching, be mindful that our decisions affect others. We need to be in a dialogue to bring about more solutions for sustainable living in the spirit of St. Francis. It is because I am rich that they are poor. It is because I am using too much.

“We took that to heart, and we entered into a partnership and put aside three acres and dedicated it to the poor.”

About 15 friars live on the Ellicott City property, and they'll tend to the Little Portion farm along with visitors to the shrine and other volunteers.

The land is part of an 80-acre farm the friars own. The rest of the friars' farmland is run by Thomas Cunningham as Mary's Land Farm, an operation that focuses on growing produce without pesticides, using a sustainable agriculture practice called permaculture.

Cunningham is helping the Franciscan Center figure out how to run the farm. Four decades ago, he volunteered at the Franciscan Center as a high school student.

He said that more than just providing access to healthy food, the farm will help people of various backgrounds consider the needs of the poor while also reconnecting city school students to nature and teaching them where food comes from.

“The number one goal is community,” Cunningham said. “We lack a lot of interaction with people outside of our age and our socio-economic circle. Farming can slice through all of that. Not if you're tractor-farming; if you're down on the ground, dealing with vegetables.”

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