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Standing with Bishop W. Shawn McKnight, Russ Kremer, a member of Our Lady Help of Christians Parish in Frankenstein, Mo., displays the Missouri Catholic Conference's 2024 Citizen Recognition Award for the Jefferson City Diocese. Bishop McKnight presented the award during the diocese's inaugural Rural Life Mass Sept. 8, 2024, in Vienna, Mo. (OSV News/Jay Nies, The Catholic Missourian)

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FRANKENSTEIN, Mo. — November 19, 2024
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The stone for the iconic Our Lady Help of Christians Church in Frankenstein came from Russ Kremer's family's farm.

Now, this fifth-generation parishioner and curator of the soil assembles the teachings of the church into a more sustainable, God-oriented way of farming.

"People call me rogue, renegade and rebellious," said Kremer. "That's OK. Everything I think and try to do is because of my Catholic faith and upbringing.

"When things are not right, I question it," he said. "When I counter those things, I sometimes get resistance."

The Missouri Catholic Conference recently honored Kremer — an internationally renowned advocate for sustainable agricultural and livestock raising techniques that benefit farmers and consumers throughout the world — with its 2024 Citizen Recognition Award for the Jefferson City Diocese.

The conference, public policy agency of the state's four Catholic dioceses, presents the award each year to a Catholic from each diocese who has exemplified good citizenship in promoting the church's values in the public-policy arena and in their local communities and parishes.

Bishop W. Shawn McKnight of Jefferson City presented the award at the diocese's inaugural Rural Life Mass Sept. 8 in Vienna.

"Russell exemplifies a Catholic who has studied 'the signs of the times' and embraced his vocation as a prophetic farmer," said McKnight.

"A diversified family farmer who co-founded and manages Heritage Foods — which is a 125-producer network for processing, marketing and distributing natural and organic protein products — Russell's farming enterprises include humanely and sustainably raised hogs and cattle as well as chemical-free vegetables, crops, hay

and timber," the bishop stated.

Kremer has also taken part in successful efforts to improve farming policy, such as convincing lawmakers to restrict antibiotic use in healthy livestock.

The bishop called him a witness of how Catholic social teaching can be the foundation of a reform for "agribusiness" in the United States, moving back toward a food supply network that is based on the dignity of the human person.

"Especially in the dignity of work and the rights of those who produce food, and which respects the essential priority of family and community, and our call to care for creation," the bishop noted.

Kremer has served on numerous boards and commissions related to farming. He has been an agricultural advisory committee member for five Missouri governors and was one of four U.S. delegates to the 2006 World Farmers Congress in Seoul, Korea.

He grew up helping to work the farm that's been in his family for five generations.

He attended St. Mary School in Frankenstein and Fatima High School in Westphalia before graduating summa cum laude from the University of Missouri with degrees in animal husbandry and agriculture education.

Kremer said he aspires to be a teacher and evangelizer, "but I also want to be one who puts models of hope into place and into practice."

Through biblical teachings and his Catholic upbringing, he's come to embrace the concept that all people are involved in agriculture.

"We all eat," he noted. "And God gave us all these resources to nourish us. Seen in this light, eating and food production are spiritual acts."

His older brother, the late Robert Kremer, was a professor of microbiology at the University of Missouri. He carried out extensive, meticulous research and let his work do the talking. His research and testimony helped convince the FDA to reject genetically modified wheat. Robert Kremer died this year of cancer.

"Whenever I receive the precious body of Christ at Mass," the younger Kremer stated, "I remember how my brother helped make sure the wheat for this bread is the closest to what God intended it to be."

Kremer believes reestablishing local, natural, organic food systems will be a major key to keeping the food supply chain safe and healthy and these rural areas remain vibrant and robust for future generations.

Sustainable farming practices and locally owned processing and distribution systems can help create better food security, he said.

In 2020, Kremer co-founded the World AgroEcology Alliance as a vehicle to heal a broken food system.

Traveling throughout Europe, he noticed that most of the food there has remarkably fewer preservatives and chemically manipulated ingredients.

And "they have more of a regional food system that's very equitable — where most of the middle men are cut out, where most farmers receive more of a living wage and you don't see huge trucks and big box stores," he said. "What you see are local markets that are very effective."

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He saw firsthand how it all works on a friend's farm in Italy.

Local wheat farmers were only earning about 10 cents per pound on the open market. But Kremer's friend had built an inexpensive, efficient system for processing the grain into premium quality pasta to sell to local restaurants for about $3 per pound.

"A family of four were manning it," Mr. Kremer recalled. "They'd do their farm chores and then go and make pasta."

This type of equipment is modular and built to the highest standards for food safety and can be installed anywhere in the world.

"So, imagine me setting one up here outside Frankenstein with highly differentiated pork processing," he said. "But we can also have a flour mill where you take wheat or barleys or buckwheat and turn them into very nutritious flours that can also be turned into pasta or bakery goods or tortillas and then transport them locally."

At the center of all that would be a closed-loop system, allowing for total energy independence through renewable fuels, and eliminating all emissions and waste.

"We envision that you can have this system employed throughout the country," he said. "It would go a long way to decentralize the food system, make our people healthier, make our planet healthier, actually raise up a new generation of farmers."

Kremer has formed a partnership with an influential Catholic entrepreneur in Italy to deploy this system in 40 countries that have developing economies — "primarily in countries that are remote and that rely on independent energy sources, like solar," he said.

The business model is built on human relationships and trust, along with fair-trade policies and what's called the 5050/50/5 Plan, which is trademarked. It's based on a circular economy.

Namely, the goal in each village is for 50% of the raw agricultural products to come from within 50 miles of each processing and aggregation facility, and for the processed items to be within a 50-mile radius of this hub. The "5" stands for accomplishing "this goal within five years," said Kremer.

For example, it would help local farmers in Cameroon process and sell the cocoa and coffee beans they grow in the pristine organic soil, finally free of the corporations that have been paying the farmers a pittance.

Planning for each of these "ecovillages" takes into account geography, climate and soil composition.

Kremer remembers when local farming communities in this country were bastions of community, cooperation and responsibility.

"Back then, farmers had a lot of competitive markets to sell our wares," he said.

"We never had off-farm jobs," he noted. "We were able to make money, at least make a wage to feed a family."

Farmers then were able to reinvest that money in the community, buying locally the goods and services they needed.

"I grew up seeing firsthand how a sustainable economy was supposed to work," he said.

Kremer's latest effort is just one of many he has helped develop and invested in to help restore rural communities and economies.

Many solutions to the world's food problems can be built around Catholic principles, Kremer said.

"When I look at these principles and see how they line up with Catholic social teaching, I think, 'God you've got an amazing mind!'" he said.