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Worshippers pray in the hoop barn on the Pieper family farm in Donnellson, Iowa, during a Mass for the farm and the blessing of seeds April 15, 2023. Fr. Dan Dorau celebrated the Mass, whose inspiration comes from Catholic Rural Life. The four parishes he leads in Lee and Van Buren counties collaborated. (OSV News/The Catholic Messenger/Barb Arland-Fye)

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Gusts of wind flapped the altar cloth and rippled the clergy's vestments during Mass on the farm and the blessing of the seeds in the Pieper family's cavernous hoop barn April 15.

Farmer Lee Pieper, singing in the choir, and his wife, Linda, playing the keyboard, knew God was in control and left any worries in God's hands. They had swept the barn clean and emptied it of equipment and fertilizer for this liturgy of thanksgiving for the spring planting season.

The barn's open end, however, proved to be irresistible to the wind.

"The wind picked up. That was the Spirit," Franciscan Sr. Jane Denning of Milwaukee said with a smile after Mass.

When Mass began, wind wasn't as much a worry as the looming, dark clouds. The celebrant, Fr. Dan Dorau, joked, "There's an 85% chance of rain, but God is holding off on the rain until after my homily, like last year," referring to his first Catholic Rural Life Mass for the fall harvest.

Joking aside, Dorau acknowledged the importance of rain for the seeds' growth. Several sacks of corn and soybean seeds and baggies and packets of seeds displayed in front of the altar brought home his point for the worshippers, many of whom belong to area parishes.

"The cycle of rain blesses us and water stored in the ground is our true treasure," Dorau said in the blessing of seeds ritual. He invoked the Holy Spirit, whose presence would soon become clear as the wind picked up. Then he prayed, "Help us to care for 'the seeds which are the Word of God,' the living words your Son shares with us. Let the hard work of sowing and tending crowned with an abundance of life."

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Dorau is pastor of four collaborating parishes in the Diocese of Davenport — St. Boniface in Farmington, St. James the Less in St. Paul, St. John in Houghton and St. Mary in West Point. Assisting him were Deacon Mike Linnenbrink, who also serves the parishes, and Deacon Dan Freeman, parish life coordinator at St. Mary Parish in Wilton.

Two of the three Pieper children, Hanna Uchtyl and Emily Moore, and their spouses, came from out of state to participate in the liturgy celebrated on the eve of Divine Mercy Sunday. Uchtyl played guitar, Moore directed the choir and her husband, Tyler, played the fiddle. The Piepers' son, Jesse, and his wife, Kelly, are fourth-generation farmers on the farm.

"The great mercy of God, a quality of God that we all appreciate even if we cannot fathom how or why it should be" was the focus of the readings for Divine Mercy Sunday, Dorau said in his homily. "Jesus in all of his ministry preached the forgiveness of sins because he knew that was the only way we could have true peace. Sin robs us of peace. So, here is Jesus sending out his disciples to bring peace to the world through forgiveness of sins. What an amazing act of mercy!"

Dorau reflected on "Doubting Thomas," whose unbelief was transformed to belief upon seeing Jesus and the wounds from his crucifixion.

Thomas "makes a poignant declaration of faith, 'My Lord and my God.' ... Jesus was thinking ahead to the church and to us, years later, when he made the point, 'Blessed are they who have not seen and have believed,'" the priest said. "So, the question for us today is do we believe? ... Do we believe when we say that Jesus is Lord on Sunday, and then live a secular life the rest of the week? Do we believe when we present ourselves to receive holy Communion, telling ourselves it's no big deal that we missed Mass for several weekends?"



Deacon Mike Linnenbrink, Fr. Dan Dorau and Deacon Dan Freeman process to the altar April 15, 2023, during a Mass on the farm and the blessing of seeds in the barn on the Pieper family farm in Donnellson, Iowa. (OSV News/The Catholic Messenger/Barb Arland-Fye)

"Jesus rose from the dead, or he didn't. Jesus is Lord, or he isn't. The Eucharist is the body, blood, soul and divinity of Jesus or it isn't. He gave his disciples, the church, the power to forgive sins, or he didn't," Dorau continued. "What do you believe? ... Today, just as we put faith in science that these seeds will germinate and grow into plants, let us put faith in the Word of God, in his holy Church, and in the testimony of the saints."

After Mass, people moved tables away from the hoop barn's open entrance and the elements so everyone could enjoy potluck and conversation. Just two other special celebrations took place in the hoop barn — the wedding dance for Emily and Tyler 10 years ago and a family reunion when the Pieper farm celebrated century farm status in 2021.

"Now, we've celebrated Mass. Linda said we can't top that," Lee Pieper told The Catholic Messenger, newspaper of the Diocese of Davenport.

Megan Scheer, who attended the Mass with her husband, three young children and her mother, said, "I went to high school with Emily Pieper. We thought the kids would enjoy getting to go to Mass on the Farm." Cindy Coffey of Madison, Wisconsin, and Sr. Denning traveled together to attend the Mass and to see family and friends. Sister Denning said she loved Father Dorau's reference to planting seeds of love.

"Looking out at God's creation and having Mass out here seemed natural," said Deacon Freeman, adding, "Father's homily was spot on." Hanna Uchytel appreciated celebrating Mass in a community of farmers, and their way of life, outdoors. Her mom, Linda, said, "To celebrate Mass on the farm is such an incredible experience."