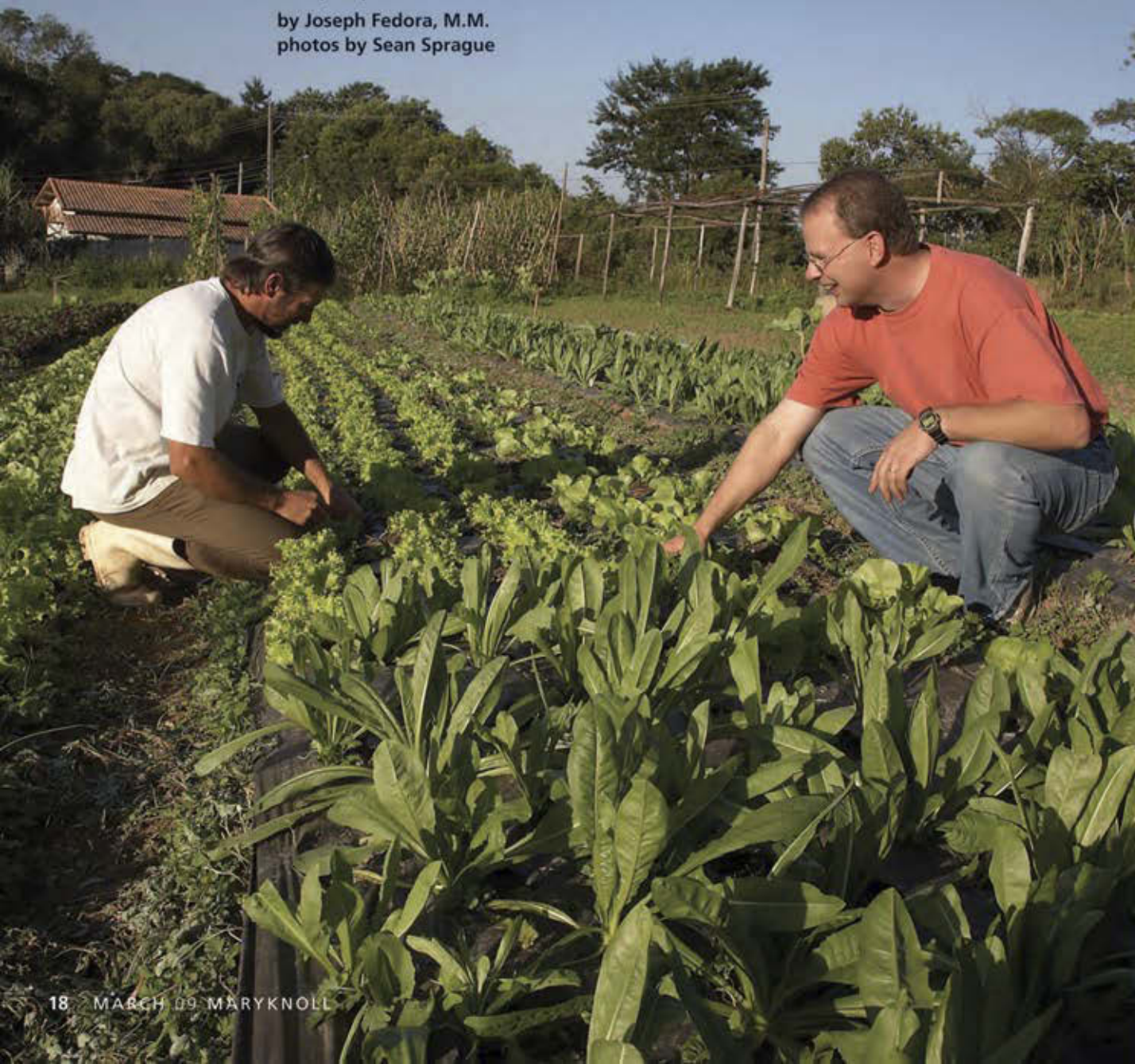


# LOVE GROWS IN TIME OF MISSION

by Joseph Fedora, M.M.  
photos by Sean Sprague



Lay mission couple finds romance on tropical island, and brings love, family and commitment to Brazil

**L**ove of adventure drew them to Guam; love for each other drew them together; and love for God drew them to Maryknoll.

Maryknoll Lay Missioner Angel Mortel was looking for a “radical change” in her life in 1990, when, at age 21, she applied for a teaching position at the Academy of Our Lady of Guam. “I guess I was eager to go into the unknown and see where the Holy Spirit would lead me,” she says. “It led me to Chad.”

Chad is Maryknoll Lay Missioner Chad Ribordy who arrived in Guam from Wichita, Kansas, a couple of years earlier. He was teaching a course on peace and justice at the Academy when Mortel arrived. It wasn’t long before they became more than just colleagues.

*Loving the land Maryknoll Lay Missioner Chad Ribordy (right) helps neighbor José Carlos Gonçalves, an organic farmer, weed vegetable garden, while a worker on a nearby farm (below) sprays lettuce with insecticide.*





**Love in action**  
*Angel Mortel (right) visits Antonia and her children, bringing them nutritional food supplements and medicine.*

"Island life is pretty conducive to romance: The sensual tropical breezes, long hot days and nowhere to go," Mortel says, recalling her courtship with Ribordy. "Come on! Who wouldn't fall in love in such a setting?"

Their attraction for each other, insists Mortel, was as spiritual

as it was physical. "My mission vocation really began when I met Chad. In building my relationship with him, I learned a lot about opening my heart in love," says the missionary from San Francisco.

Ribordy was thinking about mission even before meeting Mortel. Prior to going to Guam,

he considered serving in Liberia with another mission group, but just as he was about to ship out, civil war broke out in that African nation. "I, being only 24 and a presumed full life ahead of me, decided that the situation was too messy," he says.

The couple returned to the United States and, in 1994, mar-

ried. They moved to Washington, D.C., where Ribordy continued teaching at a high school while Mortel did graduate work in international development at American University. After her studies, she worked at Bread for the World.

After living a couple of years in a community with other lay





**Love blooms**  
Angel Mortel and Chad Ribordy, with daughters Cecilia, 8, left, and Elisa, 6, support each other in sharing God's love with their neighbors in Ibiúna, a farm community southwest of São Paulo, Brazil.

Catholics called Assisi Community, Ribordy and Mortel sent applications in 1997 to Maryknoll to become lay missionaries. "I think mission is about moving out of your comfort zone, of feeling vulnerable, because it is in that sense of vulnerability that we are forced to let go and let God," says Mortel. "I felt the need—and luckily Chad felt this too—to move even farther out of my comfort zone and that's when we decided to join Maryknoll and go to Brazil."

Moving to São Paulo entailed more for the couple than just letting go of the familiar—family, country, culture and language—it called for a radical trust in God and in each other. "I wouldn't have been able to do it if Angel hadn't been my partner," says Ribordy. "She has always challenged me to become more the person God intended me to be."

Two years after arriving in Brazil, Mortel gave birth to Cecilia, and two years after that, to another daughter, Elisa. As their children grew, so did their comfort with the language, culture and the city of São Paulo. So it was time to move out, once again, to unfamiliar terrain. They migrated from the city to the countryside, to a small farming community two hours southwest of São Paulo called Ibiúna.

There Mortel participates in the diocese's outreach program to pregnant women and mothers with children up to age 6. Ribordy gets his hands dirty with organic farming.

"As a child I hated, absolutely hated, working in it," says Ribordy about his family's organic garden. "But in spite of myself, a relationship developed between me and that dirt." Now Ribordy spends two days a week toiling in his neighbor's organic garden. "Instead of feeding the plant, you feed the soil," says Ribordy, explaining the basic principle behind organic farming. "Organic farming relies solely on animal manure and compost."

His neighbor, José Carlos Gonçalves, is one of 15 organic farmers who make up the Association of Small Organic Farmers of Ibiúna, a co-op that was begun with Maryknoll seed money in 2000.

"Ecologically speaking, it's better," 42-year-old Gonçalves says in explanation of his switch from conventional farming. "Organic farmers have an edge over conventional farmers."

It's all about supply and demand, says Ribordy. "There's a high market demand for organic produce in São Paulo but few producers, which means higher prices," he says.

The co-op's primary responsibility is cleaning, packaging and getting the produce to market. Nothing is wasted: unsold or spoiled produce is fed to farm animals or used in compost. Even the leafy carrot tops, dried and ground, are used—together with beets, grapes, cauliflower and pumpkin seeds—in the production of a nutritional supple-



ment Mortel gives to the mothers she visits on a regular basis.

One such woman is Antonia, an African-Brazilian and mother of six. She says she's 38 but, with her sunken cheeks and missing teeth, she looks decades older. She and her children live in a four-room, borrowed house. The walls are water stained, the cupboards are bare and—with the exception of a few tattered pieces of foam-rubber—there's no furniture. "The church is looking for mattresses," says Mortel. "We're asking the community to pitch in."

There's no denying the grati-

tude in Antonia's eyes when Mortel hands her the nutritional supplement. "I've known Angel and Chad now for four years," she says. "They've helped me with medicines and food for my children; I will never forget them."

Nor will Mortel or Ribordy forget Antonia and the many others whose lives they've been privileged to touch through love. "We go out in mission to spread the Good News that God is love," says Mortel. "Missioners have such an important role in moving people to open themselves up to the love that is God." ✚