



Sustaining Life on the Land

Reflections on Rural Life

AGRARIAN REFLECTIONS

The following reflections were prepared by Deacon Ralph Parsons, Rural Life Associate with the Catholic diocese of Columbus, and Jim Tobin, Associate Director with the Catholic Conference of Ohio.

My Dear Friends,

I come to you as a friend. As a friend to you and as a friend to the Rural Community, particularly the farmer. I wish to stress that these are perilous times within our agrarian community. It is important that our church community strives to better understand God's vision for the land and help support those who labor to bring forth it's fruits...food.

In Sacred Scripture, God calls us to be stewards of the land. In Genesis and Leviticus we are told that the earth belongs to God, we are caretakers; we are guests. (see Gen. 1, Lev 25, Ps 24.).

Pope John Paul II continually pleads for society to sustain the land for future generations, and sustain the dignity and well being of those who work this land. (see *The Challenge of Agrarian Reform*, Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace; 1987 Homily at Laguna Seca, CA)

Hopefully during this reflection, I can help you see what these teachings mean..

The farmers of our great land account for less than 2% of our population.

Less than 1% of the population supplies 80% of our food stuffs.

So, if you want to talk about minorities our declining farmer population is a classic example. Most farmers have very little voice in government; urban and suburban legislators make up the bulk of our elected officials. There are fewer and fewer advocates for the farming community.

Few realize that the farmer could **give** the baker the grain for the loaf of bread for free and only effect the price by about 2 cents? It is the same way for other products such as meat and cereal. The farmer only receives pennies from every food dollar. The bulk of our food dollar goes to the enterprises at the top--grain conglomerates, processors, retailers and marketing firms.

Jesus in his parables spoke in agrarian terms so the people could relate to the meanings as they were revealed to them. It was an agrarian society, they were close to the earth.

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Sr. Chris Pratt, rural life director for the diocese of Toledo, Ohio put it this way, “Jesus came proclaiming jubilee in which humanity and the land were to be liberated. Jesus was a man of the country, a small rural town. He taught with a countryman’s knowledge of the land. God’s love is like wheat growing in the night; divine love is like a shepherd looking for the lost sheep. Seeds and soil, vines and fields, sowing and reaping, goats and sheep, full barns and barren lands, mustard seed and fig trees are among the images Jesus used to lead us to understand the meaning of the Kingdom, the Paschal Mystery, our dependence on God and our interdependence we share with the rest of the created world.”

People from a more agrarian society often appreciate what a precious gift from God is land -- and what a blessing and honor it is to produce food from this land. Food is not just another commodity among commodities in the marketplace. Food is essential for the maintenance of life and an indispensable requirement to maintain our God-given dignity.

But today too many people think our milk, our meat, our fruit and vegetables, our grain comes from the supermarket. We expect it; we get upset if it is not at our fingertips. And due to our country’s transportation and marketing systems it most generally is at our fingertips. Even during our most severe weather or natural disasters we rarely went to the super market and found the milk and bread shelves empty? We take food for granted. However, if it were not for the farmer and most especially the abundant harvest the Lord has given us it would not be.

Two generations ago on a 120 acre farm, a man and wife could make a living for themselves, raise a large family and afford to send their children to the state Land Grant College for education. They would be a family unit, be pretty much self sufficient. From that 120 acres their life style was self-sustainable. Their farming practices were self-sustainable. Most farms were not so big that they needed to hire non-family workers. Livestock was fewer and the manure did not need to be trucked off their farms and could be reapplied to their fields without fear of major fly infestations. Land, machinery, livestock, and seed costs were more affordable and required less personal debt.

Today; that same family would probably have to **rent, not own**, another 800 or 900 acres to make ends meet. Higher yields and larger operations would be needed. Family size would be smaller and personal debt much higher.

Today there are fewer farmers and fewer acres of land being used to grow food. Urban, suburban sprawl has spread throughout the countryside. More and more people moving into the country do not want the smells and sounds and inconveniences associated with farming and food production. Unfortunately, a farmer can get more for his land if he sells to land developers than if he keeps it in food production. And many are selling. Costs are high and the work--really the ministry of farming--is under appreciated. Fewer youth are entering farming. They can’t afford the start up costs. This is reflected in statistics showing that the average age of today’s farm operator is 52 years. Only 13% are under the age of 35 years.

In the coming years, who will provide our food? Will it be only a few mega farmers? Who will own the land? Will it be small town, community based farmers or multinational corporations? Will farming become only a big business or will it remain a ministry of stewardship? Do we only care about having the cheapest food no matter how it is produced?

My dear friends we have seen a complete restructuring of the socioeconomic community in rural America. In our Ohio Bishops' two recent letters on farming: *Life on the Land: A Call to Reflection and Action on Agriculture in Ohio*, and *Parched Land, Perilous Times: A Call for Prayer and Legislative Actions for Farming Families*, they stress that we must listen to the needs of our farmers and pray--pray every day-- for farm families.

They write that now is the time for us to review the state of agriculture in Ohio and examine what the loss of diversity in production and the loss of productive farmland are costing us. We must listen--truly listen-- to the needs and concerns of our state's farmers and ask ourselves the hard questions that will help us assess and better prepare for a new millennium in which food security, environmental stewardship, and just treatment of all in the agricultural system is achieved.

I simply ask you this:
Pray for the farmer....
Pray for our leaders to lead us in the right path.
Inform yourselves about our food system.
Take yourself, your family on a visit to a farm.
Plant a seed and watch it grow.
Enjoy the sun set.
Enjoy the sun rise.
Enjoy nature as God has given you.

Knowing full well that it is only by the grace of God we share in the abundance's we have today.

May God's speed go with you.