



Sustaining Life on the Land

Reflections on Rural Life

EATING IS A MORAL AND POLITICAL ACT

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The title of my talk this evening may cause some uncomfortableness as we enjoy our food and drink this evening. We have grown up praying over our food, thanking God for the goodness of creation and then enjoying the fruits of the earth through either home cooked or restaurant meals. The United States food supply is known as the most plentiful, safest and cheapest in the world. Tonight, however, I would like us to look at our food supply in a different way: to look at from the perspective of a Catholic Christian, through Scripture, the Social Teachings of the Church and our own experiences. I guess I'm inviting us this evening to feed our hearts and souls, and relate that to our stomachs.

I will first give a short overview of Scripture as it relates to land and food issue. This will lead to a description of Catholic Social Teachings on food and land. I will present some information on what the food system looks like today. We'll end with a short reflection on why I believe this ties into our own spirituality within the Catholic Community.

God from the beginning gave us our place in creation. The earth might be seen as the garden of the Lord, entrusted to humanity's care, as described in Genesis 2:15: "The Lord God took the one he had created and settled him in the garden, to cultivate and care for it." In God's charge to Adam is symbolized God's charge to all people on the land. Just as God entrusted the garden to Adam's care, God entrusts the land (all the earth and

Ohio) to the care of the people living and working on it.

Psalm 24 reinforces our relationship with God through the land: "The earth is the Lord's and its fullness; the world and those who dwell in it." This relationship is continually repeated throughout the Old Testament: the land is God's, and our responsibility to God is directly related to our relationship with the land. Humanity stands responsible for ensuring that all nature can continue to thrive as God intended. Humanity's arrogance and acquisitiveness, however, led time and again to our growing alienation from nature. In the Bible's account of Noah, the world's new beginning was marked by the estrangement of humans from nature. The sins of humankind laid waste the land. Hosea, for example, cries out:

There is no fidelity, no mercy,
no knowledge of God in the land.
False swearing, lying, murder, stealing
and adultery!

In their lawlessness, bloodshed follows
bloodshed,

Therefore, the land mourns,
and everything that dwells in it
languishes.

The beasts of the field,
the birds of the air,
even the fish of the sea perish.

In the biblical vision, therefore, injustice results in suffering for all creation.

To curb the abuse of the land and of the community, ancient Israel set out legal protections aimed at restoring the original balance between the land and people. Every seventh year the land and the people were to rest; nature would be restored by human restraint. And every seventh day, the Sabbath rest gave relief from toil to worker and beasts. It invited the whole community to taste and see God's goodness in creation.

But people did not honor the law. A few went on accumulating land, many were dispossessed, and the land itself became exhausted. God then sent the prophets to call the people back to their responsibility. And people hardened their hearts; they had no compassion for either the people or the land. The prophets promised judgment for the evil done the people of the land, but they also foresaw a day of restoration, when harmony between humanity and the land would be renewed.

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 the interdependence we share with the rest of the created world.

Jesus' person not only restored the division among people. He also overcame the opposition between humanity and creation. For as Paul tells us, "He is the firstborn of a new creation" and gives the Spirit to renew the

whole earth. Our role in and within creation is clear. God gives the land for all people, not just for those who hold civil title to it. This principle was affirmed by the Second Vatican Council in *Gaudium et Spes*, which stated that "God intended the earth and all it contains for the use of every human being and people."

The American bishops in their 1986 pastoral letter on the U. S. economy summarized Catholic Social Teaching on the global economic order, especially as it related to food and agriculture. In that document they said:

"We are concerned that this food system may be in jeopardy as increasing numbers of farm bankruptcies and foreclosures result in increased concentration of land ownership. We are likewise concerned with the increasing damage to natural resources resulting from many modern agricultural practices; the overconsumption of water, the depletion of the topsoil, the pollution of land and water. Finally, we are concerned with the stark reality of world hunger in spite of food surpluses. Our food production system is clearly in need of evaluation."

After adoption of the pastoral letter, the conference of bishops decided to focus more directly on the moral and human dimensions of food and agricultural policy. They reiterated the major principles of Scripture and Catholic Social Teaching in providing the framework for assessing present problems and evaluating potential solutions. The bishops of Ohio on March 30, 1998 released a statement entitled **Life on the Land: A call to reflection and action on agriculture in Ohio**. In this document

they include these same principles to help us shape a more just food and agricultural system.

1. The sacredness of the human person. All Catholic Social Teaching is rooted in the dignity of the human person. This principle connects directly to the food system because we believe that everyone has a legitimate claim to the goods and services necessary to live a truly human life.

2. The fundamental right to food. The commitment to the right of and respect for the human person necessitates the right and access to food because food is a basic need in the sustenance of life itself. Therefore, food becomes far more than another commodity to be bought or sold. It becomes a major right to life issue.

3. The Christian call to human solidarity leads us to emphasize community, cooperation and participation in the decisions that affect people's lives. The bishops' emphasis on participation leads them to be concerned with the increasing concentration of ownership of land and farms, the trend away from diversification and toward increasing specialization in a few crops and large-scale livestock and poultry animal confinement facilities. Concentration of economic power that accompanies the consolidation of land ownership and the vertical integration of the food and agriculture system are of particular concern.

4. The Church's preferential option for the poor. The question is not only how we produce, but also how we share. In rural America and in Ohio it is especially pertinent to farmworkers, migrants and the many undocumented workers brought in to work in the food processing plants and nurseries. The poor not only must have access to food, but just and safe working conditions. They must also have a real voice in deciding how the food system and society should organize to serve the common good, at home and abroad.

5. Respect for Creation. Private property carries social responsibility. The care of resources is primarily the challenge for those who provide food, industrial raw materials and recreational opportunities. However, stewardship is the responsibility of the whole society. Whether rural or urban, suburban or small town all are called to evaluate our life choices and consumption patterns. Development of just land policies, conservation practices, responsible use of land, water and air, and simpler life-styles are some areas where all of us can live out our call to be caretakers and not exploiters of God's earth.

6. The conception of authentic development. In *Solicitudo Rei Socialis* Pope John Paul II demands respect for the local population. He warns of a "certain type of development on the quality of life in the industrial zone. We all know that the direct or indirect result of industrialization is, ever more frequently, the pollution of the environment, with serious consequences for the health of the population." The Pope concludes saying: "It is evident that development, the planning which governs it and the way in which resources are used must include respect for moral demand."

A little noticed commentary on the new world priorities of wedding economics, ecology and ethics to land and life is the recently released teaching instrument **For a Better Distribution of Land: The Challenge of Agrarian Reform**, published in November, 1997 by the Vatican's Pontifical Commission for Justice and Peace.

The document concentrates on Latin America where the Latin American church is desperately defending the poor and landless whose story about food supply and distribution converge directly with decisions about land and food in the North. The reality is that despite our fears about "foreign

food” most of our winter vegetables come from Mexico, grown on Mexican land usually owned by North American or transnational food conglomerates.

Transnational food production, land ownership, the huge energy costs of food transportation and the acquisitive companies now dictating the rules of the game about human food supply all come under the serious and balanced judgment of the Vatican’s ethical commentary. Names such as Philip Morris, Coca Cola, Nestle, McDonalds, ConAgra keep reappearing as the companies producing and distributing food. The Vatican, picking up on the justice themes previously listed tries to make ethical and scientific sense out of what is happening to the land and food system in today’s world.

A century ago in the United States half of the population owned and cultivated the land for private use and the commercial food and forestry needs of the city. Now, barely 5 percent of the population is rural. Land and food are increasingly owned and produced by an ever-reduced group of mega-suppliers. Some of these are heavily subsidized by national and local taxes or land and water rights to keep the system going. These same subsidies are not afforded the smaller or mediate sized family farms. In Ohio, between 1974 and 1992 Ohio lost 1.4 million acres of farmland. From 1992 -June 1, 1996, the number of farms fell in the state by 2000. While the numbers of farms and acreage devoted to agriculture is declining, concentration of ownership in all sectors of our state’s food production system is increasing.

Today, few companies control the processing segment for each of the major agricultural commodities. Recognizing cultural differences, there is a general assumption that when four firms control 40% or more of the market, the market no longer behaves

as a competitive market. In terms of ownership for poultry, meat, beef, pork, sheep, wheat and soybeans and corn processing, US farmers no longer sell in a competitive market. The same names of companies continue to appear on the lists of several commodities: ConAgra, Cargill, Archer Daniels Midland, Bunge (ADM), Iowa Beef Processors(IBP). ConAgra claims to be the largest distributor of agricultural chemicals in North America; one of the largest fertilizer producers; and in 1990 it entered the seed business. According to William Heffernan, Rural Sociologist from University of Missouri, Columbia, ConAgra owns over a hundred grain elevators (both local and terminal), 2,000 railroad cars and 1100 barges. Three firms mill 80 percent of the wheat in the North America-ConAgra is the largest. ConAgra hires growers to raise birds and processes them in its own hatcheries, producing its own poultry and feed. The poultry meats comes to us in name brands used by ConAgra: Country Skillet, Banquet and Beatrice Food. ConAgra is the second largest food processor in the United States and fourth in the world.

Philip Morris is the largest food processor which includes names such as General Foods, Kraft Foods, Miller Beer, Marlboro, Louis Rich Turkeys and Oscar Meyer. After Philip Morris bought Kraft Food, food industry analysts reported that ten cents of every dollar spent on food in the United States goes to Philip Morris. It is the second largest food processor in the world.

The ownership and control of the processing sector, and increasingly the production sector by firms located in places quite distant from the rural community where the production and processing take place, has major economic consequences for the local community. Large, non-local corporations, agribusiness firms see labor as just another input cost to be purchased as cheaply as

possible. The “profits” then are allocated to return on management and capital and are usually taken immediately out of the rural community.

Dr. Heffernan has studied the globalization of the food system for over 20 years. He offers the following illustration of how the system works. This example of the changing world structure of the food system comes from Thailand and represents, perhaps, the best example of how transnational corporations operate across international borders. Fifteen years ago, Thailand was not perceived as an important commercial producer of poultry. A local agribusiness firm, the G-P Group, formed a joint venture with Arbor Acres to obtain access to the best genetic stock in the world and with Continental to gain access to feed grain and nutritional information. In a matter of months, the G-P Group began to duplicate the U.S. poultry production system in Thailand. Within a couple of years, Cargill formed a venture with Nippon Meat Packers, the largest packer in Japan, to gain access to the marketing and distribution system in the Far East. Today, Thailand ranks seventh in the world as an exporter of poultry.

In Thailand, the firms found both farmers and processing plant workers who were willing to work for much lower wages than would farmer and workers in the United States. Processing plant wage rates were well under \$5.00 per day in Thailand. As economic growth in Thailand led to a doubling of wages (still under \$10 per day), both firms began similar operations in China and other countries in the region where workers are still paid less than \$5 per day.

What we see in Thailand, according to Dr. Heffernan, is an excellent example of the emerging organization of the new global food system. This example underscores that in

the global food system both capital and technology are highly mobile. Given that capital and technology are constants, the four major costs of producing meat and poultry are labor, feed, transportation and government regulations (such as those applied to protect the environment or the health and well being of farmers and other workers in the food system). This means that transnational corporations roam the world “sourcing their inputs” as cheaply as possible. If two countries have an adequate transportation system and feed availability, the question the TNC’s ask is, “in which country will the farmer provide the labor at the lowest cost, both in terms of income earned and also health and working conditions?” A second issue is whether firms are able to operate with minimum government interference in the environmental area. In a sense, the TNC’s are seeking to get the world’s farmers and countries to compete rather than cooperate with one another. Countries that succeed in attracting TNC’s investment may do so at high cost to their workers and their environment.

This changing global food system is not just a concern to farmers and to rural communities. There are many other persons and groups who are raising questions about the implications of the system. Environmentalists are concerned about ecological implications as they watch firms circumvent government regulations in one country by moving parts of their operations into another, often after having polluted water supplies and land. Consumers are concerned about issues of food quality, food safety and especially about food security issues or the “sustainability” of the food supply. The present food system is greatly dependent on petroleum supply. What does that mean for the production and distribution issues regarding the food supply? Today our food travels an average of 1800 miles to reach

our tables. That mileage is likely to increase as food production becomes more concentrated.

One major ethical issue focuses on the fact that many of the economically desperate farmers are in the “have-not” nations of the world. Often these farmers will work for lower wages because there are few, if any, alternatives. This means that much of the world’s food will be produced in the “have-not” nations, and then transported by the TNC’s to the “have” nations where consumers have adequate incomes to purchase it. This pattern will continue the distortion or the inequality of food availability around the world. Another major question is whether countries with growing populations will be markets for food products raised in the “have” nations or whether they will compete with farmers in the more affluent nations to produce the food consumed in the “have” nations.

The ethical analysis from the Vatican of these realities puts serious questions before governments and businesses of our global economy. Land and food are basic to human life and development. Their administration and use cannot be left to the vagaries of an unregulated free market. Private property carries an ethical “social mortgage” says Pope John Paul II. The interesting presumption of the Justice and Peace document is to address these problems of the poor by presenting them “especially to those with the political and economic responsibility for making the appropriate reforms to initiate a new season of agrarian growth and development.”

The community of faith must address a host of issues that the presently emerging global food system raises, from the environmental concerns about care and stewardship of all of creation to the remarkable basic social justice question of who will be allowed

access to food - who will eat. But the question at the heart of these profound changes in the global food system is whether the desperately poor of the world will be pressed into producing food for export to the more advantaged nations, while they themselves have neither land nor time to provide adequate food for their families.

Both the Vatican document and the bishops of Ohio in their latest statements call for similar reflection and action on the global food system. The Catholic Church does not pretend to have concrete economic and political solutions to these challenges. But it prophetically voices its concerns about globalization. It forces the fundamental questioning of the free market for food through regional or global reorganization of land use for food and water. The highest authorities in the Church propose that the bishops, like our Ohio bishops, Catholic educators and local church pastors and pastoral leaders get involved in the debate. We must inform ourselves on the economic and political realities of land and food and relate them to the social ethics of the Church.

Despite the directives from Scripture and Catholic Social Teaching to become involved in these issue, some hearers of the message may become agitated. On more than one occasion I have been confronted by faithful churchgoers of all denominations who are particularly angry that the Church is even in the discussion of land, food and agriculture issues. They claim it is out of our realm and that we should “keep your nose out of this business and stick to church matters”.

I will admit the issue is full of complexity and holds no simple answers for any of us. However I would like to share why I believe we belong right in the middle of this discussion, and most certainly in the lead. There are 4 responses I believe we have when con-

fronted by those who would like to silence us.

1. We, all the people of God, are “the Church”. We are not just Church in our personal piety or in our congregational prayer on Sunday. We are called to be church in our homes, neighborhoods, workplace and civic activity. We are called to be church in the marketplace and at the dinner table. More directly, we all eat. We who continue to learn and to educate about these issues like to remind ourselves that the only people who should care about the food system are those who eat.

2. It is our phones and doorbells that ring when people are troubled or trying to survive the loss of farms, environmental degradation and disrespect for the positions they take on preserving the land and the local food system. It is our churches that are expected to respond with food and assistance to the poor and dispossessed. Sooner or later the people draw us into their concerns at the most local level. And we begin asking, “why is this happening and what may we do about it?” We belong here because it is what we do. Maura Clarke, one of the Maryknoll Mission sisters killed in El Salvador in 1980 said: “The poor will strip you, pull you, challenge you, evangelize you, show you God.”

3. The Church is a large landowner. Some parishes and dioceses own farmland. Many religious communities of men and women, such as my own, are responsible for just stewardship of farmland. We are required to live with the same government regulations and policies as every other farmer. As landowners we are challenged to use our land wisely and well for the common good. We all must wrestle with the conflicts present whenever land and food issues are discussed: How do we steward land? Who

works the land? Are they justly paid? What are the environmental impacts on the natural resources within our property? How will we determine the future use of the land? What values are reflected in our decisions? How do my consumer choices determine how others may relate to the land? As church we certainly have not answered these questions adequately, but we are asking the questions about ourselves. We are not peripheral to the issue, we are the issue.

4. In our community of faith we have had brothers and sisters around the world who have spilled their blood over land and food issue. Our religious women, men and lay missionaries have died defending the rights of the poor and the landless. They have lost their lives in solidarity with the indigenous peoples struggling to reclaim land and feed their families. We have learned our lessons well from the experiences of our brothers and sisters in Central America, Asia and Africa. Food security is fragile and control of people is directly related to control of land and food. Human life is expendable in the race for huge profits and economic concentration. Our active participation in land use and food issues is a necessity, not a choice.

Our celebration of Eucharist within the Catholic community is the place where our faith and justice meet on issues of food and land. Eucharist first comes to us as wheat and grapes, bread and wine prayed over at every liturgy with the words:

Blessed are you Lord God of all creation. Through your goodness we have this bread/this wine to offer, which earth has given and human hands have made/fruit of the vine and the work of human hands. It will become the bread of life/our spiritual drink. And we respond: Blessed be God forever.

There can be no greater act of thanksgiving to the God who made us than to advocate for justice on the land so all may eat bread for life and share the Bread of Life. The Good News is our human solidarity because our God loves the world and all that is in it.

All are made in God's image and likeness. All persons are called to share in the fruits of the earth. Our efforts to share God's life on the land are affirmed in God's word found in Deuteronomy: "Justice and justice alone shall be your aim that you may have life and may possess the land which the Lord your God is giving you."

Resources:

Environmental Justice Materials-United States Catholic Conference

"Globalization of the Food System: An Overview of the Current Trends

*Dr. William Heffernan in **Justice in the Global Food System: A Faith Perspective on Food Security**, The National Catholic Rural Life Conference*