



Sustaining Life on the Land

Reflections on Rural Life

THE CATHOLIC RURAL ETHIC: PAST AND PRESENT

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Introduction

Economic concentration by a few agribusiness enterprises and the decimation of the family farm is a crucial issue for the National Catholic Rural Life Conference (NCRLC) and it has been a central concern for the American Bishops who founded it and have generously sponsored it for its entire history. The originating documents of NCRLC, the Rural Manifesto of 1939, the Handbook for Rural Pastors and the Laity of 1947 articulate a common thread of principles which have informed the position of the Conference as well as the position of the United States Bishops: Strangers and Guests: Toward Community in the Heartland of 1985, the Report of the Ad Hoc Task Force on Food, Agriculture and Rural Concerns of 1988 and the Pastoral Reflection: Food Policy in a Hungry World, the Links That Bind Us Together of 1989.

The NCRLC Application of an Ethic

In NCRLC's application of Catholic Social Teaching, one can find a consistent rural ethic. Human dignity is an essential element of productive work. This is reflected in the article "Efficiency versus Humanity," (*Landward* 4, a NCRLC magazine, Spring, 1936, p.4) "Efficiency must consider not merely the highest production at the lowest cost and largest profit. It has been shown that too many people get hurt that way. The traffic laws of efficiency should be changed to read, production at such a cost and with such a profit as well provide a good life with economic freedom for the largest number of human beings (a word we are forgetting these days) engaged in production. This would mean throttling down the merely mechanical elements of efficiency and broadening its base to include the human, social values that are indispensable to the welfare of the nation at large because they benefit the largest number of individuals."

In a February, 1949 statement on "Industrialism and Agriculture" NCRLC stated:

"The Conference regards concentration...to the exclusion or detriment of the family-type farm, as socially unjust and requiring correction by governmental action and by informed public opinion.

(Industrialism and Agrarianism: an Official Statement of the National Catholic Rural Life Conference," *The Christian Farmer* 2, a NCRLC publication, (Feb. 1949 pp. 1-3)

O'Rourke Works to Develop an Ethic

Father Edward O'Rourke (later Bishop of Peoria, IL), the Executive Director, wrote in 1960: "Technical changes are taking place in agriculture. A family can till more acres today than families did a generation ago. Hence, farms are growing larger. But these larger farms must still be operated by and for families. We must not exchange the family farm system for a few 'general farms incorporated.' Such an exchange would be tragic for families on the land and for nations as a whole. In America we have an agriculture which is efficient, which is conducive to good family life, which is a bulwark of religion and democracy. Let us not exchange it for a type of agriculture which has failed in every place and every age in which it has been tried." Edward W. O'Rourke, "Family Farm," *Catholic Rural Life*, 10 (August, 1961, p.4)

In March of 1967, O'Rourke wrote about the industrialization of agriculture: "It neglects entirely the spiritual, social and cultural values of rural living. It is concerned more with prices and markets than with people. It means the uprooting of thousands of rural families...The spiritual, social and cultural values of the farm family and the rural community are important to our society and should be given priority in determining our agricultural priorities. "Big Farms and Little People," *Catholic Rural Life*, 16, March 1967, p.2.

Monsignor George Weber, the rural life director of the Salina, Kansas diocese, as the Executive Secretary for NCRLC wrote for *Catholic Rural Life*, in 1975: "Work must be human and it remains human only if it remains free and intelligent. This is one of the major reasons for preserving and strengthening the family farm. Another vital reason for this objective is the common good of the entire nation...Food is a must for human life and if the source of food production is concentrated and controlled, the more the masses of society are at the whim and beck of a

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powerful few. This amounts to food slavery, both in prices set and in the quality and availability.” (November, 1975, pp.6-7, *Catholic Rural Life*.)

The World Food Summit in Rome in 1986 (November) reminded NCRLC of the issues of food security and world hunger:

“Much of the problem lies in the structure of our food system. Our commitment to a free market agriculture has created a corporate system that responds mainly to profit opportunities. And it is becoming ever more costly to all of us as control moves into the hands of fewer managers and decision makers.” (*World Hunger Problem* *Catholic Rural Life*, 24 August 1975, p.2)

Most Reverend William Skylstad, formerly the Chair of the Board of The National Catholic Rural Life Conference and now the Chair of the Domestic Policy Committee of the United States Catholic Conference testified before Congress on the 1995 Farm Bill. His testimony stated the official policy of the Bishops’ Conference:

“...moderate-sized farms operated by families on a full-time basis should be preserved and their economic viability protected.”

He went on to differentiate the family farm from the corporate farm: “The goal of a corporate farm, by way of contrast, would be to make a profit to support its investors. Day-to-day management and operation of the farm is not necessarily by the owners.”

Francis Cardinal George, O.M.I., the Cardinal Archbishop of Chicago, speaking on behalf of the Catholic bishops of Illinois, in his recent call for a moratorium on large-scale confinement operations expressed the view: “At some point in time, we crossed the line and some of these facilities became factories, not farms as we once knew them. We believe now is the time for members of the General Assembly to pass legislation that will halt the construction of any new large-scale facilities for a period of time until solutions can be developed that will address the impact these facilities are having on the environment and on small farmers.”

Bishop Sullivan Applies a Rural Ethic

Speaking in a similar vein, Bishop James Sullivan, speaking to a rosary rally at Madison Square Garden in New York City said the following: “I am a bishop of a rural diocese, a diocese whose land mass is larger than all of Ireland. But for a rural bishop, there is a sin against life of which few people are aware. It is strange that people are unaware of this sin against life, since it concerns the very bread of life in the most basic sense.

“North Dakota, where I am bishop, has often been termed the breadbasket of the world. That this breadbasket has been there for us is largely due to

the family farmer. But now the family farm is in danger of disappearing. It is the goal of those who plan at high levels to soon have only 50,000 farms in the United States. These fewer farms would all be corporate farms.

“Big Brother” (is) taking charge of our rural life. It was this concept that Pope John II has been attacking, not only in *Evangelium Vitae*, but in all of his social encyclicals.

“Take North Dakota as an example of this overlooked sin against life playing out in the concrete. In North Dakota in 1930, the rural population was 567,000. In 1990, the rural population stood at 319,000 - a drop of almost 250,000 people. Conversely, the urban population in our state in 1930 was 113,000. In 1990, the urban population was 320,000 - a gain of almost 200,000. Rural communities, schools and churches have been devastated. They have literally lost generations of leaders. Rural communities, schools and churches find it very difficult to provide services, and the infrastructures necessary for the livelihood of citizens are disappearing.”

“Social justice requires that we take into account the principle of Subsidiarity. I am dismayed when I see people dismissing the family farm as a relic from the romantic past. The family farm, however you want to define it, offers the best environment for family life and for feeding our nation and the world. We have moral obligations towards generations to come as the Catechism of the Catholic Church reminds us. This is a much true in the rural life context as it is in other moral contexts.”

The Bishops of Minnesota also Comment

The Bishops of Minnesota through their Catholic Conference have called for a moratorium on large-scale hog confinement operations, so have the Bishops of Kansas and Illinois. The North Dakota Catholic Conference recently presented testimony on the future of agriculture in the state of North Dakota, their positions are consistent with past applications of Catholic rural ethic. Recently too, the Bishops of Wisconsin and Ohio, the Rural Life Commissions of the Diocese of Sioux Falls, South Dakota, and the Diocese of Sioux City, Iowa have all issued important statements raising questions about concentration, the family farm and environmental protection.

Vatican Comments on an Agrarian Ethic

The recent Vatican Document: “Towards a Better Distribution of Land: The Challenge of Agrarian

Reform” and the 1996 publication “World Hunger-A Challenge for All: Development in Solidarity” clearly articulates the application by John Paul II of Catholic Social teachings to the land, food, and agricultural arenas. The Pontifical Council, Cor Unum, makes a clear call for a more sustainable agriculture:

#25 Ignorance of the common good goes hand in hand with the exclusive and sometimes excessive pursuit of particular goods such as money, power, or reputation when viewed as absolutes to be sought for their own sakes: namely as idols. This is what created the “structures of sin.” All those places and circumstances in which habits are perverse and which demand proof of heroism on the part of all new arrivals if one is to avoid acquiring such habits.

#30 At present, nature is teaching all a lesson in solidarity that could easily be forgotten. In the very act of producing food, everyone discovers that they are either active or passive component parts of an ecosystem. A new sphere of responsibility is opening up to people’s consciences.

The pretense of pretending to want to provide more food to more people and at the same time weaken agriculture cannot continue. Agriculture seems to be contributing more pollution (with the wholesale use of fertilizer, pesticides, and machines) as it reaches the industrial stage, before having developed the capacity to work without polluting.

#31 It is urgently necessary to manage this planet in an ecologically sustainable manner. Sustainable agricultural development involves an agriculture that is environmentally sound, socially just, economically beneficial. In the Vatican testimony at the World Food Summit the contrast was made between cultures of the common good and “structures of sin.”

The “structures of sin” are numerous and vary in scope. Some are world wide, for example the mechanisms and conduct which create hunger. Others are on a much smaller scale but equally capable of creating imbalances, thus making it more difficult to do good to the people affected by them. These “structures” always generate high costs in human terms and are the places in which the common good is destroyed.

The Culture of Death

In 1995, Pope John Paul II issued the papal encyclical, “Evangelium Vitae,” in which he contrasted the Gospel of Life to the “culture of death”. The Pontifical Council, Cor Unum’s statement for the World Food Summit in November of 1996, speaking for the Vatican, made the same contrast between “structures of sin” and “structures of the common good.” John Paul II wrote: “We are confronted by an even larger

reality, which can be described as a veritable structure of sin. This reality is characterized by the emergence of a culture which denies solidarity and in many cases takes the form of a veritable “culture of death.” This culture is actively fostered by powerful cultural, economic, and political currents which encourage the idea of society excessively concerned with efficiency...in this way a kind of “conspiracy against life” is unleashed.” The Pope and the Pontifical Council are speaking here of investment enterprises, large-scale organizations which do not practice corporate citizenship, that control production, that manipulate markets and aim at the maximization of profits.

In the statement on agrarian reform, the Vatican’s Peace and Justice Commission clearly condense latifundia, the control of large landholdings by a few. In doing so the Commission quotes John Paul II’s encyclical letter *Centesimus Annus*, 1991, no.43: “Ownership of the means of production in the agricultural sector ‘is just and legitimate if it serves useful work. It becomes illegitimate, however, when it is not utilized or when it serves to impede the work of others, in an effort to gain a profit which is not the result of an overall expansion of work and the wealth of society, but rather is the result of curbing them or of illicit exploitation, speculation, or the breaking of solidarity among working people. Ownership of this kind has no justification and represents an abuse in the sight of God and man.”

Clearly, the type of ownership and the effect of the type of ownership which the Pope condemns are large corporate farms and investment agribusiness enterprises. The dimensions of concentration in the food industry are well documented. The USDA has been so concerned a commission was formed to study the issue and a report was published on concentration in the food industry. These concentrations of power have been clearly identified by John Paul II.

Structures of Common Good

In the words of the Pontifical Council’s “World Hunger-A Challenge for All: Development in Solidarity” “There are...many large-scale “structures of sin” which deliberately steer the goods of the earth away from their true purpose, that of serving the good of all, towards private and sterile ends in a process which spreads contagiously.”

The Pontifical Council encouraged cooperation rather than competition: “As soon as groups of men and women begin working together in order to take due account of the need to serve the whole community and each individual member of it, remarkable developments can take place. The obverse of the “structures of sin” are the “structures of the common good” which pave the way to a civilized humanity rather than a culture of death.” The structures of

the common good are mechanisms, rules, laws and programs that work for the good of all. Included are programs that provide fairness for smaller producers and independent family farmers. They may include protection by the state in the regulation of contract language, they include oversight of market access so that there is a level playing field, they include vigilance in providing for a system which gives the local producer a fair and living wage, opportunities for value-added activity, the right to form cooperatives in which the producers have a management interest. Markets by themselves are not the solution of the Church:

“Human development will not come about as a result of economic mechanisms operating alone; a belief that all is necessary is to encourage them. The economy will only become out at every level. Designed to provide the best possible service for approach based on the infinite value of each man and woman and of all humanity.”

That is an economy which allows itself to be inspired by “the need to build relationships between peoples on the basis of a constant “exchange of gifts,” a real “culture of giving” which should make every country prepared to meet the needs of the less fortunate.” This is the counter-vision proposed at the World Food Summit by the Holy Father.

Principles of a Catholic Rural Ethic

These positions stem from the deeply held Catholic convictions developed over time thoroughly Catholic Social Teaching based upon Scripture and Tradition. A Catholic rural ethic applies the following principles:

1. Human dignity: each person is made in the image of God.
2. Subsidiarity: no higher power should deny lower levels freedom to self governance.
3. Solidarity: persons are called by God to self-transcending love.
4. Universal destination of goods: private ownership has a social mortgage.
5. Common good: each should act on behalf of the good of all.
6. Integrity of creation: the created order is one whole, each being has its own worth.
7. Option for the poor: a fundamental question is how human action affects the poor.

Counter positions to these principles include attacks on human dignity, concentrations of power (by states or market forces), individualism, selfishness greed, abuse of animals, ecological devastation, blaming the victim. The Catholic Rural Ethic is consistent, strong, and clear. We don't have to invent a substitute for it. What we need is to have the courage to apply it. Throughout the ages the Scripture and Catholic tradition have been applied to rural situations. The end result has been a deeply held set of convictions which rightfully deserve to be called the Catholic rural ethic.

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