



Sustaining Life on the Land

Reflections on Rural Life

THE VATICAN AND USDA CALL FOR AGRARIAN REFORM

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*“A commitment to justice and peace in a world like ours, marked by so many conflicts and intolerable social, and economic inequalities, is a necessary condition for the presentation and celebration of the jubilee.”
(John Paul II Apostolic Letter Tertio Millennio Adveniente, 1994, no. 51)*

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The concentration of land and power, the decline of rural communities, loss of prime farm land, the devastation of our natural environment, and the discrimination against ethnic minorities decried in earlier documents of the Church have recently been forcefully repeated in two documents calling for agrarian reform, one from the United States Department of Agriculture and the other from the Peace and Justice Commission of the Vatican. The Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace in January of 1998, published “Towards a Better Distribution of Land” with the subtitle of “The Challenge of Agrarian Reform” (Referred in the future as Agrarian Reform). The Secretary of Agriculture, Mr. Dan Glickman, appointed a national commission on small farms to report on the circumstances of family farms and minorities in agriculture. The report of the commission was published in January of 1998 with the title: “A Time To Act” The statement Agrarian Reform” looks particularly at the Latin American context; “A Time To Act” describes the U.S. experience. The two are compared below as they share 5 common themes.

1. Agriculture policy has been biased in favor of larger operations:

‘A second important cause of the failure of agrarian reforms is the scant attention paid to the history and cultural traditions of agricultural societies, which has often resulted in a bias in favour of a large scale landholding system as against traditional forms of land tenure.’ (Agrarian Reform, p.15)

In 1978, there were 2.3 million farms in the United States. Today, there are 2.0 million farms in the United States. Today we have 300,000 fewer farmers than in 1979, and farmers are receiving 15 percent less for every consumer dollar. Four firms now control over 80 percent of the beef market. About 94% of the Nation’s farms are small farms, but they receive only 41 percent of all farm receipts. Today, the farmer receives 23 cents of every consumer dollar spent on food. (A Time to Act, p.16,17)

‘The agrarian structure of developing countries is often characterized by a two-tier form of distribution, ‘with a small number of large landowners possessing most of the arable land, while vast numbers of very small owners, tenants and settlers farm the remaining land, which is often inferior in quality. Land holdings are still a feature of many such countries’ land systems. This form of organization of the agricultural sector seems to be on the decline only where agrarian reforms have been implemented.’ (The Challenge of Agrarian Reform, p.12).

“(A)s small farms are consolidated into larger farms, the economic basis of America’s rural communities decline, and rural towns are lost. Trends have been revealing. The land base of America is being concentrated into fewer and fewer owners, in large part due to the concentration of agriculture, and that large agricultural processors are actively acquiring highly productive farm land in some regions, like the Central Valley of California” (A Time To Act, p.15)

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2. Price policy has hurt the smaller farmers:

“Price control policies have been adopted for certain products, favouring large agro-industrial concerns and export growers, but penalizing small growers producing traditional farm products. Other policies have meant that the whole infrastructure and service system tends to be run in the interests of large farmers. In Yet other cases; tax policies concerning agriculture have worked to the profit of certain landowners (individual physical persons or companies), allowing them to recoup fixed investments in a relatively short time, either by not envisaging progressive taxes or in some way facilitating tax evasion.’ (Agrarian Reform, p. 16)

The present system of “transition” payments as part of the 1995 farm bill perpetuates the large-farm bias because the amount of payment is based on historical payment levels. A new risk management tool, “revenue insurance,” also perpetuates a large-farm bias through its provisions of coverage for the few major program commodities with no limit on the amount of coverage provided. Recent changes in Federal tax policy~ provide disproportionate benefits to large farms through tax incentives for capital purchases to expand operations. (A Time to Act, p. 18)

3. Ethnic minorities, women in agriculture

There has been an indifference to the needs explicitly unique to small farms, including minority and women-owned farms, for the last several decades. (A Time To Act, p.40)

In the culture and spirituality of indigenous populations, land is seen as the basis of every value and as the unifying factor that nourishes their identity. ...The only ways they can avoid expulsion from their own land is by agreeing to work for the large companies or by emigrating.” (Agrarian Reform, p. 17)

“(Women) are widely marginalized by severe forms of economic and social injustice. Even agrarian reform programs consider women in terms of their domestic work and not as agents of productive action. Laws favour men in conferring the right to land ownership, and the educational system tends to emphasize boys’ training rather than that of girls. (Agrarian Reform, p.44)

4. Promoting development of family-sized farms:

The social teachings of the Church condemns both latifundia as the expression of a socially responsible use of the right to property and as a serious obstacle to social mobility, and also State ownership of land as leading to a depersonalization of civil society. While it is aware that “it is not possible to determine a priori what the structure of farm life should be,’ it suggests that family owned and farmed enterprises should be actively promoted. Farm units of the size intended here use family labour for the most part, but can tap into the extended external labour market by taking on paid workers. Such farms should be large enough to allow the family sufficient earning, to retain possession of the farm, to have access to the land credit market, and to ensure sustainability of the rural environment also through the appropriate use of inputs., (Agrarian Reform, p.35)

University of California anthropologist Dean MacCannell wrote: “As farm size and absentee ownership increase, social conditions in the local community deteriorate. ... Communities that are surrounded by farms that are larger than can be operated by a family unit have a bimodal income distribution, with a few wealthy elites, a majority of poor laborers, and virtually no middle class. The absence of a middle class at the community level has a serious negative effect on both the quality and quantity of social -and commercial service, public education, local governments, etc.” (A Time to Act, p.20),

5. Degradation of the natural environment:

In the social leaching of the Church, the process of the concentration of landholdings is judged a scandal because it clearly goes against God’s will and salvific plan, inasmuch as it deprives a large part of humanity of the benefit of the, fruits of the earth. Perverse inequalities in the distribution of common goods and in each persons opportunities for development, as well as the dehumanizing imbalances in individual and collective relationships brought about by such concentration, are the cause of conflicts that undermine the very life of society, leading to the breakup of the social fabric and the degradation of the natural environment. (Agrarian Reform, p.28)

“A great deal of effort ... has gone into developing technologies, products and marketing structures that require farmers to spend more money on capital-intensive systems to produce raw-commodities on a large scale, often at a great harm to the natural environment”
(A Time To Act, p.98)

A Vision for Small Farms

Small farms have been the foundation of our Nation, rooted in the ideals of Thomas Jefferson and recognized as -such in core, agricultural policies. It is with this recognition of our nation’s historical commitment to small farms that we renew our dedication to the prominence of small farms in the renewal of American communities in the 21st century. Black, Hispanic, Native America, Asian, women and other minorities have contributed immensely to our nation’s food production and their contributions should be recognized and rewarded.

It is our resolve that small farms will be stronger and will thrive, using farming systems that emphasize the management, skill, and ingenuity of the individual farmer. We envision a competitive advantage for small farms realized through a framework of supportive, yet responsible, government and private initiatives, the application of appropriate research and extension, and the stimulation of new marketing opportunities. As small farms and farmworkers succeed in this nurturing environment, not only will they continue their valuable contribution to the Nations food supply, but they will also fuel local economies and energize rural communities all across America. In the process of flourishing, small farms will contribute to the strengthening of society, providing communities and the Nation with opportunities for self-employment and ownership of land, and providing a cultural and traditional way of life as well as nurturing places to raise families.

In addition, our economic accounting systems do not take into account the “hidden” costs of large farms. An agricultural system characterized by a limited number of large-scale farms does not take into account the loss of market competition when production is concentrated in oligoposonistic markets. The environmental, consequences of concentrating a large number of animals in limited areas is rarely considered.

Small farms contribute more than farm production to our society. Small farms embody a diversity of ownership, cropping systems, landscapes, biological organization, culture, and traditions. Since the majority of farmland is managed by a large number of small farm operators, the responsible management of soil, water, and wildlife encompassed by these farms produces significant environmental benefits. Decentralized land ownership produces more equitable economic opportunity for people in rural communities, and offers self-employment and business management opportunities. Farms, particularly family farms, can be nurturing places for children to grow up and acquire values of responsibility and hard work. (A Time to Act, p.- 13)

“If the market prompts small farmers to grow export crops, this often takes place at the expense of production intended mainly for their own consumption, thus putting farming families all considerable risk. Unfavourable climatic or market conditions can lead to a vicious circle of hunger, so that such families contract debts that then force them to give up ownership of their land.’ (Agrarian Reform, p.16)

***A Time To Act: A Report of the USDA National Commission on Small Farms; January 1998; Jennifer Yezdk Molen, Director; National Commission on Small Farms/USDA; P.O. Box 2890 Room 5237 South Building; Washington, DC 20013.**

***Towards A Better Distribution of Land; The Challenge of Agrarian Reform; Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace; Libereria Editrice Vaticana; 00120 Citta Del Vaticano.**

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