



## ***Life on the Land: A Call to Reflection and Action on Agriculture in Ohio*** (Issued 1998)

*"All agree that the situation of the farming community in the United States and in other parts of the world is highly complex, and simple remedies are not at hand. The Church, on her part, while she can offer no technical solutions, does present social teaching based on the primacy of the human person in every economic and social activity. At every level of the agricultural process, the dignity, rights, and well-being of people must be the central issue. No one person - grower, worker, packer, shipper, retailer or consumer - is greater than others in the eyes of God."*

*-Pope John Paul II, 1987 Homily at Laguna Seca, CA*

### **I. INTRODUCTION**

In our National Conference of Catholic Bishops' pastoral letter on Catholic Social Teaching and the U. S. Economy, we urged a renewed focus on economic issues and their moral and human implications. Recent events in Ohio have catalyzed important public debate about concentration of land ownership and food production, agricultural and labor practices, and rural ecology. In June 1997, the Ohio Farmland Preservation Task Force formed by Governor Voinovich issued its findings and recommendations. Among the findings reported was the fact that agriculture and food processing are a critical component of the state's economy contributing \$56.2 billion annually and supporting one in six jobs. Between 1974 and 1992 Ohio lost 1.4 million acres of farmland.

According to the Ohio Agricultural Statistics Service, from 1992 through June 1, 1996, the number of farms fell in the state by 2000. While the number of farms and the acreage devoted to agricultural production is declining, concentration of ownership in all sectors of our state's food production system is increasing. New entrants into farming find the costs of increasingly sophisticated chemical and mechanical technologies out of reach. Indeed the average age of farm operators in Ohio is 52 years. Only 13% are under the age of 35 years. It is 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 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, just treatment of all in the agricultural system and the broadest participation of all Ohioans in the agricultural sector is achieved.

Now is the appropriate time for state policy makers to evaluate the legacy of vertical integration, especially in the livestock, dairy and poultry industries, and the impact of industrial scale farming operations on farmers, agricultural workers, rural communities and the local environment.

The argument is sometimes made that we are captives of the economic forces of the marketplace. Concentration is said to be inevitable, bringing larger economies of scale and higher productivity and profitability. However, our economy remains a human creation, which reflects our choices about what we value. We must not lose sight of the fact that the economy exists to serve the human person, not the other way around. All economic choices and institutions must be judged by how they protect or undermine the life, dignity and fundamental rights of the human person.

It is against this backdrop that we offer questions, directions for public policy and considerations for pastoral ministry. It is our hope that this offering will promote open and sincere dialogue toward resolution of the issues that permeate our living on the land.

### **II. A CALL TO REFLECTION**

The present agricultural production system needs to be situated within an ethical framework rooted in the principles of social justice found in Scriptures and the Church's tradition of teaching and action. We, the Catholic Bishops of Ohio, call all people -- producers, consumers, community and civic leaders -- to reflect on the conditions and actions which challenge our rural communities and ultimately affect the lives of those who work within the system and those who enjoy the fruits of their labor. We especially affirm farm families who are active participants in the life and vitality of their local communities.

Food, like life itself, is a basic human right. Food is essential for the maintenance of life and an indispensable requirement to maintain our God-given dignity. Food is not simply a commodity among commodities in the marketplace. A just agricultural system will promote food security and food safety. Justice also demands stewardship of the land and resources used in agricultural production and attention to the dignity and fair treatment of all who work in the system.

### III. DIRECTIONS FOR PUBLIC POLICY AND ACTION

In the U.S. Catholic Bishops' 1989 statement entitled "Food Policy in a Hungry World" we set forth some directions for public policy that would assist in the achievement of a just agricultural system. We wish to reiterate and underscore those directions applicable to policy making in Ohio. Specifically, we call upon policy makers to:

- Establish an ongoing public review and oversight process regarding industrial scale agricultural facilities to assure appropriate community accountability, public safety and just working conditions.
- Develop appropriate policy distinctions among farm operations considering factors such as the number of non-family employees, the concentration of animal units, waste disposal needs, and community accountability.
- Foster the development of state and local land use policies and plans which support farmland preservation, urban and rural revitalization, and appropriate housing and industrial developments.
- Foster the widespread ownership of land and productive property while emphasizing support for first time farmers and the maintenance of small and moderate sized family farms.
- Support farming methods and technologies that sustain rather than damage the environment (e.g., crop diversification and rotation, conservation practices and greater reliance on environmentally safe chemicals and other technologies).
- Strengthen rural communities by helping rural people shape their own economic and social future through increased participation as decision makers.
- Support efforts that secure accessibility to quality education, job development, health care, housing, and child care.
- Assure all persons working in the agricultural system fair wages, unemployment compensation, and protections and benefits afforded to other workers, including the right to organize.
- Encourage and support cooperatives as a way of giving both consumers and producers a measure of economic power and greater participation in the economic enterprise.
- Support further study and research in the development of alternative food systems such as sustainable and regenerative farming, and urban gardening.

### IV. A CALL TO FAITH FILLED MINISTRY

We support and encourage the participation of all our parishes and organizations in addressing these issues of land control, natural resource use, and concentration of food production, processing and distribution. We call on a more effective use of education, pastoral ministry, and public advocacy as means for developing a wider response and a deeper involvement in the food system in Ohio and throughout the nation and the world.

#### Education

We support increased efforts by our pastors, schools and diocesan staff to guide our parishioners toward a better understanding of the present food system, its implication on individuals and communities and its effects on food security and natural resources. We invite the inclusion of those who live these experiences to be our primary teachers in this learning process.

#### Pastoral Ministry

The dignity of human persons challenges us to look to the needs of people within our communities and to respond to needs brought about by changing agricultural policies and practices.

Parishes could offer space as a place for convening groups who are working to seek just solutions within their rural communities. Where possible, the Church must serve as a place where peaceful resolution may occur.

Liturgies, special homilies and prayer services during appropriate times of the year provide support and spiritual growth. The Feast of St. Isidore, planting and harvest seasons and Thanksgiving are times for community prayer and special emphasis on the needs of our farming communities.

Effective outreach and support services can be developed to meet needs of persons negatively affected by local agricultural activities. These may include such services as health care, food, housing, emotional support and job training. Parishes can continue providing first-step assistance through emergency services and referrals.

#### Public Advocacy

The Church will continue to serve farmers, farmworkers and hungry people. But this is not enough. We must also seek ways in which we help resolve the broader problems related to the food system and their impact on both rural and urban people in our state. We strongly encourage parishes and diocesan offices to work collaboratively with other local institutions and groups in addressing issues related to the food system and agricultural concentration. Farm workers, farm organizations, health services, labor, environmental and consumer groups are

among those in both rural and urban communities who welcome and need the Church's presence.

#### Statewide Coordination

Each diocese has a designated Rural Life Director. Together with the Catholic Conference of Ohio and interested lay persons from the dioceses, these directors have formed the Ohio Catholic Rural Life Conference (OCRLC) to develop and provide resources to assist parishes and diocesan offices in their ministries of education, pastoral services and advocacy. We support these efforts. It is our hope that the OCRLC will be able to encourage all those involved in Ohio's agricultural system as well as those who benefit from it to join together in reflection and action.

#### V. CONCLUSION

In closing we offer several questions which address the moral and ethical ramifications of Life on the Land. While these are not meant to be exhaustive, they are reflective of many of the moral issues confronting Ohio families and communities. It is our hope that all those involved in Ohio's agricultural system, as well as those who benefit from it, will join together in reflection and action ensuring that our life on the land respects God's creation, recognizes human dignity and preserves the communal solidarity which has sustained us for so long.

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#### QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. How does our current agricultural system affect the most vulnerable persons among us: children, the hungry, the undocumented, migrant workers, farm families and others who labor in industrialized farms and processing plants?
2. How does society best maintain, nurture and protect the diversity of peoples, cultures, natural resources and agricultural practices within a given community?
3. How does our society best reflect the principle that private land ownership carries a social responsibility?
4. How is the community at the most local level involved in land use decisions that affect their lives and livelihood?
5. What measures of social and economic accountability should owners of industrial scale agricultural facilities be required to offer to local communities? How should this accountability be enforced?
6. How can state and local policies better support widespread ownership and local control of farmland and productive resources, including support for first time farmers and those using alternative food production methods?
7. What are appropriate practices and policies which will ensure safe working conditions and just treatment of all agricultural laborers, especially migrant and undocumented workers?
8. How do my lifestyle choices regarding consumption reflect gospel values?
9. What information will assist me in making purchasing choices that reflect a commitment to a just food system?
10. How can the Church use its resources to effectively address the issues related to Life on the Land?
11. How am I called to help parish and diocesan rural life efforts become more effective in addressing issues related to food production and land use?

**CATHOLIC BISHOPS OF OHIO**

Most Rev. Daniel E. Pilarczyk  
Archdiocese of Cincinnati

Most Rev. Carl K. Moeddel  
Auxiliary Bishop of Cincinnati

Most Rev. Anthony M. Pilla  
Bishop of Cleveland

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Bishop of Youngstown

Most Rev. Robert M. Moskal  
Bishop of St. Joseph

Most Rev. J. Michael Botean  
Bishop of the Romanian Catholic Diocese of Canton

**Rural Life Director Listing**

**Archdiocese of Cincinnati**

Brian Henties  
Social Action and World Peace  
Archdiocese of Cincinnati  
266 Bainbridge Street  
Dayton, OH 45402  
937-224-3026

**Diocese of Cleveland**

Pat O'Bryan  
Catholic Commission of  
Wayne, Ashland & Medina Counties  
P.O. Box 109  
Wooster, OH 44691  
330-263-6176

**Diocese of Columbus**

Mark Huddy  
Department of Social Concerns  
Catholic Diocese of Columbus  
197 E. Gay Street  
Columbus, OH 43215  
614-241-2540

**Diocese of Steubenville**

Rev. Gerald Calovini  
Rural Life  
Diocese of Steubenville  
P.O. Box 969  
Steubenville, OH 43952-5969  
740-282-3631

**Diocese of Toledo**

Sr. Christine Pratt, OSU  
Rural Life Ministry  
Diocese of Toledo  
304 N. Main Street, Suite 8  
Fostoria, OH 44830  
419-435-1543