

Catholic Rural Life and Human and Natural Ecology

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Catholic Rural Life is a membership-based, Catholic non-profit organization founded in 1923 by Fr. Edwin V. O'Hara, who grew up on a dairy farm outside Lanesboro in southeast Minnesota. As a priest (he later became a bishop and eventually an archbishop), he loved rural people and had a vision to educate Catholics in rural communities about the riches of their faith and how to integrate that faith into their everyday lives. CRL's mission is to apply the teachings of Jesus Christ for the betterment of rural America and care of God's creation. CRL provides spiritual, educational and advocacy assistance to help rural people shape their own destinies and lead lives of dignity.

The explicit question in our seminar is, "What is the relationship between human and natural ecology, and what are the implications for society today?" When CRL speaks of "right relationships", we are referring to "justice and love". Often today the term "justice" is thought of only in terms of retribution—"the criminal will receive justice", or of entitlements—"the lawfulness of a claim". But there is another important meaning to this word. Justice is also a noble moral virtue that refers to doing the right thing toward God and neighbor¹, no matter what the cost. The virtue involves relationship with both God and our fellow human beings.

Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, in his 2012 World Day of Peace Message on New Year's Day entitled *Educating Young People in Justice and Peace*, said,

"In this world of ours...the value of the person, of human dignity and human rights is seriously threatened by the widespread tendency to have recourse exclusively to the criteria of utility, profit and material possessions, it is important not to detach the concept of justice from its transcendent roots. Justice, indeed, is not simply a human convention...it is the integral vision of man that saves us from falling into a contractual conception of justice and enables us to locate justice within the horizon of solidarity and love. We cannot ignore the fact that some currents of modern culture, built upon rationalist and individualist economic principles, have cut off the concept of justice from its transcendent roots, detaching it from charity and solidarity: The 'earthly city' is promoted not merely by relationships of rights and duties, but to an even greater and more fundamental extent by relationships of gratuitousness, mercy and communion. Charity always manifests God's love in human relationships as well, it gives theological and salvific value to all commitment for justice in the world"².

In our work with rural communities around the country, CRL strives to promote right relationships with God, with one another and with the whole of creation. The underlying operative word is "relationships", which implies mutual love and respect. Where there is genuine

¹ Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1994. n. 1807.

² Pope Benedict XVI, Address for the Celebration of the World Day of Peace, January 1, 2012; p.4.

love and respect, there is life and there is hope. Too often in rural communities, however, right relationships are strained or broken. There is no longer a connection to the land. Family members are estranged from God and from each other. This estrangement can lead to isolation and disintegration in rural communities where many suffer silently and without hope.

This estrangement from God can also lead to a degradation of creation. For example, CRL has been following for a number of years the accessibility to clean water for agricultural production and human consumption, especially for people living in low-income areas.

From upstate New York to the plains of the Midwest, from the vegetable fields of New Mexico and Arizona, to the fertile San Joaquin Valley in California, concerns about water quality are being raised in research centers and state legislatures all over this country. For example in California, in a recent study of ground water contamination in the San Joaquin and Salinas Valleys, two of the most productive agricultural areas in the country, researchers concluded: "...nitrate contamination is widespread and increasing. Nitrate contamination poses an environmental health risk because many rural areas obtain drinking water from wells that are often shallow and vulnerable to contamination. Infants who drink water containing nitrate in excess of the maximum contaminant level (MCL) for drinking water may quickly become seriously ill and, if untreated, may die because high nitrate levels can decrease the capacity of an infant's blood to carry oxygen."³ Approximately 2.6 million people living in these two valleys rely on groundwater for drinking water. Some of the highest levels of nitrates were found in wells located in rural communities, many of which are low-income areas.

Within the study area the primary causes of nitrate pollution was cropland (96% of total) where nitrogen applied to crops is leached from the root zone to groundwater. Other causes included percolation of wastewater treatment plant (WWTP) and food processing (FP) wastes (1.5%); urban parks, lawns, golf courses, and leaky sewer systems (less than 1%).

In the Midwest Professor Matt Liebman, an agronomist from Iowa State University, reported that, "...the Iowa Department of Natural Resources classified 44% of the state's streams and rivers and 47% of its lakes as 'impaired' by excessive levels of nutrients, sediments, and bacteria. In layman's terms, impaired water may be unsafe to swim in, uninhabitable by fish and other aquatic life, and unsuitable for drinking without intensive treatment...we now live a world in which scarcity of the basic necessities of life, including food and water, is an unavoidable reality for billions of people."⁴

Water is vital for life and a gift from our Creator. Catholic social doctrine teaches,

"God destined the earth and all it contains for all men and all peoples so that all created things would be shared fairly by all mankind under the guidance of justice tempered by charity."⁵

³ Center for Watershed Sciences; University of California, Davis; Groundwater Nitrate Project, Implementation of Senate Bill X2 1 Prepared for California State Water Resources Control Board; January 2012
<http://groundwaternitrate.ucdavis.edu>

⁴ Matt Liebman, Ph.D., *Sustainable Agriculture: Balancing agricultural production with resource conservation, environmental quality, and compassion*, Catholic Rural Life magazine, Fall 2009, pp. 12-15.

⁵ Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, #171.

Each of us has a responsibility to do all that we can to ensure God's gifts are shared fairly. Access to clean water is no longer to be taken for granted. Land management practices impact water quality. Many rural communities are on the frontlines of several environmental challenges facing us today. Contemporary practices have led to an increase in the use of harmful chemicals, contamination of water resources, and the depletion of topsoil, just to name a few issues.

So, what is happening in rural communities?

From my experience as executive director of Catholic Rural Life, what I have observed in rural communities is something I call a "blind spot". Similar to the situation when you are driving on a highway and you seek to pass the car in front of you. You signal to pass, and as you pull into the passing lane, suddenly there is a car honking right next to you. You never saw the car because it was in your blind spot: the space adjacent to your car where you cannot see the car in your rear and side view mirrors!

During a recent rural ministry course taught in partnership with a diocesan seminary, I faced a question by one of the seminarians who skeptically asked why the Church had "bought into the fad of the food and environmental movement." His assumption was that the Church had little to say about the ethics of food and the environment, and the insinuation is that the Church should stick to its primary mission, the salvation of souls (or at least a course on rural ministry should stick to spiritual concerns). There were several students nodding their heads in agreement.

Then there was the time I read an article in the respected journal *National Catholic Bioethics Quarterly* entitled, *Christians and the New Food Movement*. In this article (Fall 2011 issue), the author made a questionable argument about why Christians should be on their guard against the infiltrators of the new food movement who are seeking to co-opt the Christian faith. The author even accused Catholic Rural Life of abandoning its roots of evangelism and religious education by getting involved in agricultural and environmental concerns as if the two—the spiritual and secular—should not intertwine.

What these two examples have in common is a misunderstanding of the role of the faith in the world. This misunderstanding manifests itself in various ways. For some, faith is a personal matter and not to be mixed with worldly matters. Faith should be reserved for the pews in a house of worship. For others the notion of separation of Church and State means Christians have no business imposing their faith views or values in secular affairs, especially in public policy debates. Still others think the Church solely has expertise in spiritual matters, but not in secular matters. Therefore the Church should not be involved in secular debates. Our lives are so compartmentalized that our spiritual and secular lives are like silos separated to prevent contamination.

Pope Francis' warns us in his Apostolic Exhortation, *The Joy of the Gospel*: "the process of secularization tends to reduce the faith and the Church to the sphere of the private and personal. Furthermore, by completely rejecting the transcendent, it has produced a growing deterioration of ethics, a weakening of the sense of personal and collective sin, and a steady increase in relativism. These have led to a general sense of disorientation...."

In 1979 during his first visit to the United States, Pope John Paul II made a special trip to Iowa to speak to rural America. He reminded rural Americans that the land is a loving God's gift

entrusted to people from the very beginning. This gift calls for the responsible cultivation of the land by men and women for the good of all people. The future-saint also reminded the crowd—the largest outdoor gathering in Iowa’s history (over 300,000 people)—that God is the source of life and provides the rain and the sunshine to make plants grow. The land must be treated with care to ensure that our children’s children will inherit a land even richer than what was entrusted to us. Finally, Pope John Paul II called on farmers to be generous and to share the fruit of their labor, by contributing their knowledge to others and by promoting rural development and defending the right to work. He also reminded the crowd that it is Christ alone who provides the bread of life and we must listen to his call to us and to follow him. He invites us into a relationship. Jesus calls each of us to “Come to me...and I will refresh you.”

But today the issues we face regarding feeding a growing world population while ensuring fertile fields and healthy natural resources for future generations continue to perplex and challenge us. There is a great need for ethical leadership in addressing these concerns. How does faith inform the next generation of leaders in agriculture and food production? What principles, ethics, and values will enable men and women of good will and faith to exercise leadership and flourish in their communities, while also providing food for those in need, and caring for the gift of the earth?

Catholic Rural Life hosted and co-sponsored a national symposium in St. Paul, Minn., in November 2014 at the University of St. Thomas, entitled *Faith, Food and the Environment—The Vocation of the Agricultural Leader*, to retrieve the truth and importance of “vocation,” or “calling”(implying there is a God who calls us), and to discuss with farm leaders, theologians, scientists, and environmental leaders how faith can inform the next generation of leaders in the food and agriculture sectors to make wise and prudent decisions that help to feed a hungry world and care for the earth.

Food and agriculture are inextricably linked and the increasing concentration at every level of agriculture and growing globalization mean that fewer people are making decisions that affect far more people than at any time in history. Because of the corrupting influence of injustice - that is, of sin - the Church cannot remain indifferent to food and agriculture matters.⁶

The Church has always been a champion of farmers and ranchers, affirming the unique vocation the men and women involved in the agriculture industry who provide food for our tables and for the world.

The Church’s theology of creation and stewardship is not some new fad or green trend—it’s a calling from God that’s been consistently recognized throughout time and throughout the teachings of the Catholic Church. There is a strong connection between care for creation and another God-given commission: solidarity with the poor. Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, who wrote in his encyclical letter, *Caritas in Veritate* (Love in Truth), “...She (the Church) must above all protect mankind from self-destruction. There is need for what might be called a human ecology, correctly understood. The deterioration of nature is in fact closely connected to the culture that shapes human coexistence: when ‘human ecology’ is respected within society,

⁶ *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*; Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace. Libreria Editrice Vaticana, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Washington DC. 2004. n. 71.

environmental ecology also benefits.⁷

Our world is in need of men and women who are willing to live heroic lives of faith, willing to follow the leadership and inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and willing to provide leadership in our world for the common good.

⁷ Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, #51, 2009