



FAITH, FOOD & the ENVIRONMENT

Catholic Rural Life

2014 SYMPOSIUM

Overview

Faith, Food, and the Environment was a three-day symposium in early November 2014 that brought together a synergetic blend of participants. These individuals, numbering more than 65, predominantly represented farmers and farm organizations in the Upper Midwest. Select participants also came from agribusiness and food processing corporations, and university departments as diverse as theology, nutrition, and environmental science. Each brought their wisdom, experience and expertise to participate in an important dialogue tying together sustainable food production, stewardship of the environment, and faith-inspired principles.

THE VOCATION OF THE AGRICULTURAL LEADER

The subtitle of the Symposium reflected the larger purpose of this project, which is to develop resource materials in respect to “The Vocation of the Agricultural Leader.” The opening day presentations of the Symposium sought to explain the meaning of vocation within the agricultural sector. In

essence, there is a responsibility to the common good when managing an agribusiness enterprise or leading a farm advocacy organization: a responsibility to the greater good of the entire food system that upholds the dignity of all workers and protects the integrity of creation. What is meant by “Agricultural Leader”?

“Agricultural Leader” is a term or expression used to represent the range of occupations and professions within the broad sector of agriculture and food production. Agricultural leaders emerge from farmer organizations and corporate agribusinesses; from state and federal politicians and policymakers; from academia and research groups; from conservation organizations (land, waterways, wildlife, flora & fauna); from food/consumer/nutrition advocates; and from farm and rural media commentators. Agricultural leaders can be found all along the “food chain” that stretches from agricultural inputs to food production and distribution, including those who set policies or create the conditions for a productive food system.

WHY A FAITH PERSPECTIVE?

The intent of the Symposium was to address not only if the current food system is productive and efficient, but also fair, just and sustainable. In effect, today’s agricultural leaders must re-evaluate their way of doing business in response to the crucial challenge of meeting the food needs of all people while ensuring the vitality of the environment for generations to come. Can guidance be found within faith traditions? Scriptural passages from the Bible have been used to rationalize certain practices, and to censure others, when it comes to how we treat the earth and fellow human beings. The prophets remind us: “The earth is the Lord’s, and everything in it, the world and all those who live in it.”

A CALL TO A NEW WAY

If current agricultural practices are on the wrong track – if food production is not sustainable and market distribution is not feeding everyone – then changes must be made. As history has proven, religious inspiration is a tremendous



motivator for change. The Symposium poses that it is possible to talk about agribusiness and food production as a “calling” that goes beyond an occupational choice. But can society agree on a set of principles and wisdom regarding the common good of the world and stewardship of creation? If so, then we can better articulate a set of guidelines for the vocation of the agricultural leader in the 21st century.

“NATURE AND SPIRIT ARE INTIMATELY BOUND TOGETHER. THE NATURAL WORLD, IN ESSENCE, REFLECTS GOD’S OWN NATURE.”

Many questions were raised during this three-day gathering. A synthesis of those questions can be

expressed in three “human ecology” concerns:

1. Can our farming methods give back as well as take from Nature?
2. Can we rediscover a more intimate, conscious and respectful relationship to Earth, its biodiversity and its creatures?
3. Can we organize economic enterprises in such a way to sustain us while also broadening our awareness of the ecological whole?

“Agriculture is a unique human enterprise,” said one of the presenters, “for it is through this labor, perhaps more than any other, that one learns of the grammar of the

Creator.”

The Symposium participants in general agreed that there is something about agriculture – this most fundamental connection between Nature and Culture – that calls the humble farmer to see himself as unlocking the beauty of creation, perhaps even to contemplate the mind of God. This is not a lyrical overstatement. In the presentations by speakers at the Faith, Food and Environment symposium, their conclusions always led to this elevated point of view about the true place of humans in the world and our relationship to nature, which in the mind’s eye is an ongoing act of creation.