

Opening Speech by Archbishop Bernard Hebda ***A Noble Vocation – Integrating Faith, Food and the Environment***

Introduction

It is my great pleasure to be here and welcome all of you to this very significant conference entitled, *A Noble Vocation: Integrating Faith, Food and the Environment*. To those of you who have traveled from out of State, a warm welcome to Minnesota and the Archdiocese of Saint Paul-Minneapolis.

I have been told that in November, 2014, a previous national symposium on Food, Faith and the Environment was held here in Saint Paul, with a subsequent international gathering in Milan, Italy in 2015. Many of you contributed to the articulation of the Vocation of an Agricultural Leader which became ‘this document’ published by Catholic Rural Life in the US in collaboration with the International Catholic Rural Association. This conference adds ‘nobility’ to this vocation. Aristotle asserts that every ethical virtue tends toward nobility, which is the common good. This is most exemplified in his treatment of the moral virtue of courage.¹ As we know, with every vocation there are responsibilities and obligations, which I see that you are taking seriously by the topics and discussion sessions included in this conference.

The Church has esteem for Agriculture

As an Archbishop of the Catholic Church, and specifically, the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis, I would like to encourage you with words from the Church’s perspective regarding the important and noble vocation of an agricultural leader.

Let us begin with the words that St. John Paul II addressed to those gathered in Iowa nearly 40 years ago: “remember what the heart of your vocation is. While it is true here that farming today provides an economic livelihood for the farmer, still it will always be more than an enterprise of profit-making. In farming, you cooperate with the Creator in the very sustenance of life on earth..... You who are farmers today are stewards of a gift from God which was intended for the good of all humanity.”²

More recently, the Bishops of the USA wrote the following words of encouragement: “To all those who labor in order to produce ‘our daily bread,’ to all those who work to provide nourishing food for the human family – farmers, harvesters, ranchers, food processors, marketers, and distributors – to each and every one of you, the Church extends

¹ cf Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book 3.

² Pope John Paul II, Homily, Living History Farms, Des Moines, Iowa, October 4, 1979.

its deepest expressions of gratitude and esteem for the noble work of feeding the human family of God.”³

All of our food, indeed all that nourishes us, comes first from our heavenly Father, through the gift of the earth and the work of human hands. On this fundamental point we cannot be mistaken: every good gift, including our daily sustenance, is from the Father above (James 1:16-17).

Farmers, therefore, hold a crucial place in the common family of man and a unique role in the fulfillment of God’s plan. For through their determined labor, those who work in agriculture cooperate with divine providence and make manifest God’s care for each one of his children. Their work is not merely an effort to meet a basic human necessity.

Vocation

When we typically think of vocation, we refer to the vocation to the Priesthood, Consecrated Life or Holy Matrimony. It comes from the Latin word *vocare*, that is ‘to call’. What follows is *obedire* which is ‘to listen’. To refer to the vocation of an agricultural leader means someone who is called and then also listens. The commitment to agriculture is a vocation given by God, a unique and privileged way of life. Indeed, of all the occupations undertaken by men and women, the task of “tilling and keeping the earth” reaches to the depths of our relationships with God the Creator, with creation and with all of humanity. The origins of the vocation of the farmer (and all who tend to food and fiber) extend to the foundations of the human community, the “pre-history” of the Sacred Scriptures. The Book of Genesis records the moment when God placed man in the garden in order to till it and keep it (Gn. 2:15). The vocation to care for the earth and to bring forth its fruits emerges from the original condition and relationship of man within Creation.

This privileged way of life precedes the trauma of original sin and provides an insight into the place of the human person within the broader order of creation. From the very beginning, whether through the cultivation of its fruits, the preservation of its lands or the contemplation of its beauty, men and women find in their engagement with creation, an encounter with the Creator Himself. “For the heavens declare the glory of the Lord,” (Ps. 19.1) and through these created realities, we can discern the wisdom of the Creator at work (Rm. 1:20). Like every gift from God, creation itself shows us something of the Creator, his Wisdom and Provident care. God calls us; how do we listen?

Agricultural Leader

To serve as a leader implies prayer, communication skills, study and also teaching. “Agriculture is unique because it touches all our lives, wherever we live or whatever we

³ For I was Hungry & You Gave Me Food – Catholic Reflections on Food, Farmers and Farmworkers. USCCB 2004.

do.⁴ Many of us are unaware of the multifaceted systems to produce food and fiber and most do not realize the consequences on the environment and natural resources. We take a lot for granted, and at times forget to be grateful. To reflect on the 'noble vocation' of an agricultural leader requires faith. The theme of this conference suggests the necessity and urgency of integrating faith, food and the environment. This is complex because of differing standards and ethical priorities, yet not without hope.

It is essential – especially in this age of secularization with the tendency and temptation to neglect God – to encourage a deeper reflection upon agriculture as a vocation, and the responsibilities this implies. In his 2015 encyclical, *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis calls each of us to a profound interior conversion, and to recognize that our encounter with Jesus Christ impacts our relationships with the world around us. “Living our vocations to be protectors of God’s handiwork,” he says, “is essential to a life of virtue; it is not an optional or secondary aspect of our Christian experience.” (LS, 217) This is especially true for farmers. Pope Francis’ encyclical provides many of the insights for the document, the *Vocation of the Agricultural Leader*, upon which this conference is based.

A little over a year ago, Pope Francis initiated the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development to express the Holy See's concern for issues of justice and peace, including those related to migration, health, charitable works and the care of creation. These concerns cannot be limited to the Church alone, we must collaborate with others. An example of this collaboration is the work that Catholic Relief Services actuates with the USDA. Programs such as sustainable growth and capacity building, agriculture and nutrition, and regenerative agriculture are effective ways of reaching international needs. On a national level we need to have our voices heard in the public square. Much of our concern regarding the integration of faith, food and the environment includes our care and concern for migrants, especially those who are undocumented yet dependent upon farm work. We need to provide adequate housing and food for them and their families. In addition, we overlook rural poverty in our country, and especially the impoverished rural health care system which has contributed to the problem of opioid addiction. By addressing these difficulties, as well as many others, we respond with faith to Pope Francis’ concern for Integral Ecology.

In many areas of this country, there has been a significant demographic shift in rural communities. The impact of the so-called farm crisis of the 1980’s with the loss of rural families due to farm foreclosures continues to have influence on population decline. A 2017 FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization) report indicates that “critical parts of food systems are becoming more capital intensive, vertically integrated and concentrated in fewer hands.”⁵ The research of an Iowa State rural sociologist shows that roughly one-quarter of Iowa's 88,000 farms controlled nearly 70 percent of its cropland and drove 80

⁴ For I was Hungry & You Gave Me Food – Catholic Reflections on Food, Farmers and Farmworkers. USCCB 2004.

⁵ FAO, The Future of Food and Agriculture: Trends and Challenges, 2017.

percent of the state's agricultural sales.⁶ Farm land is expensive and many who would like to farm are not able to compete with corporations to purchase land. The desertion of towns of course has ramifications for our Churches in rural communities, as well as the Pastors who serve them; a topic that I see you will be addressing. Our families in rural communities are struggling to survive as opportunities for living their noble vocation as an agricultural leader dwindle. I am grateful to have the Office for Catholic Rural Life in the Archdiocese of Saint Paul-Minneapolis. You remind us to advocate for those who not only live in the countryside, but also revere the gifts that God gives to us in the beauty and goodness of creation. We need to renew our sense of wonder and our commitment to the dignity of work that is accompanied with prayer and gratitude.

Conclusion

It is my hope that this conference is used as a prompt for prayerful reflection on the significant responsibilities of agricultural leaders informed by faith. May your sessions and discussions over the next two days encourage each of you to enter more fully into a spirit of discernment, confident that "If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you." (James 1:5) As you reflect on this noble vocation, may you have the necessary courage to truly work for the common good, overcoming all obstacles to the grace the Lord desires to give you. May God bless each of you. Thank you.

⁶ <http://www.desmoinesregister.com/story/money/agriculture/2017/08/10/middle-sized-farmers-getting-squeezed/471382001/?hootPostID=39b62cbce5f53aad7476f85b29df176b>