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Catholic Rural Social Planning

The great social plan, the all-embracing social order, the comprehensive social structure that will always be the true practical ideal in any national social planning, in any functional democratic ordering of society, is outlined in the encyclicals—*Rerum Novarum* and *Quadragesimo Anno*. And it was for the purposes of establishing a program of Catholic Action in the reconstruction of agricultural districts that the present Conference (National Catholic Rural Life Conference) began, under the leadership of both rural and urban bishops and rural and urban priests. Our Conference has always been able to draw a strong urban membership, because not only the rural but also many urban people see clearly the basically important part that agriculture plays in this nation's total economic life. In answer to our daily prayer for bread, our fields bear and sustain the nation's crops and livestock.

What the people on the land contribute in human lives and wealth to the productivity and the prosperity of the city is enormous. The economic well-being, the health, the increase of rural families, the improvement of their plane of living, and their adequate religious instruction, is essential, therefore, to the continuity, the security and the prosperity of the entire nation.

From the earliest days of our Conference history, our scholarly pioneer planners, notable among them are His Excellency Bishop O'Hara, His Excellency Bishop Muench, Dr. Kenkel, Reverend Dr. Schmiedeler, Rev. Howard Bishop, Rev. William T. Mulloy, Rev. James A. Byrnes and Rev. Louis Ligutti, warned us that high land taxes and the high interest and rent payments demanded by banker landlords were draining farm wealth to exhaustion. They pointed out that much of the money accumulating for investment should be made available at low interest rates on long-term loans for the purpose of increasing the number of farm owners—the great source from which our basic wealth in lives and property must come.

These eminent rural leaders roundly condemned the industrialization of agriculture, the formation of farm corporations and large-scale specialization in cash crops on all farms, and they pointed out that such commercialism on the land would bring with it concentration of land ownership, an increase in renters and sharecroppers and hired rural labor, with the final reduction of our rural people to the same low, insecure, economic status that characterizes the industrial wage earner.

Even in our early plans for the modernization of agriculture, we clearly saw that if we could save the family-owned farm and direct it in diversified land use, in functional social



organization and in spiritual activity, we could prevent the complete loss of political and economic freedom, and the loss of much purchasing power. We were convinced from the beginning as we are today that you cannot modernize agriculture by taking the ownership to the profit-seeking hands of absentee landlords, or the greedy hands of distant managers and irresponsible stockholders. We know that such land tenure would finally give us in the domain of agriculture the same big, exploiting, usurping, private monopolies that claim the industrial world, and our rural families would under such land tenure be broken up and exhausted, economically, morally, spiritually, as so many industrial families are.

Our plans for the family farm in the economic order embrace the retention and perfecting of food production and processing for consumption as near as possible at the point of production, land use for much diversified production, land use with a view to conservation of soil and water, land use for family needs first, lower land taxes, lower rents, but principally provision of long term, low interest capital to assist in the promotion of family ownership, and finally the development of local markets, controlled through cooperative groups of farmers and consumers. Our plans for the family farm in the social order embrace necessary measures for the retention of the family as the primary economic unit in farm production and the formation and direction of a variety of functional social groups among farmers to help them to recapture their markets and solve their own social problems of economic organization, local planning, care of health, provision for more adequate education, etc.

We know that this program contains effective measures for accomplishing in a lasting, constructive way, the social work indicated in the great social order encyclicals.

In a country such as ours, with its millions of fertile acres and its widespread favorable climates, we can easily rehabilitate and gain, not great riches but reasonable security, for the full-time farmer through training in diversified land use and cooperative leadership, and we can add security to the status of many industrial workers by means of five and ten acre land zoning and division for many miles around most of our industrial areas. Our program in its land settlement, land conservation and land tenure plans, is capable of being very effective in a democratic way, with the assistance of democratic legislation, in the removal of many of the recent ghastly ailments of an insecure proletarian population.

withdrawal of farm wealth were not enough to exhaust it, we find the farmers disorganized and left without recourse, either through legislation or functional grouping against the unfair market manipulations of grain gamblers, meat packers, chain store magnates and tariff-making politicians.

Perhaps all this plunder could be endured if it affected only a small portion of the populace for only a short time. But this land tribute is being enacted continually by our modern barons of money and politics and is seriously affecting the present economic welfare of half of our people. It leads ultimately to the complete ruin of our natural and human resources and it endangers the peaceful continuation of our country, its institutions and its ideals.

Our sociology and economics are primarily interested in building the best environment for human nature and training that nature to at least a minimum degree of responsibility, preserving its dignity in free citizens, citizens whose freedom is guaranteed through their effective ownership of some small portion of productive property. Our agricultural economics will concern unfair profit taking, destructive collectivization, and wasteful centralized food processing, involving cross-country hauls and rehaults of canned goods of inferior quality. Our farm economics is the efficient democratic economics of more and more food processing and consumption near the point of production, the efficient democratic economics of subsistence together with a fair return from crops sold as much as possible in local markets or at least in a market to some extent under the control of farmer groups.

Not until recently did we become aware that when this occupation [family farming] and mode of life is allowed to deteriorate, the cornerstone and foundation of the entire social structure, is no longer safe and secure. ■

Ed. Note: This article was excerpted from a 1937 NCRLC publication.

Through a knowledge and skillful direction of cooperatives, farmers can in actual practice, as they are doing in many communities, prove to the world that private food monopolies and their main crop—single cash crop farming—are destructive for both producer and consumer. Much consumption at the point of production and the restoration of extensive local marketing, such as the well-trained farmer could manage, can easily bring to light the enormous economic damage that is being wrought in natural and human resources by the virtual private food monopolies—the exploiters of commercial farmers, and the wasteful and inefficient long distance processors and distributors of inferior foods for the consumers.

Because of the long continued neglect of Catholic rural social planning and the lack of any uniform educational training on correct land use and other rural life objectives, the basic occupation of farming and farming as a way of life is completely demoralized by mortgage foreclosures, excessive interest rates, and the exorbitant rent demands of bankers and banker landlords. Furthermore, tinkering governments, with their bloated bureaus for disbursing relief for “trouble areas” and their tax bills that mount higher and higher, drain whatever farm owners yet remain to utter financial exhaustion. And as if these two waste pipe drains for the

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- Read the encyclicals Rawe referenced by visiting the Vatican website.

Rerum Novarum
www.vatican.va/holy_father/leo_xiii/encyclicals/

Quadragesimo Anno
www.vatican.va/holy_father/pius_xi/encyclicals/

