



Catholic Rural Ethic

Catholic social teaching is a rich tradition that is rooted in the Scripture and the lived experience of the people of God. It has been developed in the writings of church leaders through the ages and is continually articulated through modern papal, conciliar, and episcopal documents.

For example, in the 2009 encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*, Pope Benedict XVI teaches on points essential to human development, the environment, and progress towards the common good of all people. This work, like other Church statements, relies on moral principles to help resolve the economic and social problems of our day. The National Catholic Rural Life Conference applies these principles when considering economic, social and environmental policies in respect to agriculture and rural communities.

Principle of Human Dignity

Human beings are created in the image of God. In this image, we have worth and value by virtue of our existence: our dignity shall not be taken away from us or diminished in any way. It is never permissible to use a human being to attain some proscribed end or purpose. Therefore, the rightful purpose of an economic system is to serve the human person: no one is meant to be a slave to the economy. The reduction of the human person to increase economic production violates that dignity.

The Common Good

The common good encourages individuals and communities to act on behalf of the good of all. A fundamental common good is the vital goods of human sustenance: food, water, the air we breathe, the right to life. The common good is also social, which means that each of us finds comfort and happiness when we belong to a community and when we are accepted for who we are. The common good is cultural, which gives meaning to our lives by allowing us to act in concert with others and leading each of us to live, work, and believe together. The common good is at once a basic need and an ultimate end, the sharing of life's necessities and the love of one another and creation which flows from our love of God and God's love for us. Where the common good is ignored or disdained, then disharmonies in our social, economic, personal and ecological lives will grow like choking weeds around us.

Preferential Option for the Poor

A fundamental moral measure of any society is to ask how the poor and vulnerable fare. Those who suffer from lack of basic goods and necessities bring before us a profound question about the order of the world, and whether this order is truly good. The option for the poor means that we



should act - as individuals and as members of community - to overcome the structural injustices of social and world orders. The preferential option for the poor is a commitment to transforming society into a place where human rights and the dignity of all are respected. Let us begin to build a new earth based on our new creation as the faithful followers of Christ.

Universal Destination of Goods

The earth is God's and is created for the well-being of all. Creation and all its goods are plainly for the good of all. We believe and accept that private ownership of goods is a natural right, but we believe that private ownership brings with it a social mortgage. How we fairly distribute the goods of the earth is an important factor in overcoming the persistence of poverty. We know that each person in the world is meant to receive enough to eat and drink, enough to clothe and house themselves, and enough to live in human dignity. The destination and accessibility of goods today is shaped -- some may say twisted -- by global corporate interests. We can rightly ask: do corporate interests truly feed the hungry? There is a great social responsibility to how we share the goods of the earth.

Integrity of Creation

As Catholics we believe that the earth belongs to the Lord. If this is true, then creation has an integrity and an inherent value beyond its utility or usefulness for human beings. Human beings are meant to be responsible stewards of creation, and indeed we can say that we work in harmony with God as co-creators. Just as God is One, the web of life is one and we are its caring stewards. How we live on God's land cannot be disconnected to how we live in community as social beings. If we are to sustain ourselves in authentic community, we must maintain a healthy environment, we must develop a beneficial economy, and we must build a just society.

Principle of Subsidiarity

In harmony with principle of human dignity, all people hold the natural right to organize, to associate with one another, and to exercise responsible self-governance in their communities and local regions. No higher political authority - no state - should strip a person or local community of their capacity to judge and act on their own behalf. Subsidiarity means local control and democratic participation, as long as people within the locality are willing and able to fulfill their necessary functions. Opposite to subsidiarity is centralized bureaucracies or economic concentration which rob people of their ability to act freely. Subsidiarity creates attachment to a real place - a person's town or city - which in turn creates strong feelings to the preservation of the nation and a democratic society. In many rural areas here and abroad, the land is turned into an endless stretch of commodity



production for global export rather than a natural landscape of community imbued with rights. This we fight for in solidarity.

Principle of Solidarity

The virtue of solidarity propels individuals and communities to go beyond their narrow selfishness or enclave mentality, and to care for their neighbors, their regions, even the world. Solidarity moves us beyond blind self-interest and private advantage; solidarity reminds us that we are social beings. In solidarity, we are joined in a greater body of being and the fruitful sharing of common desires. For rural life, the principle of solidarity motivates us to care for the earth and the greater bio-community in which we ourselves are just a part. Solidarity in this sense means a stewardship of the land as we recognize that creation is a web of life in which we all cling together.

CONCLUSION:

By these principles, we believe that farmers and consumers need to be in solidarity. We need to once again know and understand who we are as a people of God. We need to learn again how to share and sustain the common goods of Creation. And what is not a part of creation? What does not fall into the web of life? We believe that all things are a part of creation, all people and all living things are part of one community -- the community of Christ, the new creation we seek in our modern lives.

(For a more thorough discussion of the themes identified here and their roots, see the Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2nd ed. (Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops [USCCB]-Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2000); Sharing Catholic Social Teaching (Washington, DC: USCCB, 1999); the USCCB website www.usccb.org; the Vatican website www.vatican.va.)