

Celebrating Rural Life and Community

HOW A LOCAL CRL CHAPTER LIVES THEIR FAITH TOGETHER

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Local Chapters of Catholic Rural Life are a part of a family of rural life committees around the country. CRL provides models of what is working well in other areas to promote the best ideas and resources to each chapter, recognizing that each diocesan chapter will differ from one another—especially by hosting and participating in events that celebrate Catholic rural culture and tradition.

Mid September was a festive time for the parishes of St. Rose and St. Joseph in Jay and Farmington, Maine. For the third consecutive year, parishioners and visiting friends gathered to celebrate a Catholic Rural Life Festival. Combining liturgical prayer, common meals, practical life demonstrations, contra dancing, art, and singing around the fire, the festival encompassed many elements of genuine rural culture.

As would be expected of any Catholic festival, the liturgy formed the source and summit of the weekend celebration. Holy Mass was celebrated on Friday and Saturday in addition to the Sunday parish Mass schedule. After the opening Mass Friday evening, we gathered at a nearby

campground owned by the parish for campfire songs and a light supper. The food was deliberately bought from local farmers in order to support and appreciate their craft. We enjoyed a simple feast of local bread, butter, milk, vegetables and cheese. As we prayed before eating, we thanked the contributing farmers by name to foster a sense of gratitude for their hard work. Earlier in the day, knowledgeable parishioners hosted practical life demonstrations to hand on culinary arts once commonplace in every rural kitchen.

Saturday's festivities began with a Mass in the Extraordinary Form along with a parish schola featuring Gregorian Chant. Mass was followed by another series of practical life demonstrations, and

a brief presentation of the parish-based pilot project, Androscoggin Rive Farm Stand, organized to support local farmers by providing a delivery service in the surrounding communities. A lunch of soup and bread was provided once again with ingredients purchased from local farmers as well as the parish bread guild.

After lunch, we headed out to a nearby organic dairy. Adapting the rogation procession with the Litany of the Saints, we processed praying our way across the farm to the dairy barn for the blessing of the fields, barn and animals. In the meantime, back at St. Joseph's parish, preparation was underway for the capstone of the festival: a six course Farm-To-Table Supper. Children enjoyed

the Kid's Kitchen activity and supper, and as families gathered at the parish, some participated in a craft beer tasting, while others attended a talk on Nature and Grace. A local artist displayed folk art inspired both by his Catholic faith and his family's off-grid rural lifestyle.

As supper began, we thanked God for the bounty of creation and settled in to enjoy a real feast of locally grown and seasonal food from nine area farms. Supper in the parish hall gave way to dessert outside then to Night Prayer in the parish church and then to a lively contradance with a live band. Participants remarked at the joy-filled room as both young and old danced to the same music, as used to be common in rural dance halls across America.

Put most simply, what we are

celebrating in these activities is the sheer goodness and beauty of creation, and the ensuing lifestyle arising from a close connection with the created order as the handiwork of the Good God in the words of St. John Vianney. It's easy, at times, to lose a sense of gratitude for the wondrous gift of creation. The Catholic Rural Life Festival calls us back to our senses and helps us see with new eyes the glorious world bestowed upon us by God who is love. In the words of a Catholic Rural Life board member, "The beauty of creation is one of the first tutors in the faith and points us to the reality of God and His presence in a compelling way."

The Catholic Church highly esteems rural life and culture on account of the common experience that rural

communities remain familiar with the rhythms of the natural world. For all the benefits cities can rightly boast, their insulation from the natural world requires a deliberate intention to remain attentive to the order of creation, lest urban dwellers lose sight of the Creator. In an address from 1946, Pope Pius XII urged Italian Farmers: "Great care must be taken to preserve for the nation the essential elements of genuine rural culture." The membership of Catholic Rural Life, as a national organization, is well situated to discover and promote for the good of the Church and society these essential elements of genuine rural culture. Our own inclination is to bridge the gap between the proverbial dichotomy between spiritual and religious. This apparent contradiction suggests

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that persons who are religious are not attuned to the natural wonder (many times they are not) that inspires many to seek a spiritual connection within the order of nature, while on the other hand suggesting that spirituality is somehow adverse (many times it is the case) to the sapiential and liturgical dimensions of a religious life and practice.

On the contrary, our intuition is to acknowledge and affirm truth, goodness and beauty where ever and in whomever we discover these preambles to the fullness of faith so as to enter into a conversation that draws on the analogous relationship between nature and grace. In the concluding document of the Pontifical Council for Culture's Plenary Assembly, the council document notes: "The Way of Beauty seems to be a privileged itinerary to get in touch with many of those who face great difficulties in receiving the Church's teachings." (*Via Pulchritudinis*, 2006) Beauty is hard to resist as

beauty has a persuasive quality drawing us toward the Beautiful One—Jesus Christ.

Religious feasts, broadly understood, provide us with the opportunity to exercise and grow our capacity for joy. Other festivals that are not specifically religious often enough witness to the transformation of the temporal order. Yet the Catholic Rural Life Festival, inspired by the autumn Ember Days, combines elements of the temporal cycle, which deserve to be observed alongside the Church's sanctoral cycle of prayers and practices. This winning combination is precisely what constitutes an authentic Catholic culture. This inclination to festivity is in the human heart. A true festival combines the need for leisure as well as a sense of common participation in the community. The author of *In Tune with the World*, Josef Pieper, maintains true festivity, genuine festivals, are dependent upon worship of the divine; otherwise, "the root

of both festivity and the arts is destroyed." Catholic Rural Life in Maine, as requested by Bishop Robert Deeley, aims at providing a festival experience as Pieper describes.

It is our hope that other parishes, especially in (but not limited to) rural areas find similar ways to come together and celebrate genuine rural culture. Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI once remarked: "It is important to hand on to future generations not merely the technical aspects of production, nutrition and protection of natural resources, but the values of the rural world." What better way to hand on those values than to actively live and celebrate them! Doing so as a parish not only brings parishioners together in a meaningful way, but also communicates to the world that we as Catholics are attuned to the integration of faith into all areas of our lives.