

FRUIT OF THE EARTH & WORK OF HUMAN HANDS

Rural Life in Oregon

By Matt Cato

No state produces more Christmas trees than Oregon. It is not even close between Oregon and the next state. Imagine your Christmas without an Oregon Christmas tree. Either the Christmas tree in the living room corner is artificial or obscenely expensive.

When many people across the country think of Oregon, they imagine snow-capped mountains designed for skiing, rolling green hills, the great outdoors. They might be surprised that 26% of Oregon land is classified as farmland: its Christmas tree farms; traditional food-producing farms; the dairy farms along the Pacific Coast; ranches; the pear orchards in Southern Oregon; the farmland from which springs Oregon hops, an essential ingredient in Oregon's unparalleled microbrew industry; vineyards that support America's fourth largest wine producer; and the "Grass Seed Capital of the World", supplier of 75% of all grass seed produced in the world.

Fruit of the earth and work of human hands: the tapestry of Oregon's history was woven with the fabric of farms and farmworkers. Agriculture is an essential component of Oregon's economy and farmworkers are essential to Oregon's economy.

Rural communities and small towns need their local farmers. A drive through the Willamette Valley and Southern Oregon—the 250-mile long backbone of the Archdiocese of Portland—is predominantly colored by farmland. A drive through the Willamette Valley is a visit with Oregon's small and moderate-sized farms. Farms play a significant role in Oregon's collective psyche as does its forests and the timber industry (No better book depicts Oregon than Ken Kesey's novel about a family of loggers, *Sometimes a Great Notion*.)

Rural communities and small towns are the life-giving force of the social and economic life of America. Without rural communities America loses touch with nature and all of God's creation. Without rural communities America becomes dependent on industrial agriculture and though agriculture has a special place in the Catholic Church, factory farming can only be considered "agriculture" in the broadest definition of the word. Without rural communities, America becomes populated by larger urban areas of cement and anonymity.

As for me, I cannot explain why,

but the importance of agriculture and rural life has always resonated with me. It may be that I grew up in typical suburbia where processed and packaged foods were considered progress. But now my wife ascribes to Michael Pollan's principle, "Don't eat anything with more than five ingredients, or ingredients you can't pronounce." After all, the fundamental "principle" of agriculture is that it deals with life. Food is life.

It may also be that I spent my summers on the Illinois-Wisconsin border, in farm country.

Or it may be that we Oregonians love our Farmers' Markets: every community with a Farmers' Market promotes it, brags about it, and takes special pride in it.

For all these many reasons, I reached out to the Archdiocese of Portland's 45 rural parishes—parishes where agricultural, dairy, farmers or farmworkers are part of their culture—to provide them with a tool to minister to the needs of their community: Catholic Rural Life (CRL). The success of these parishes is critical to the Church and is of special interest to CRL. Its mission is to apply the teachings of Jesus Christ for the social, economic and spiritual



development of rural America: communities where agriculture, timber and dairy are woven into the culture, or where farmers and farmworkers are essential to the community and the parish.

A few parishes have shown interest in becoming a member of Catholic Rural Life. I am hoping that many more will be intrigued and that some will join CRL. This will make it viable to form an Oregon chapter.

Our newspapers and government understand that, politically and economically, Oregon experiences a significant urban-rural divide. For example, Oregonians living in farming communities are 25% more unemployed than urban residents. The districts for four of Oregon's five Congressional Representatives fall within the Archdiocese of Portland, responsible for only 17 of Oregon's 36 counties. Oregon's four largest counties account for more than half of the state's population. They are predominantly urban.

Our rural parishes share common concerns. They need each other to draw hope, inspiration, and support.

Evangelization is the essential mission of the Church, yet rural parishes find it harder to bring parishioners together. I do not

have the answer to this problem. But, these parishes might find an answer together.

Catholic Rural Life has played an important role in rural ministry over its many decades of service to rural communities. Its role comes forth from our lasting concern with the land—God's greatest material gift to His people—and how the land relates to our Christian faith. Our own Fr. Edwin O'Hara (of Eugene, Oregon) founded CRL in 1923, inspired by his ministry to those who lived in sparsely populated areas. According to him, "The Church is the biggest single factor in building up rural communities."

The reverse is also true: Rural communities are a big factor in building up the Church. We need each other.

I mentioned above, that I could not quite pinpoint my passion for agriculture and supporting rural and farming communities. Is it an understanding of what real food is? Is it the youthful memories of childhood? Is it a feeling of delight the moment I enter a Farmers' Market?

No matter what the initial reasons were, I have now discerned that agriculture and rural life is essential to our Catholic faith.