



Jim Ennis

# Why Rural Matters

## *Faith, Food, and Environment*

By Jim Ennis, Executive Director

Last November I was invited to Rome to present the *Vocation of the Agricultural Leader* resource document to Pope Francis. For the past five years, in addition to my responsibilities as Executive Director for Catholic Rural Life, I have served as president of the International Catholic Rural Association (ICRA). The role of president has opened doors for collaboration between CRL and the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace based in Rome. Pope Francis spoke to a group of fifty of us who were representing the final work of the first edition of the *Vocation of the Agricultural Leader*.

His Holiness met with us for 30 minutes saying, “Your concern for rural life, grounded in the vision of the Church’s social doctrine, is an eloquent expression of that imperative to ‘till and keep the garden of the world’ to which we have been called, if we wish to carry on God’s creative activity and to protect our common home...agriculture continues to be important for policies of development and for addressing disparities in food security and issues in the life of rural communities....” He went on to challenge us to build bridges with others and advocate on behalf of farmers and rural communities, proposing “a culture of agricultural work that has as its foundations as well as its goals in the centrality of the person, in openness to others and in gratuitousness.”

Pope Francis concluded his address

(available online at the Holy See website under speeches for December 10, 2016) to us with an anecdote of a recent encounter he had with an olive grower. He said, “...when he (the grower) talked about how he pruned the trees, it was clearly with great

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**Pope Francis**

love; he had that relationship with nature. He pruned those trees as if he was their father, with love. May we never lose this relationship with creation. It assures dignity to us all.”

Our Holy Father took significant time out of his busy schedule to address us—leaders of agricultural institutions, farmers, and advocates of rural concerns—to extend his blessing and express the Church’s concern for rural communities and all those involved in agricultural production. All of us in that room were struck by the pope’s sincerity and genuine concern for all who are living in rural ar-

eas. Rural matters to the Church, not only because we all need food to live, but because there are over 3.3 billion living in rural communities worldwide and over 60 million in the US. The Church is concerned about every single human being, each created in the image of God, and for how we care for our common home.

Here in the US, Catholic Rural Life has worked on behalf of rural communities for over 93 years. As a membership nonprofit organization, CRL now has members in 48 states. Why does rural matter today? Several reasons:

### **Food Security and the Importance of Family Farms**

All of us need food to live. No farms, no food. Yet, how often do people in urban communities think about where their food comes from or about the farmers and ranchers who grew the food? Our rural communities are still the backbone of the US in terms of sustaining life. Agriculture products and services provide \$985 billion to our US economy (5.7% share of US GDP), and the number is much higher when you include all food, fiber, and leather related sectors. All of us depend upon our rural communities to sustain life. Supporting our rural communities and keeping family farmers on the land is a priority for the Catholic Church. Rural matters because we need a robust and secure agricultural sector that provides food for our world.

## Human Dignity

Rural matters also because the Church cares about each individual who is created in the image of God. There are over 60 million people living in rural communities around the US, representing 18% of our country. Many however are vulnerable because of low wage jobs, unemployment in depressed sections of the rural US (17.2% living in poverty in rural communities nationally), and inadequate infrastructure, health-care, housing and transportation.

And as Cardinal Timothy Dolan stated in a CRL interview in 2013, "... rural areas deserve special attention, because in these places you find the strongest families and people who take their faith very seriously. There's a rhythm of life that is conducive to spiritual vitality in the heartland and in the countryside. So if we're going to be serious about evangelization, we have to strengthen what we have there, because most of our evangelizers come from there." But the secularization of our society has impacted rural communities as well, and families and individuals are struggling to pass their faith onto the next generation. Opioid addiction, suicide, and domestic violence are now impacting rural communities and often without adequate human services to help families.

## Care of Our Common Home

In CRL's *Vocation of the Agricultural Leader* document, it states, "At

the heart of a sound vision of agriculture lies the theology of creation, the theology of the earth as a gift given by a loving Creator. The land is not a blank slate, a meaningless void, merely waiting for the human being to impose his or her design upon it.

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Rather, the entire order of creation, from the lowliest creatures up to humankind, is permeated by God's loving design. Agricultural life unfolds within his plan."

The US has been blessed with very fertile soil and good climate to grow enough food, not only to feed people

in the US, but for people around the world. There are environmental challenges in the US, however, due directly to some agricultural production practices that are contaminating our soil and water resources.

One of the purposes of the *Vocation of the Agricultural Leader* project is to help us see how to work as coworkers with our Creator in creation, not against creation; and to see farming as a vocation, a way of life, a calling, not simply an occupation.

Healthy rural life is vital to the Church. In this issue of Catholic Rural Life we hear from several CRL members and farmers who live in rural communities and make the case why rural still matters!



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