



# Morality and Agriculture

By Jim Ennis

The **Sowing Seeds** campaign of Catholic Rural Life seeks to **bridge the gap between farmers and consumers** caused by the industrialization of agriculture.

Since its founding in 1923, Catholic Rural Life has stood as a pillar of the Church protecting and promoting vibrant rural life in America. CRL does this through three interrelated program areas: Ethical Food and Agriculture, Stewardship of Creation, and Rural Ministry and Outreach.

The Catholic Church has always been a champion of farmers and ranchers affirming the unique vocation of the men and women involved in agriculture who provide food for our tables and for the world. As the Catholic bishops of the United States wrote in a reflection in 2003, “Food sustains life itself; it is not just another product. For many, farming is a way of life, not just another business or industry. Agriculture is the way farmers, ranchers, and farmworkers provide a decent life for their families and help feed a hungry world...Agriculture touches all of our lives.”<sup>1</sup>

The Church recognizes the hard work of all those involved in agricultural production. Men and women literally put their lives on the line to help provide food for our tables. Agricultural jobs are some of the most dangerous occupations in the US.

But food and agriculture production are abstract concepts for many of us. For most Christians—and our nation in general—agriculture is a distant reality, little seen and less understood. For most of us food comes from the grocery store or fast food restaurant. We have become disconnected from how our food is produced. This disconnection results in putting trust in a food system that provides food for us. But this fact does not negate our responsibility as Christians to consider some important ethical questions: How can hunger in the human family be overcome? How can we ensure a safe, affordable, and sustainable food supply? How can we ensure that farmworkers and owners of small farms, in the United States and around the world, live and work with dignity? How can land, water, and other elements of God’s creation be preserved, protected, and used well in the service of the common good?<sup>2</sup>

A few examples of agricultural practices here may be helpful. Increased specialization on farms has led to a decrease of diversity on farms, and greater dependence on chemicals (pesticides) and on synthetic fertilizers. Increases in inputs—pesticides and fertilizers—combined





with problems of soil erosion and runoff into rivers and streams, have contributed to increases in groundwater and surface water contamination leaving many rivers and lakes unsafe to swim in, uninhabitable by fish and other aquatic life and unsuitable for drinking without intensive treatment.<sup>3</sup> A 2012 study by the Environmental Working Group reported that shallow wells in parts of Minnesota have four times as many unhealthy nitrates and nitrites as normal groundwater, and 37 of 56 Minnesota lakes tested had high levels of nitrogen or phosphorus.<sup>4</sup>

The industrialization of agriculture has also impacted animal husbandry practices and the expansion of confined animal feeding operations (CAFO's) in many states. "Animals are God's creatures. He surrounds them with his providential care...God entrusted animals to the stewardship of men and women, and it is legitimate to use animals for food and clothing...It is contrary, however, to cause animals to suffer or die needlessly".<sup>5</sup> Therefore, CRL continually reminds livestock producers of their high calling as stewards of creation and to treat animals with due care. This concern for the welfare of animals is not misplaced

or disordered as some challenge; but rather deeply rooted in the teachings of the Church over the centuries<sup>6</sup>. Man's dominion over creation is not absolute and must be governed by a concern for future generations and a respect for the integrity of creation.

Catholic Rural Life addresses critical issues in agriculture through its Ethical Food and Agriculture program area that deepens members' and participants' understanding of our rich Catholic teaching, the human person, the high vocation of the agricultural leader, and the ethical dimensions and responsibilities we have as children of God. Through national and regional conferences and workshops—such as the Vocation of the Agricultural Leader, *Laudato Si'* and the Countryside, and *Eating is a Moral Act* (a presentation focused on urban participants)—CRL is training people of faith across the country.

During a Faith, Food, and Environment conference in the Diocese of Stockton, California, co-sponsored by Catholic Rural Life, a group of farmers came up to me after CRL's presentations and said, "We have never heard this before, and we all were raised Catholic. You have got



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to get this information out to other farmers around the country!" The presentation articulated the importance of right relationships: with God, with one another and with the whole of creation. The underlying operative word was "relationships", which implies mutual love and respect.

There is a great need for ethical leadership in addressing these concerns. How does faith inform the next generation of leaders in agriculture and food production? What principles, ethics, and values will enable men and women of good will and faith to exercise leadership and flourish in their communities, while also providing food for those in need, and caring for the gift of the earth? What is also remarkable is that of the 244 Catholic universities in the United States, there is not one school of agriculture. Catholic colleges and universities have schools of business, medicine, education, but not one school of agriculture. Catholic Rural Life seeks to fill this vacuum through its educational workshop and conferences.

But Catholic Rural Life can't do it alone. The needs and demands are great. CRL is seeking to collaborate with its members and advocates to raise \$400K to be used to:

- Conduct Vocation of the Agricultural Leader workshops across the countryside in strategic locations;
- Lead *Laudato Si'* in the Countryside workshops across the country;
- Sustain advocacy efforts on behalf of rural communities informed by Catholic Social Teaching and train Catholic social ministry directors across the country (Farm Bill, family farm legislation, etc.); and
- Develop a new Eating is a Moral Act initiative that focuses on the next generation of consumers.

1. For I Was Hungry & You Gave Me Food, Catholic Reflections on Food, Farming, and Farmworkers. United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Washington DC. 2003. Paragraph I.

2. For I Was Hungry and You Gave Me Food; Catholic Reflections on Food, Farmers, and Farmworkers. United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Washington, D.C. 2003; paragraph II.

3. In a survey released in 2008, the Iowa Department of Natural Resources classified 44% of the states streams and rivers and 47% of its lakes as "impaired" by excessive levels of nutrients, sediments, and bacteria.

4. Troubled Waters - Farm Pollution Threatens Drinking Water; Environmental Working Group Report; April 2012.

5. Catechism of the Catholic Church, n.2415-2418.

6. Catechism of the Catholic Church, n.2416; "We should recall the gentleness with which saints like St. Francis of Assisi or St. Philip Neri treated animals."







CATHOLIC RURAL LIFE

# SOWING SEEDS

*A Campaign to Renew Catholic Faith in Rural America*

**GIVE!**  
**And help**  
**us grow to**  
**our goal!**

**\$2,500,000**

*Goal*

**\$2,012,000**

*Progress*

**Ethical Food  
& Agriculture  
(\$400,000)**

*Vocation of the Agricultural Leader workshops  
Laudato Si' in the Countryside*

**Rural Ministry  
and Outreach  
(\$1,300,000)**

*Life in Christ Lay Leadership program expansion  
Rural Ministry Practicum for seminarians  
Native American Scholarships*

**Current Activities  
and Programs  
(\$800,000)**

*Informative and inspiring quarterly  
magazine, e-Bulletin and website resources  
Rural Life Celebration guides and support  
Advocate and support policy issues  
involving family farms  
Workshops and training on specific topics of concern  
Support of existing Life in Christ program participants  
Be a voice for rural communities via the DJP Committee*

**A gift of any size is welcomed and appreciated! We invite you to consider a special year-end gift or pledge to this campaign. This is the first campaign in our history and we want to unite all our members and those concerned with rural communities to help us expand our work to support the Church across the countryside.**

*Unless you inform us otherwise, a gift to Sowing Seeds is over and above your membership commitment.  
Catholic Rural Life is a 501(c)3 organization and all charitable gifts are deductible to the fullest extent allowable.*