

Compassion and Support for Rural People

Twenty years ago, the U.S. bishops completed a task force* report on food, agriculture and rural concerns. They sought “not only to express our compassion and support for rural people, but also to stimulate and encourage the people of our cities to join the struggle actively and work for justice in rural communities.” The bishops focused on the moral and human dimensions of food and agricultural policy during the 1980s because of the alarming problems that persisted in rural America and around the world. As it was in past decades, these problems confront us today:

- Hundreds of millions of people malnourished or facing starvation around the world, despite food surpluses globally.
- Hardworking farm families leaving the land as a result of public policy and economic forces beyond their influence or control.
- Continuing exploitation of farmworkers and meat & poultry process workers.
- Persistent poverty and inadequate basic services in rural America.
- Growing concentration of resources in the hands of large agribusiness firms.
- An industrial, export-oriented food system that impoverishes farmers here and abroad.
- Continuing damage to land and water resources because of unsound agricultural policies and practices.



The U.S. bishops concluded then as we would certainly concur today:

“What happens in rural America directly affects the quality of life for the rest of the United States and the world. Without increased emphasis, a legitimate expression of solidarity may be too easily crowded out by other pressing concerns and even indifference.

Food security, rural poverty, food trade and environmental concerns need to be shared concerns. Food and agriculture is an agenda that can build solidarity among urban and rural people. These problems know no borders and do not stop at the city gate.

We are in this together. Our nation's food and agricultural policies will enrich or diminish all of us wherever we live.”

QUESTIONING THE CHANGES UNDERWAY

The problematic trends in our food and agricultural system are symptomatic of a profound transformation in the social and economic structures of our global community. This transformation has many causes, but critical drivers of change are the structural forces of a global economy, greater concentration and control of food production and agricultural resources, and the deteriorating conditions of land, water and air. National governments and local communities are right to question the global food system and ask about food security and agricultural sovereignty.

Catholic social teachings lead us to ask fundamental questions about the economy and shape of society: “Who effectively controls the system? Who makes the crucial decisions? Who benefits from the system? Does it enable people to participate effectively in it? Are the major actors in the food sector producers, input suppliers, processors and retailers responsive to the needs of society?” The bishops asked these questions 20 years ago. We ought to ask and find the answer to these questions again today.



* “Report of the Ad Hoc Task Force on Food, Agriculture and Rural Concerns,” National Conference of Catholic Bishops, United States Catholic Conference (November 15, 1988). Formed in 1986, the task force was mandated to improve the approach and implement the food and agricultural concerns the bishops expressed in their 1986 pastoral letter, *Economic Justice for All*. Members of the task force included 14 bishops and nine representatives of organizations such as the National Catholic Rural Life Conference, Catholic Relief Services and Catholic Charities USA.



Equally crucial to these economic questions is the urgent concern for the environment. As the bishops teach us, we have to be faithful stewards of the God given resources of the earth.

"All people on this globe share a common ecological environment that is under increasing pressure. Depletion of soil, water and other natural resources endangers the future. Pollution of air and water threatens the delicate balance of the biosphere on which future generations will depend. The resources of the earth have been created by God for the benefit of all, and we who are alive today hold them in trust." (*Economic Justice for All*, p.12).

RURAL AND URBAN, ONE COMMUNITY

The Catholic bishops, as pastors, are clearly concerned with those who feel the crisis most directly. They recognize that rural people have pastoral needs unique to their situation. Rural people look to their bishops, parish pastors, pastoral ministers and fellow parishioners for help and support. In a time of economic and social changes – especially in times of crisis – we know these sufferings can lead to depression, marriage and family problems, alcohol and drug dependency, and other human ills. Care needs to be taken so that rural communities will not suffer disproportionately.

So while rural people are the primary focus of the National Catholic Rural Life Conference, urban people are intimately bound to the lives of their rural sisters and brothers. All of us together must find ways to express our compassion and support for rural people. We must also stimulate and encourage the people of our cities to join the struggle actively and work for justice in rural communities. The ideas and campaigns in the following pages may offer a way to actively support this food, agriculture and rural compassion. ■

ETHICAL GUIDEPPOST

An ethical framework derived from Scripture and Catholic social teaching provides the church with an angle of vision from which to assess present conditions and suggest directions for public policy.

Human Dignity – Right to food

Social Nature of the Person – Civic participation

Option for the Poor – Last shall be first

Respect for Creation – Stewardship of earth

MATTERS OF CONCERN

These concerns manifest an aspect of the global food and agriculture system. They should be seen as interwoven and resolved as a complex whole.

Land Ownership – The Catholic bishops favor a system of family farmers who live and work on the land as the primary structural component of a just food system.

Hunger – The increasing numbers of impoverished hungry people in the United States and developing countries points to the need for a change in food security and economic policies.

Rural Poverty – Rural communities lag behind urban areas economically; particular attention must be given to the plight of racial and ethnic minorities in rural areas.

Preservation of Natural Resources – Stewardship demands that we live within the ecological limits of the planet, consuming in modest quantities and producing in ways that sustain us in the present and preserve resources for future generations.

Food, Trade and Aid – The issues of land reform, hunger, rural poverty and protection of natural resources have particular relevance to the relationship between the United States and developing countries.