

# What Do We Mean By 'Eating Is a Moral Act?'

By Christopher Dodson

**T**wenty-three years ago, Br. David Andrews, then the executive director of the National Catholic Rural Life Conference (NCRLC), now known as Catholic Rural Life, introduced the *Eating is Moral Act* campaign. At that point I was new to the work of the organization and had become a board member.

Br. Andrews was inspired by Wendell Berry's statement that "eating is an agricultural act," which, so far as I can determine, appeared in *What are People For?*, his 1990 collection of essays. Berry's sentence seemed intuitive to me. Eating is the end act of the agricultural process, at least as it relates to the production of food. The same, of course, applies to agriculture for clothing, energy, and other products. The end act is a human act made in response to our basic needs such as food, clothing, and protection.

In each case, humans apply their labor to the creation gifted by God. Food, clothing, and shelter go through a process, starting with basic elements and moving through many hands to the final product. That process is agriculture. Berry was saying that the end — us eating or wearing clothes, for example — is not separate from the process. The end is part of the process, the two cannot and must not be separated.

*Eating is a Moral Act* pushed us to take Berry's lesson one step

further. If eating is an agricultural act, it is also a moral act.

From its inception in 1923, CRL treated agriculture as a moral act. In 1939, the organization published the *Manifesto on Rural Life*, with the imprimatur of Aloisius Muench, then-Bishop of Fargo, N.D. The document sets forth an extensive review of the state of agriculture at that time in light of the social encyclicals *Rerum Novarum* and *Quadragesimo Anno* and, notably, of two encyclicals on marriage, *Arcanum Divinae and Casti Connubii*.

Underlying the entire document is concern for how industrialization of farms will affect the family—the social institution that occupies “the place of primacy” and “the best guardian and defender of the human race.” More specifically, the publication warned that factory practices, such as investor ownership and the use of wage laborers, embraced concepts of ownership and labor more consistent with socialism and unbridled capitalism than the principles of economy proposed by Pope Leo XIII in *Rerum Novarum* and Pope Pius XI in *Quadragesimo Anno*. Marriage, family, and the economy are moral issues. Therefore, agriculture was a moral issue.

If, then, as Berry reminded us, eating is part of agriculture, and agriculture is a moral act, then eating is a moral act.

Logic aside, I will have to admit that some of us on the board at the time were still a bit taken

aback by the campaign. CRL had always focused on how we produce our food. With the exception of the excellent *Cooking for Christ* cookbook, the conference did not focus much on eating itself. We wondered how this campaign would be accepted.

One thing we did understand was that the campaign could connect the work of CRL to Catholics who had no connection to agriculture — or at least those who did not think they had a connection. Everyone eats. The purpose of the new effort was to tell all Catholics that they also were part of the agricultural process, a process with moral implications.

## Misinterpretations

Through the years I have seen *Eating is a Moral Act* misunderstood or misapplied by some Catholics and non-Catholics. Here is a look at some of those errors.

*Eating is a Moral Act* is not a call to judge a person's food buying choices. Some critics of *Eating is a Moral Act* claim the campaign ignores the fact that for financial, geographic, and market reasons not all families can purchase food that comes to them in a morally acceptable manner. Related to this concern is the fact that in our complex world it is almost impossible to make a purchase that is entirely ethically clean.

Both of these claims are based on true facts. *Eating is a Moral Act*, however, was never meant

to judge people for what they buy. Instead, it is a call to first awaken people to the choices they do have, and secondly to continue to build a system that makes ethically good choices more possible.

The *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* has two paragraphs on this issue that are worth repeating. It states:

Consumers, who in many cases have a broad range of buying power well above the mere subsistence level, exercise significant influence over economic realities by their free decisions regarding whether to put their money into consumer goods or savings. In fact, the possibility to influence the choices made within the economic sector is in the hands of those who must decide where to place their financial resources. Today more than in the past it is possible to evaluate the available options not only on the basis of the expected return and the relative risk but also by making a value judgment of the investment projects that those resources would finance, in the awareness that “the decision to invest in one place rather than another, in one productive sector rather than another, is always a moral and cultural choice.”

Purchasing power must be used in the context of the moral demands of justice and solidarity, and in that of precise social responsibilities. One must never forget “the duty of charity..., that is, the duty to give from one’s ‘abundance’, and sometimes even out of one’s needs, in order to provide what is essential for the life

of a poor person.” This responsibility gives to consumers the possibility, thanks to the wider circulation of information, of directing the behavior of producers, through preferences—individual and collective—given to the products of certain companies rather than to those of others, taking into account not only the price and quality of what is being purchased but also the presence of correct working conditions in the company as well as the level of protection of the natural environment in which it operates.

Similarly, *Eating is a Moral Act* is not about judging a person’s food consumption choices. Here again, some people do not have the ability to choose healthy food. Our concern is not about judging what people eat, but about building a system that allows people to eat healthy.

*Eating is Moral Act* is not a call to reject meat and all animal products. Catholic teaching does not reject the proper use of animals for food and other products. It does, however, call for the proper treatment of animals. The Catechism states: “Animals are God’s creatures. He surrounds them with his providential care. By their mere existence they bless him and give him glory. Thus men owe them kindness.”

*Eating is a Moral Act* is not an insistence that only organic farming is moral and that conventional farmers are sinners. There can exist legitimate differences in Catholic opinion

about what are the best choices in agriculture. The *Eating is a Moral Act* campaign and much of CRL’s work is not about condemning or lauding particular forms of agriculture. Instead, it is about calling attention to economic and social systems that do not allow farmers and ranchers the freedom to make moral choices. The injustice lies in the structures of sin that make it nearly impossible for farmers and ranchers to do what they, with a well-formed conscience, would prefer to do in conformity with good stewardship.

Finally, *Eating is a Moral Act* is not about sacramentalizing food. Some have claimed that the campaign, and others like it, elevate food to something holy, akin to pantheism. This is not true. It is true, however, that Catholics should resist the other end of the spectrum that reduces food to mere subsistence. Food is not just food. From the Catholic perspective, nothing is just its parts and the value of something is not just its utilitarian benefit. Food, because it originates in creation and is the “fruit of human hands,” is one of the goods essential to human life that touches upon a multitude of Christian concerns.

This is how eating becomes a moral act.