

# Farmers *as* Stewards of Creat

*Reclaiming the Creative Good in Modern Agriculture*

**Glory be to God for dappled things--  
For skies of couple-colour as a brindled cow;  
For rose-moles all in stipple  
upon trout that swim;  
Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls;  
finches' wings;  
Landscape plotted and pieced--fold,  
fallow, and plough . . .**

*By Christopher Thompson, Ph.D.*



**Dr. Thompson**

**T**he Jesuit priest poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins, penned these lines at the end of the nineteenth century, when his beloved rural English countryside, that world that gave such glory to His God, was becoming increasingly beclouded under the darkness of industrialization.

The loss of the beauty of creation, the silencing of creation's voice was often one of Hopkins' central themes in his writings. He went on to write several poems capturing this beauty that is our earth and especially of its abuse by modernity. His poetry is dense with insight and speaks beautifully about the dignity of creation and our vocation as stewards.

The challenge was not for Hopkins' day alone. Contemporary life is marked by a remarkable and pervasive technology, however one that is seemingly built upon a vision of nature that is no longer permitted to speak of a Creator. How can we live in right relationship with God, when God's Word is no longer heard in creation? When the Logos is as a distant echo amidst the din of modernity?

What's happening in our Catholic culture when whole generations of the best and brightest seem indifferent to God's earth, especially when it comes to their food and the agriculture that sustains them?

"The time is now for the re-evaluation of agriculture," the Holy Father has said at a recent Angelus address, "not in some nostalgic sense, but as an indispensable resource for the future."<sup>2</sup>

## **Then and Now**

Special attention needs to be given to the National Catholic Rural Life Conference in this regard which for over 80 years has worked to bring the gospel of Jesus Christ and the social teachings of His Church into the heart of rural life in the United States.<sup>3</sup> Among its many accomplishments were a series of catechetical efforts including summer vacation schools. There were also courses in "rural philosophy," offered by theologians, social scientists, and agri-

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## Feature Story

cultural experts, throughout rural communities. At its peak, sixty programs enrolled 1,700 priests, 9,000 women religious, and 12,000 laity in various schools of rural philosophy sponsored by the Conference at Catholic colleges and universities. And 15,000 participants gathered at its annual meeting-- in 1941 – in Bismarck, ND.<sup>4</sup>

But that was then and this is now. And despite such persistent efforts to raise awareness among the Catholic faithful about the importance of agriculture in both its moral and social dimension, one has to come to terms with what now is perhaps the most staggering statistic concerning the essential relationship between agricultural life and Catholic life as it has unfolded in the United States in the last 50 years. And it is simply this: Of the 244 Catholic degree granting institutions of higher learning within the United States, *not one* offers a program of study in Agriculture.

How can this be? How can it be that the single, most prominent facet of American economic life is absent from the arena of Catholic higher education? What is it about Catholic education or agriculture today that has contributed to this great divorce?

I have suggested on several occasions<sup>5</sup> that the problem of the gap between Catholic social tradition and Catholic educational practice is

rooted in deeper problems of an intellectual sort: namely, the loss of a theology of creation, a philosophy of nature, which lies at the heart of the Church's social tradition concerning the meaning of man and the task of agriculture. Agriculture could disappear from the horizon of Catholic education, because the philosophy of nature that illuminated its importance had lost its illustrative force.

### Aquinas and the Agrarian Life

More specifically, it was St. Thomas Aquinas' philosophy of nature, a philosophy of creation and the human person, that provided the fundamental context out of which the principles of Catholic agrarian life had been formed. This was the "rural philosophy" that fueled Catholic social tradition and established the intellectual climate in which its social doctrine was nurtured.

For Thomas Aquinas *argues that the native habitat of the human person as an embodied creature is our material cosmos of created beings, intelligently ordered by God and intelligibly grasped by man, a nexus of which constitutes the natural environment of the human person as such.* The human person, whose dignity lies in his spiritual destiny, is nonetheless a creature of the earth, an embodied being among embodied beings, whose immortal soul by nature transcends material creation

and yet by grace permeates it with eternal significance.

Thomas argued that the entire hierarchy of being, from the lowliest creature up to man (and, beyond, to angels), is permeated by a Provident intelligence that supplies the necessary connections between lower creation and its grace-filled care.

Agricultural life, perhaps more than any other occupation, unfolds within this milieu. The successful farmer, who attends to the soil, enters into a relationship with an order of creation that is itself *already* ordered and whose wisdom becomes his norm. One ignores the order of reality at the risk of one's own peril, as the practical wisdom of farming must submit to a *logos* which lies hidden in the order of things.

The well-ordered farm, more importantly the well-ordered farmer, reflects the natural law of a prudential stewardship, not as some lonely despot over an untamed wilderness, nor as some demagogue over an otherwise meaningless order of nature. Rather, the prudent steward participates in a provident order of reality, an *imago dei* amidst the *vestigia*.

### Agriculture as a Cooperative Art

Agriculture, specifically in this view, is understood to be a "cooperative art," because its tasks are yoked to the forces at work in creation itself. Like the teacher who guides





the desire to know on the part of the student, or the doctor who capitalizes on the desire to live, the prudent farmer labors with nature's creative forces and coaxes from the earth the fruits she is destined by Providence to yield. Agriculture, then, is a unique human enterprise, for it is through this labor, perhaps more than any other, that one learns by participation of the wisdom of the Creator and His ways.

The natural order becomes our wisdom, our norm, because such a world reflects the original plan of the Creator. The order of lower creation, that is, the organic world of creatures, animals and plants, is not directly implicated in the fall.

The punishment of original sin, the loss of original justice, does not directly implicate the lower orders of creation, specifically the animals, the plants, or inorganic matter. Rather, it is *our* grasp of the *wisdom* of creation that is now fleeting and fraught with error due to original sin. For their part, Aquinas says, "all natural things were produced by the Divine art, and so may be called God's works of art."<sup>6</sup>

It follows, then, that if it is *we* who are sinful and the creature is not, a certain deference to the creature's intelligibility would be the only prudent measure to take. In other words, the foundation for the farmer's dignity, ultimately lies in his right relationship, his obedience to the original wisdom of creation.

Because creation is not random, or meaningless, or an inert collection of parts, we can begin to envision the vocation of the farmer as a kind of faithful steward – a faithful minister in the temple of creation.

## Creation and Goodness

The precautionary principle of Catholic social thought would apply most forcefully in our treatment of lower creation, then, because it is *our* ways, not nature's ways, which are caught up in the drama of sin.<sup>7</sup> Before we propose to modify creatures to suit our expectations, it would be wise to consider how our own ways of acting may be in need of modification. Before we ignore the design and purposiveness of living things – we might pause to consider how our modern biases lend themselves to reducing the creature to an artifact, and thus the craft of agriculture to simply another industry.

The deliberate, genetic modification of a naturally occurring creature is not just an exercise in human ingenuity; it is a recasting of the creature as a mere product of human making. If unchecked by the norms of prudence,<sup>8</sup> such practices run the risk of deforming creation, whose original wisdom is our norm, of transforming the creature into a "resource" whose value is to be merely to be "used." It is not a question of dominion over creation. It is, rather, a question of the norms for such dominion, norms which are not

only written in the human heart, but written into creation itself from the beginning.<sup>9</sup>

*Each* of the various creatures, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says, willed in its own being, reflects in its own way a ray of God's infinite wisdom and goodness. Man must therefore respect the particular goodness of every creature, to avoid any disordered use of things which would be in contempt of the Creator and would bring disastrous consequences for human beings and their environment. (CCC 339)

John Paul II tried to address some of the very same concerns I'm raising here, but from a slightly different context. In his "theology of the body" Blessed John Paul reflected on how the body participates in the dignity of the human person precisely because it is created by God. It is the body's natural rhythms of fertility that teach us how we ought to conduct ourselves in terms of marriage and family. The human body can teach us such things because the human body is created by the same God who has created the beautiful universe!

John Paul's theology of the body—took on the very challenges you and I are taking on when it comes to agriculture – namely, the defense of created nature as manifesting a divine wisdom; creatures are not to be treated like machines; creation has a purpose and a structure.

## In Rhythm with the World

There's an incredible convergence waiting to happen within the Catholic community itself between those who promote the church's teaching on human life, human sexuality and those who promote the church's teachings on environmental stewardship. Both communities affirm that there's a wisdom to the natural rhythms of things, that there's a wisdom to the created order and that when we ignore that order we pay a price.<sup>10</sup> Perhaps agriculture has been allowed to escape our attention because to be called to account in our fields, would mean to be called to account in our homes. As Alasdair MacIntyre puts it: "We resent our nature, and we resent nature in general. We struggle against it, and we seek ways to triumph over it through technology. Ours is a pathological ingratitude, a special sort of ingrati-

tude, because it amounts to being resentful of who we are." (*Dependent Rational Animals*)

Josef Pieper, the German Thomist philosopher, says in his essay, *In Tune with the World: A Theory of Festivity*, that all true festivity comes down to this: "to live out, for some special occasion and in an uncommon manner, the universal assent to the world as a whole." Underlying all festive joy, he says, there has to be an absolute affirmation extending to the world as a whole, to the reality of things and the existence of the human person especially; that every thing is, is good, and that it is good to exist.

It's about entering the very real, poetic world of Father Hopkins when he says:

**Glory be to God for dappled things--  
For skies of couple-colour as a brinded cow;  
For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim;  
Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls; finches' wings;  
Landscape plotted and pieced--fold, fallow, and plough;  
And all trades, their gear and tackle and trim.  
All things counter, original, spare, strange;  
Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)  
With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim;  
He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change: Praise Him.**

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## Endnotes

1 This is an abridged version of a keynote address given in November 2011 at the "Food, Faith and Farming Symposium," sponsored by Catholic Charities of the Diocese of Stockton, CA, and the NCRLC.

2 November 14, 2010. <http://www.zenit.org/article-30959?l=english>

3 For a history of the NCRLC more broadly see, David S. Bovée, *The Church & the Land: The National Catholic Rural Life Conference and American Society, 1923 - 2007*. (Washington, D. C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2010). For a recent account of the NCRLC's activities in relationship to the liturgical movement, see, Michael J. Woods, SJ, *Cultivating Soil and Soul*. (Liturgical Press, MN, 2010).

4 Bovée, 140; also, Woods offers an extensive survey of NCRLC's catechetical and pastoral efforts.

5 See my "In the Temple of Creation: American Agriculture 50 Years after 'Mater et Magistra,'" delivered at the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, May, 2011, at [dottrinasocialedellachiesa.net/wp-content/uploads/2011/05/Thompson.pdf](http://dottrinasocialedellachiesa.net/wp-content/uploads/2011/05/Thompson.pdf).

6 Summa theologiae I.91.1.

7 I disagree with those who call for a re-evaluation of the precautionary principle

along lines that would suggest that prediction and (presumably) action is the central feature of prudential reasoning. See "Recommendation 3" in the summary document, "Main Conclusions of the Pontifical Academy of the Sciences Study Week: Transgenic Plants for Food Security in the Context of Development," Vatican City, 15-19 May 2009. Accessed at [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_academies/acdsien/2010/newbiotechnologynov2010.pdf](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_academies/acdsien/2010/newbiotechnologynov2010.pdf) on June 7, 2011.

8 Because I appeal to the exercise of prudence, it precludes the notion that the deliberate, genetic modification of lower creatures is, strictly speaking, intrinsically disordered. At the same time, prudence would demand the greatest circumspection in such an instance. See Compendium of Catholic Social Thought, 458.

9 Compendium, 458, 459. Also, International Theological Commission: Communion and Stewardship: The Human Person in the Image of God, (2002) 61.

10 Christopher Killheffer, "Organic Sex, Organic Farming," at [www.pilgrimjournal.com/organic\\_sex.html](http://www.pilgrimjournal.com/organic_sex.html).