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## **Agriculture and Catholic Social Teaching- Elements of an Agricultural Ethic**

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Agriculture has been in a state of change forever. The manner in which we produce food for human consumption has evolved in response to the needs of local communities, to scientific and technological discoveries, and to worldwide food needs. In recent years the rapid pace at which these changes have occurred has become an issue in itself. From 1950 to 1998 the number of farms in the U.S. declined by 60% from almost 5 million to less than 2 million. Clearly we are shifting to an agricultural system that is characterized by fewer but larger farms.

When change of this magnitude occurs in any area of the economy it is often the case that something other than pure economic processes are at work. The changes in agriculture today are not the result of a natural and inevitable unfolding of free economic forces. Decades of national farm policies have guided American agriculture towards an ownership structure that features the big and the few. Tax supported research at land grant universities has provided the technological infrastructure to smooth the transition to large, corporate style agriculture. We can debate whether these changes are good or bad. There can be no debate, however, over the fact that these changes are the result of human choices.

Changes of this nature and magnitude in our food production system carry the potential to impact life for everyone in society. For that reason alone, such changes call for a critique that includes non-economic criteria. Economists, even agricultural economists, cannot provide an adequate evaluation of what is happening in our food production system. That assessment must emerge out of a broader questioning process – a process that carefully explores agriculture's impact upon our society as a whole, a process that includes ethical norms and questions to help us articulate what we expect from the food production system. The need for this ethical assessment of agriculture grows in proportion to the degree of change and the level of impact current changes are having upon the lives of people – not only those in rural communities but the lives of people throughout our nation, and the world.

The articulation of an agricultural ethic is no easy task. There is no one path to such an ethic. The value systems by which this nation functions – religious, philosophical, experiential – all have a role in shaping and

in continuing to shape this ethic. One value system from which we might find direction in shaping an agricultural ethic is that offered by Catholic social teachings.

### **Elements of an Agricultural Ethic**

There are at least four areas where Catholic social teaching can make a contribution to our thinking about the structure of American agriculture, or what we should look for in a just agricultural system.

They are  
the right to food,  
the protection of creation,  
the support of rural communities, and  
respect for justice.

### **The right to food**

One of the clearest principles in Catholic social teaching is that every human being has a right to food.<sup>1</sup> This right derives from the fundamental principle of human dignity, and that everyone has a right to life and to all that is needed to support that life in dignity. Food is a basic necessity. It is a primary need for human life. Everyone has a right to food that is safe and accessible.

The food that we eat must be free of unwanted, unexpected substances that threaten human health. We as consumers have a right to be free of unreasonable worry about food safety. In recent years there has been far too much reason for such worry. The rise in food borne illnesses caused by microbial contamination is not the mark of a food system designed to serve and respect the dignity of the human consumer. This right to food maintains that however food is produced and processed, food safety is as important as maximizing yields, embellishing appearances, and increasing profits.

A second implication of this right to food is that it must be accessible. Food must be available to everyone and at a price all can afford.<sup>2</sup> This does not mean that food on the consumer end must be priced so cheaply that producers, or processors and distributors, do not receive a fair or just compensation for their efforts.<sup>3</sup> The accessibility implication of the right to food raises a warning flag regarding ownership concentration within the food system.<sup>4</sup> Catholic social teaching consistently cautions against such concentration of power and control as a potential threat to the accessibility of the fruits of agricultural production.<sup>5</sup> The principle of global solidarity<sup>6</sup> reminds us that people anywhere in the world hold the same right to food as do we in the United States. This means that we must organize our agricultural system with an eye to the needs of others. It means that in a world with more than 600 million hungry persons, we must move beyond viewing foreign nations simply as markets upon which to unload our surplus production. Yes, it means we join the effort to provide food where needed, but it does not mean that we make others dependent upon us for food.<sup>7</sup> Global solidarity means that we examine the extent to which our agricultural system is structured and capitalized for exports.

## **Protection of Creation**

A second principle in Catholic social teaching by which we might critique our agricultural system is respect and protection of creation. This principle is based upon the Judaeo-Christian conviction that the earth and all it contains – land, water, forests, wildlife – are not ours but a gift from the Creator. The Book of Leviticus tells us that the land is God's, and we are but strangers and guests.<sup>8</sup> The Catholic bishops of the United States reminded us in 1986 that within this biblical vision of creation, we do not recognize God as the Creator if we do not respect God's creation.<sup>9</sup> Pope John Paul II, in a 1990 social document entitled "Peace with God the Creator, Peace with All of Creation," pointed out that our mistreatment of the earth is a consequence of our broken relationship with God.<sup>10</sup> Agriculture, likewise, must work with creation and must appreciate what nature can offer. This does not mean that we should not have agronomists, crop specialists and animal scientists working to improve food production. It does, however, suggest sensitivity to what is there and a wonder at the natural order as we find it. It also calls for an appreciation of how well humankind is served by these gifts and an honest effort to understand the consequences of our sometimes arrogant attempts to change nature. In a 1987 encyclical, "On Social Concerns," Pope John Paul II reminded us that the natural world has its own laws and when we alter one area, we inevitably cause changes in another.<sup>11</sup>

Respect for creation suggests a second, related principle in Catholic social teaching. That is the universal purpose of the goods of creation. Simply stated this means that the gifts of creation – land, water, air – are intended for all people to use. Every person has a right to share in these gifts, to find and use what she or he needs to live a life of dignity.<sup>12</sup> Appropriation of the world's resources by a minority of the world's population constitutes a betrayal of the gift of creation because "whatever belongs to God belongs to all."<sup>13</sup>

This universal purpose of creation reminds us that, while individuals have the right to own property privately, no one has the right to use property, land or other forms of property, for their own use without concern for the needs of the larger community. Private property carries a social mortgage.<sup>14</sup> Private ownership is always a limited right. It is always subject to the prior principle of the right of all people to find in God's creation what they need to live their life in dignity.<sup>15</sup> Directed towards agriculture this teaching claims that neighbors should not be put at risk by another neighbor's farming practices.

This principle of Catholic social teaching states that we must use the gifts of creation with an eye to the needs of future generations. This teaching suggests that we have a system of agriculture that uses the gifts of land, water and air not only to enrich legal land owners, not only to feed our own citizens, but to support the struggles of our sisters and brothers to feed themselves anywhere in the world.

## **Support of rural communities**

A third core principle of Catholic social teaching that relates to agricultural ethics is that every person must contribute to the common good.<sup>16</sup> For most of us, this is realized by being productive members of society: working at our jobs, paying taxes, taking leadership positions in the community, volunteering. This principle, this expectation insists that it is not enough to claim our own rights, to seek only our own interests, to lose ourselves in a culture of individualism. It holds that we must consciously seek to create a society with an environment and structures that support the full human development to which each of us is called. As

members of society our most significant activities are social in nature and are directed towards the common good.<sup>17</sup>

Thus, any economic activity we pursue must benefit the larger society. It must contribute to this common good. From a minimalist ethical perspective, activity such as is conducted at a chemical fertilizer plant, must not cause harm to the community: It must not pollute the air and water; it must not endanger worker safety. The principle of contributing to the common good, however, raises the expectations. It claims that the fertilizer plant must bring positive benefits to the community, to the common good. The plant must surpass the avoidance of harm and it must not function only for the enrichment of those involved in this enterprise. Most enterprises do make positive contributions to the common good: they provide jobs; they pay taxes as do individual citizens; they support other businesses and services in the town; their personnel are active in the social fabric of the community.

As with individuals and all economic enterprises, this obligation to contribute to the common good applies also to agriculture. Here again, it is not sufficient that farming enterprises avoid doing direct harm to the communities through, for example, environmental or odor problems. Beyond the avoidance of harm, farms should make positive contributions to the local communities. Today, however, the changing structure of agriculture leads us to question how well the emerging, larger farming enterprises support local communities. What happens to these communities when more and more families leave the land and the fields or livestock herds are managed by larger entities? Do these larger farming operations contribute to the health and well-being of the small towns and rural communities in their area?

### **Respect for justice**

The fourth core principle from Catholic social teaching which can assist us in critiquing our agricultural system is respect for justice. The biblical sense of justice, upon which Catholic thought is based, is faithfulness to the demands of a relationship. This faithfulness referred particularly to the demands of the covenantal relationship the Hebrew people had with God. At the same time, the Hebrew scriptures make clear that this sense of justice, this remaining faithful to their relationship with God, demanded that the people live in right relationship with their neighbor and with the land.<sup>18</sup>

Over time Catholic social thought has developed and articulated this sense of justice to speak of commutative, distributive and social justice. The latter is of primary concern both in Catholic social teaching and in this discussion. Social justice contains two elements: first, "that persons have an obligation to be active and productive participants in the life of society," and second, "that society has a duty to enable them to participate in this way."<sup>19</sup> Every person must contribute to the common good, and society must make it possible for each person to make such contributions. Therefore, if any laws or public policies or economic systems function in such a way as to prevent persons from achieving a decent living and thereby contributing to the common good, that law or public policy or economic system must be changed. That is why in this religious tradition when we speak of social justice we necessarily speak of social change, structural change, and systemic change.

With reference to farmers, this principle of justice says quite simply that the system of agriculture should allow farmers the opportunity to make a reasonable living - not only so they can care for themselves and

their families, but also so they can be active participants in building the local community. This principle does not say that every person who might wish to farm has the right to be a farmer. It does say that those who are farming in a sound and responsible manner have a right to make a living from their efforts. If farmers are unable to earn a reasonable income from their work, then they will be equally unlikely to contribute to the good of the larger community, local or national.

Respect for justice suggests that a norm of fairness should be operating throughout the agricultural system. It requires a reasonable relationship between costs of production and profits earned – what farmers refer to as “a fair price” for their products. If producers are not receiving fair prices, then this principle of justice claims that changes within the agricultural system are necessary. This concern for fairness also suggests that national farm policies and programs should not give a competitive advantage to certain producers on the basis of size or any other measure that cannot be justified on grounds that point to broader community needs.

This principle of justice further requires that farm workers are able to earn what is needed for a decent living. This applies equally to full-time employees and to seasonal workers. It requires that agricultural employees work in conditions and environments that are safe and pose no threat to their health.

Respect for justice, as presented in Catholic social teaching, leads to an agricultural and food production system that fosters respectful and healthy relationships among all participants, relationships that are shaped by factors other than competition. Such a system will allow producers, farm laborers and everyone employed in food production to pursue their own well-being and to contribute to the common good as well. One of the marks of an unjust food production system is that too many participants are focusing upon their own survival, and find themselves unable to direct necessary attention to caring for creation and to the communities which depend upon them.

### **The Family Farm Question**

Historically, Catholic Church leadership in the United States has supported the concept that agriculture should be organized primarily around a family farm system. There are many reasons for this position including the belief that rural communities are best served by small or moderate-sized family farm enterprises, as well as, the fear that concentration of ownership within the food production system poses serious threats to food security. These concerns appear in such pastoral statements of the U.S. Catholic bishops as Strangers and Guests and Economic Justice for All.<sup>20</sup> It is worth noting that in the universal documents of Catholic social teaching (papal encyclicals, conciliar documents) there are very few specific references to the family farm itself. Pope John XXIII, in his 1961 encyclical, Christianity and Social Progress, offers two statements (numbers 142 and 143) in which this preference for a family farm system is explicit. Elsewhere it is far more characteristic of the documents to provide principles for critiquing existing systems and for determining what kind of systems we should support.

This raises an interesting question about the starting point for discussing agriculture and the food production system. From Catholic social teaching, we clearly can draw guidelines and principles for sorting out what might constitute a just agricultural system. We can identify aspects of such a system. We can articulate

elements of an agricultural ethic. This ethic, built with values and insights from other sources as well, can guide us in determining what kind of an agricultural system we should have in this country. This ethical focus is the appropriate contribution that Catholic social teaching can make to any discussion about the agricultural and food production systems in the United States.

#### Public Debate Needed

Agriculture affects everybody – not just farmers, not just rural communities, but everybody. The direction that agriculture takes has lasting implications for many aspects of our national life: the quality and availability of food, the strength and character of rural communities, the protection of our natural resources, and the income and quality of life within the farming community itself. Any social or economic changes with ramifications as far ranging as these, deserve national discussion and debate.

To date there has been very little national discussion about the future of agriculture, about the kind of agricultural system that is best for this nation. We need a national debate on the future of U.S. agriculture, a debate that will help the American public recognize the current trend and its long-term implications. We need a debate to determine what we want from agriculture and how it should be structured to achieve these results. The question for that debate should not be: “How do we save family farms?” Rather, we should be asking, “Which system of agriculture would best ensure safe and accessible food, would respect and protect creation, would support rural communities, and would ensure justice for producers and laborers?” These are elements of an agricultural ethic that one can draw from Catholic social teaching. Undoubtedly there are other elements from other sources that should be considered. Such an ethic, evolving though it may be, is essential to any discussion on the future of agriculture and food production in the United State.



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## EndNotes

1. "Beginning our discussion of the rights of the human person, we see that every person has the right to life, to bodily integrity, and to the means which are suitable for the proper development of life; these are primarily food, clothing, shelter, rest, medical care, and finally the necessary social services" (Peace on Earth, 11).
2. "Inasmuch as agricultural products are destined especially to satisfy the basic needs of people, it is necessary that their price be such that all can afford to buy them" (Christianity and Social Progress, 140).
3. "Nevertheless, there is manifest injustice in placing a whole group of citizens, namely the farmers, in an inferior economic and social status, with less purchasing power than required for a decent livelihood. This, indeed, is clearly contrary to the common good of the country" (Christianity and Social Progress, 140).
4. "We are concerned that this food system may be in jeopardy as increasing numbers of farm bankruptcies and foreclosures result in increased concentration of land ownership" (Economic Justice for All, 217).
5. "Of particular concern is the growing phenomenon of "vertical integration" whereby companies gain control of two or three of the links of the food chain as suppliers of farm inputs, landowners, and food processors. This increased concentration could also adversely affect food prices" (Economic Justice for All, 225).
6. "There can be no progress toward the complete development of the human person without the simultaneous development of all humanity in the spirit of solidarity" (On the Development of Peoples, 43).
7. "But as we have so often stated, the most important duty in the realm of justice is to allow each country to promote its own development, within the framework of a cooperation free from any spirit of domination, whether economic or political" (A Call to Action, 43).
8. "The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; with me you are but aliens and tenants" (Leviticus 25:23).
9. Economic Justice for All, 34.
10. "If a person is not at peace with God, then earth itself cannot be at peace: 'Therefore the land mourns and all who dwell in it languish, and also the beasts of the field and the birds of the air and even the fish of the sea are taken away' (Hosea 4:3)" (The Ecological Crisis: A Common Responsibility. Also titled, "Peace with God the Creator, Peace with All of Creation").
11. "...one cannot use with impunity the different categories of beings, whether living or inanimate — animals, plants, the natural elements—simply as one wishes, according to one's own economic needs. On the contrary, one must take into account the nature of each being and of its mutual connection in an ordered system, which is precisely the "cosmos"" (On Social Concerns, 34).
12. "God intended the earth and all that it contains for the use of every human being and people. Thus, as all persons follow justice and unite in charity, created goods should abound for them on a reasonable basis. Whatever the forms of ownership may be, as adapted to the legitimate institutions of people according to diverse and changeable circumstances, attention must always be paid to the universal purpose for which created goods are meant. In using them, therefore, a person should regard his lawful possessions not merely as his own but also as common property in the sense that they should accrue to the benefit of not only himself but of others" (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, 69).
13. The U.S. Catholic bishops quoting St. Cyprian, On Works and Almsgiving, in Economic Justice for All, 34.
14. "Private property, in fact, is under a "social mortgage," which means that it has an intrinsically social function, based upon and justified precisely by the principle of the universal destination of goods" (On Social Concerns, 42).
15. "That is, private property does not constitute for anyone an absolute and unconditional right. No one is justified in keeping for his exclusive use what he does not need, when others lack necessities. In a word, 'according to the traditional doctrine as found in the Fathers of the Church and the great theologians, the right to property must never be exercised to the detriment of the common good'" (On the Development of Peoples, 23).
16. Catholic social teaching understands the "common good" as "the sum of those conditions of social life by which individuals, families, and groups can achieve their own fulfillment in a relatively thorough and ready way" (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, 74).
17. On the Development of Peoples, 17; A Call to Action, 24.
18. Leviticus 25:1-5; 26:33-35. Isaiah 5:8-10. Hosea 4:1-13. Amos 5:21-24. Psalm 85.
19. Economic Justice for All, 71.
20. Strangers and Guests: Toward Community in the Heartland. A regional (Midwestern) Catholic Bishops' statement on land issues. 1980. (Available through the National Catholic Rural Life Conference.)