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## ECONOMICS FOR CULTURE

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Economic systems and the businesses and financial institutions that sustain them should serve the human persons whose lives they affect; human persons should not become slaves to economic systems for the enrichment of a few having the power and wealth to manipulate economic life.<sup>1</sup> God's gifts are given to all. The earth is for the sustenance of all.<sup>2</sup> From a Christian perspective, then, any economic system is unacceptable and dysfunctional that fails to provide for the sustenance of all members of the community it purportedly serves or that serves a pocketbook rather than a community. All those involved in economic planning, whether government officials, business leaders, or financial wizards, should aim primarily to make life thrive in all realms subject to their influence.

Material prosperity is not, however, the sole aim of an economic system. As Bernard Lonergan maintained, the purpose of an economy is to establish a material foundation for human community adequate to meet all basic subsistence needs comfortably, for all members, in a manner that leaves time and resources to devote to higher human cultural pursuits, those creative endeavors of the spirit without which human beings are incomplete.<sup>3</sup> Humanity is after all more than its animal nature, despite the contrary biases of our day; and those things that most enrich life lie far beyond the demands of subsistence. A successful economy, therefore, should provide a quality of life with space for the things of the spirit.<sup>4</sup> Clearly, though, we remain far from providing adequately even for the world's subsistence needs.

Quite in line with Lonergan's concern for the development of culture and also consonant with the considerations mentioned above, so familiar from *Rerum Novarum, Quadragesimo Anno* and their progeny involving the universal destination of the goods of creation, is John Rawls' reminder that social justice, in the strictest sense, is radically communitarian. Perhaps more than any other philosopher in recent times, Rawls has reawakened an ethical sense in today's children of the enlightenment. His work is generating considerable interest among philosophers and political economists whose voices will be important for any effective steps away from the "free trade" mentality of global capitalism.

Beginning from social contract theory, Rawls reasons that the standard of justice that should abide in human community is most adequately determined only from an original standpoint in which everyone's fate is

uncertain. In the original position, no bargainer knows anything about his or her own later social status, natural talents, or material resources, and in such a game, one necessarily reasons from the standpoint of the least advantaged. One is forced to stand in those shoes for bargaining purposes for fear of later actually inhabiting them.<sup>5</sup> The norms of justice most likely to emerge among men similarly situated in that respect are the following:

- (1) each person engaged in an institution or affected by it has an equal right to the most extensive liberty compatible with a like liberty for all; and
- (2) inequalities defined or fostered by the institutional structure are arbitrary unless it is reasonable to expect they will work out to everyone's maximum advantage (including, especially, the least advantaged) and provided that the positions and offices to which they attach or may be gained are open to all.<sup>6</sup>

Rawls makes clear that the two principles above apply to the relationships between all economic and social institutions that influence a person's liberties, rights, and prospects in life.<sup>7</sup> Further, the social inequalities he is concerned to avoid include those flowing from a selfish usage of one's natural gifts and talents. In an article of this small scope, there is no time to spell out in detail the implications of Rawls' theory. Scant reflection is required to see, however, that its application would significantly transform our current political economy. For Rawls the only social contract that makes sense from the standpoint of justice is one that regards even native gifts and talents as part of the common inheritance of the human race and not as personal possessions. Further, the political economy he envisions "writes in" an option for the poor and is radically consistent with the golden rule.<sup>8</sup>

Lest anyone think that no progress has been made along the lines of such communitarian thinking in a business context, it is well to keep in mind the very interesting and so far successful experiment of the Basque people with the Mondragón Corporación Cooperativa in northern Spain. What the Basques could not achieve by revolution, they won through economics. By means of the Mondragón Corporación Cooperativa, they built the economic infrastructure of a semi-autonomous Basque region in Spain. While not self-consciously operating on the basis of a Rawlsian model, but rather on a model suggested by the tradition of Catholic social thinking, the Basques achieved a communitarian structure that Rawls could have envisioned as a possibility from the standpoint of his own philosophy. Mondragón is a democratically owned and operated cooperative of businesses, themselves democratically owned and operated.<sup>9</sup> It presents a fascinating case study for one dedicated to learning about and implementing communitarian thinking, and it offers much food for thought to farmers, who are not without their own cooperative ventures.

All persons familiar with the social teaching of the Catholic Church recognize the basic tenets and aims of justice outlined above; serious Catholics have a duty both to try to realize them in their own lives and to give birth to them in the lives of their neighbors. Certainly no one can doubt their applicability in the rural sphere, either as they relate to the tensions between first and third world family farmowners and agribusiness or to the relation between agribusiness and consumers.

The common practices of agribusiness, as many have noted, are not good for the quality of life of the diverse communities of human persons around the globe.<sup>10</sup> They are:

- (1) an irresponsible use, for the sake of better-looking produce in the marketplace, of large amounts of toxic pesticides on fruits and vegetables with a resulting increase of consumer illness and ground water pollution
- (2) the suppression of biodiversity through the cultivation of very few varieties of a food type, for reasons of business efficiency, with resulting increased risks of famine and disease
- (3) the cross-species genetic modification of foods, for marketing considerations having little or nothing to do with nutrition, with potentially serious deleterious consequences for consumer health;
- (4) the establishment of animal factories, as in the pork industry, that in a frenetic rush to get meat to market ensure its infusion with antibiotics and unscrupulously pollute the sites on which they exist, contaminating ground water
- (5) the concentration of control over the world's food supply in the hands of a few transnational corporations that manipulate both the globe's food markets and the economies of whole nations to their own enrichment but also to the impoverishment of many people.

The end consequence of agribusiness is a very great number of small farmers out of work; less nutritious food for general consumption in the markets and on the tables of the world; increasing resentment of struggling third world peoples toward the peoples of the first world; and the dangerous monopoly power of a few over the global food supply.<sup>11</sup> In the face of such difficulties, it is reasonable to insist that agribusiness be dismantled (like "Ma Bell") and that local economies be left to themselves to serve local needs, after farmers have been provided with a top-notch agricultural education. The latter conclusion is particularly justified, given that large industrial agricultural producers have imposed globalization on farmers and consumers without their informed consent, or indeed any participatory voice in the matter at all. Big agribusiness caters to government officials everywhere, government officials who, in the United States, have forgotten the ordinary constituents from all walks of life whom they are bound to serve. To be denied a voice in matters that so profoundly affect one's life, circumstances, and opportunities is the condition of a slave, not the condition of a free man or woman.

The question for the thinking public becomes, then, what to do about the situation; for mere talk, as Maurice Blondel so vividly reminded us, is utterly insufficient.<sup>12</sup> We need to remember, as American Catholics, that we are children of the Knights of Labor, the first American labor union, and of figures like Mother Jones, Dorothy Day, and Cesar Chavez. It is time to fight. Friends of rural America must think in detail about how family farmers and consumers can both survive and prevail against the wealth-concentrating mindset and wealth-concentrating tactics of the fattest and greediest food giants. A grassroots communitarian effort in line with the best of the Catholic social teaching tradition is in order.

I recommend the following specific steps:

- (1) The National Catholic Rural Life Conference should team-up with two grass roots organizers, John Powers of the Educational Foundation of America and Ted Quaday of Farm Aid, and six organizations, the Campaign for Family Farms and Environment and its member organizations, namely the Citizen Action Coalition of Indian, the Illinois Stewardship Alliance, Iowa Citizens for Community Involvement, the Land Stewardship Project, and the Missouri Rural Crisis Center, to

organize farmers for legal action on all relevant fronts against agribusiness. On October 22, 2002, persons from these organizations won a major legal victory in the Federal Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit (Cincinnati) in their defeat of the mandatory pork check-off signed into law by President Reagan as part of the Pork Promotion, Research, and Consumer Information Act of 1985. The Sixth Circuit affirmed a federal district court's decision that the mandatory pork check-off was unconstitutional. Family hog farmers are well aware of the significance of such a defeat. The pork check-off, in effect, forced them to help subsidize corporate concentration, industrialization, and a factory farm system of hog production to their own detriment and the detriment of the environment. CFFE is dedicated to the defeat of factory farms throughout rural America. They have procured some of the funding behind their efforts from the Environmental Grantmakers' Association. <sup>13</sup>

- (2) The National Catholic Rural Life Conference should team-up with the National Family Farm Coalition, networking that organization with all of the others mentioned above, to learn about and to participate in NFFC's anti-trust suit against Monsanto and a number of corporate co-conspirators for the following wrongs: price-fixing, both in the U.S. and abroad, in the genetically engineered corn and soybean seed markets; exerting illegal influence over the non-genetically engineered corn and soybean markets; defrauding farmers into thinking that particular genetically modified seeds were desirable; and failing to carry out human health and environmental safety tests with respect to the modified seeds either before or after marketing them. <sup>14</sup> Federal district judge Rodney Stippel in St. Louis dismissed part of the class-action lawsuit filed in 1999 but has recently allowed the case to proceed on the antitrust claim. <sup>15</sup> The *amicus curiae* brief is a wonderful legal device. Every farm organization that considers itself significant should be jumping into the fray. They should also keep their eyes open for any appeal of the dismissal of particular claims, lending their resources to the aid of the law firms involved. An array of legal talent already has a history in the case. Some of them have done so on a "no-win/no-fee" basis. Generally such a contingency arrangement is unheard of outside the bounds of the personal injury law suit. Law firms farmers should know about, in connection with the fee arrangement, are Lief, Cabraser, Heimann in San Francisco; Pomerantz, Haudek, Block, Grossman & Gross in New York; Kaplan, Kilsheimer & Fox in New York; Mills & Olson in Minneapolis; Cohen & Malad in Kinston, North Carolina; White & Allen in Indianapolis; and the Law Offices of Liebenberg & White in Jenkinstown, Pennsylvania. Lead counsel is Cohen, Milstein, Hausfeld & Toll in Washington, D.C.
- (3) The National Catholic Rural Life Conference should team up with the Farm Justice Alliance, bringing all of the above organizations into the effort, to help that organization in its endeavor to defeat the farm subsidies currently funding big agribusiness. <sup>16</sup> It should also support the work of The Binational Family Farm Alliance in its opposition to NAFTA. <sup>17</sup>
- (4) All organizations involved in the actions noted above should take the further step of investigating eminent domain laws as a possible device for pressuring local officials to retrieve land for the good of local communities that agribusiness has been acquiring to the detriment of local communities.

- (5) The National Catholic Rural Life Conference should solicit the help of all of its fellow member organizations in the Community Food Security Coalition in connection with the above efforts.<sup>18</sup>
- (6) In addition, the Community Food Security Coalition should help farmers achieve a more public voice and visible presence in urban settings. Urban America is not hearing the family farm message with sufficient force. The Coalition should actively train the following teams of people: (a) a team that energetically develops an urban market for family farm products (restaurants, urban dwellers, school cafeterias, local butchers, and other institutions, such as hospitals and nursing homes); (b) a team that actively and aggressively seeks and gains entrée to high school consumer education classes for the purpose of teaching segments on the ethics of food; (c) a team that actively and aggressively seeks and gains entrée to college and business school ethics classes for the purpose of teaching segments on the ethics of food; and (d) a team that actively pressures land grant schools to devote a more substantial portion of their curricula to the viability of the family farm and the ethical dimensions of agriculture.
- (7) The National Catholic Rural Life Conference should develop a curriculum on the ethics of food specifically for Catholic schools at all levels from the elementary grades through college, and cultivate a team of people willing to teach such courses at those levels all over the country. The learning centers recently developed by the Coalition for Food Security may be one source from which to draw teachers. Youth ministers and campus ministry teams could supply additional resources and talent.
- (8) The Community Food Security Coalition, in cooperation with university extension services, should prepare attractive state-by-state booklets for distribution in the front windows of urban bookstores discussing the issues at stake in the battle between the family farm and Big Food, summarizing material already available on the internet and providing material otherwise procurable through original research concerning the farmers markets, community supported agriculture, and family farms in each state. Realize that in this age of information overload, the only people likely to visit farm-related internet sites are people already interested and in-the-know about rural issues.
- (9) The Community Food Security Coalition should actively solicit business school students interested in small business operations for internships at family farms. Such an effort would establish one avenue for making the family farm more visible as a business entity in the business community.
- (10) Family farmers should become involved with one or more of the organizations mentioned above. They should steer the agricultural educations of those who will continue operating the family farm in a direction permitting farmers to learn and take advantage of the most effective marketing and distribution techniques. Family farmers should also form cooperative alliances like the Prairieland Community Supported Agriculture Alliance in Illinois for selling, marketing and distributing farm products.<sup>19</sup> They should aggressively pursue participation in community supported agriculture. Farmers they might consider consulting for expertise in that dimension operate the Seabreeze Organic Farm in San Diego, California; Angelic Organics in Illinois;

Center Valley Organic Farm and CSA in Indiana; Michaela Farm in Indiana; Roots N Herbs Farm in New Mexico; Spoutwood Farm in Vermont; and Hearbeet CSA in Vermont. Roots N Herbs may be a particularly good choice, as it bills itself as an active research and education farm.<sup>20</sup>

In addition to the concrete recommendations above, I invite the National Catholic Rural Life Conference to assemble an operating team to help contribute to and coordinate the indicated efforts.

#### EndNotes

- 1) U.S. Catholic Bishops, *Economic Justice for All*, Pastoral Letter on Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy, 1986, 13-19 and 28-34. The text of the letter is available on the internet at <http://www.osispm.org/cst/eja.html>.
- 2) Leo XII, *Rerum Novarum*, Encyclical Letter issued May 15, 1891, 7-8; and Pius XI, *Quadragesimo Anno*, Encyclical Letter issued May 15, 1931, 45-58. The texts of these encyclical letters are available on the internet at <http://www.papalencyclicals.net>.
- 3) Bernard Lonergan, *Macroeconomic Dynamics, An Essay in Circulation Analysis*, edited by Fred G. Lawrence, Patrick H. Byrne, and Charles C. Hefling, Jr., vol. 15, *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988), 82; Bernard Lonergan, *For a New Political Economy*, edited by Philip J. McShane, vol. 21, *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 18-20, 22, and 23-25. Fred G. Lawrence, "Introduction," in *Macroeconomic Dynamics, An Essay in Circulation Analysis*, edited by Fred G. Lawrence, Patrick H. Byrne, and Charles C. Hefling, Jr., vol. 15, *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988), William Matthews, "Lonergan's Economics," *Method Journal of Lonergan Studies* 3 (1985):11.
- 4) Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum*, 40-46.
- 5) John Rawls, "Distributive Justice," essay in *Collected Papers*, edited by Samuel Freeman (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 130-132.
- 6) *Ibid.*, 132-34 and 139.
- 7) *Ibid.*, 133-34.
- 8) See *Economic Justice for All*, 95 for the U.S. Bishops endorsement of an option for the poor.
- 9) See <http://www.mcc.es/ing/quienessomas/historia.html> for a substantial document relating the history of the Mondragón cooperative effort.
- 10) See, e.g., Br. Andrews, "The Lord's Table, The World's Food: A Eucharistic Vision of the Farm Crisis," *Catholic Rural Life Magazine* 43, no.1 (Fall 2000), available at <http://www.ncrlc.com.html>; Br. David Andrews, "Hunger in the Heartland," *Catholic Rural Life Magazine* 44, no.1 (Fall 2001), available at <http://www.ncrlc.com.html>; David Pollard, "California Farming: Reflections on "Life Based" Agriculture," *Catholic Rural Life Magazine* 44, no.1 (Fall 2001), available at <http://www.ncrlc.com.html>; Ken Meter, "The Hunger for Food in Farm Country," *Catholic Rural Life Magazine* 44, no.1 (Fall 2001), available at <http://www.ncrlc.com.html>; Hugh Joseph, A Community Food System: It's All About "Eating Local" and More," *Catholic Rural Life Magazine* 46, no.1 (Fall 2003), available at <http://www.ncrlc.com.html>; Bruce Anderson, "Trade and the Failure of the Economic Theory," *Catholic Rural Life Magazine* 45, no.1 (Fall 2002), available at <http://www.ncrlc.com.html>; various pieces in Gregory E. Pence, ed. *The Ethics of Food, a Reader for the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002); and various pieces in parts II-IV of Richard Sherlock and John D. Morrey, eds., *Ethical Issues in Biotechnology*, (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), 97-358.
- 11) Leo XII long ago specifically noted the ill effects of such concentrations of power and wealth. See *Rerum Novarum*, 107-109.
- 12) Maurice Blondel, *L'action* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1963).
- 13) Environmental Grantmakers Association Winter 2003 Newsletter available at <http://www.ega.org/resources/newsletters/win2003/effe.html>.
- 14) See extract from *The Agribusiness Examiner* 60 (Jan. 2000), available on the internet at <http://www.netlink.de/gen/Zeitung/2000/000104a.html>.
- 15) See the September, 2003 *New York Times* article by David Barboza available on the internet at <http://www.mindfully.org/Industry/2003/Monsanto-Antitrust-Seed24sep03.htm>.
- 16) <http://www.subsidieskill.org/>
- 17) [http://www.organicconsumers.org/chiapas/071303\\_farm\\_alliance.cfm](http://www.organicconsumers.org/chiapas/071303_farm_alliance.cfm).
- 18) <http://www.foodsecurity.org/links/html>.
- 19) <http://www.prairienet.org/pcsa/aboutpcsa.html>.
- 20) See <http://www.nal.usda.gov/afsic/csa> for extensive information about community supported agriculture and helpful internet links. A simple internet keyword search using "community supported agriculture" also surfaces a wealth of information.

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