1-1-2012

Responding to the Crisis in Agriculture: The Church's Role

Archibishop Ignatius Strecker

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarship.law.nd.edu/ndjlepp

Recommended Citation

Available at: http://scholarship.law.nd.edu/ndjlepp/vol3/iss1/2

This Essay is brought to you for free and open access by the Notre Dame Journal of Law, Ethics & Public Policy at NDLScholarship. It has been accepted for inclusion in Notre Dame Journal of Law, Ethics & Public Policy by an authorized administrator of NDLScholarship. For more information, please contact lawdr@nd.edu.
RESPONDING TO THE CRISIS IN AGRICULTURE:  
THE CHURCH'S ROLE

ARCHBISHOP IGNATIUS STRECKER*

I. A CRISIS IN AGRICULTURE

We are watching it all on the nightly news—the bankruptcies, the auctions, the tears of families leaving the way of life they have known for generations, the murders and suicides of desperate people.

But does what we see strike us as truly a national crisis, something demanding national concern and response? Is American agriculture in the midst of a crisis or is it simply the painful shaking out of another sector of the economy, something like the adjustments that periodically occur in the housing industry, after which it is business as usual?

Despite the vividness of the pictures, some Americans are not convinced that a crisis exists. In early 1985, the South Dakota legislature flew en masse to Washington, D.C. to seek federal assistance for farmers, ranchers and rural communities. They received much publicity, but no help. The Farm Bill enacted by Congress in 1985 contained few changes from the policies of the past. And while millions of Americans are greatly concerned, millions of others find no evidence of a crisis in the local supermarket and therefore are unconvinced.

But there can be no mistake that a crisis exists. Farmers and ranchers are leaving the land in numbers comparable only to the Great Depression. Farm bankruptcies, rural bank failures and small town business closures are at record levels.

It is a crisis, the worst ever, for rural and urban America. American agriculture, our nation's largest industry, providing at least 20 percent of all employment in the United States, is in serious financial and social trouble. A radical

* Archbishop, Archdiocese of Kansas City, Kansas.

1. Approximately 20-22 percent of civilian employment in the United States is related to agriculture. This percentage includes downstream employment, such as fertilizer and pesticides, as well as upstream
change is taking place in American society, a change that is not only determining the future of food and agriculture, but also is changing the future of life in much of America.

II. ORIGINS OF THE CRISIS

The crisis in rural America is not an event that happened overnight or is just now happening in the 1980s. It began 75 years ago when government policies and technology began to encourage the expansion of the family farm into a business operation.

Farmers responded enthusiastically to government subsidies to stabilize prices in the 1930s and subsidized credit and tax incentives to increase production in the 1970s. But in the 1980s, these policies have failed rural and urban Americans, despite the policymakers' best intentions. The legacy of these failed policies are record crops and food surpluses, depressed prices and farmers' bankruptcies, additional government subsidies and high taxes, and unpredictable international conditions, all of which have contributed to a decline in the number of Americans farming and an increase in influence of large, corporate farmers.

Indeed, of all farms in the United States, only four percent (about 93,000 farms) have gross sales over $250,000 per year. But these farms provide almost half of the food grown in America today. The remaining 2.2 million family farms and ranches, 96 percent of all farms in the United States, produce less than 55 percent of America's food. These figures reflect a significant consolidation of farmland ownership in the hands of corporate absentee managers. For example, the insurance company Metropolitan Life recently purchased the Farmers National Company in Omaha which had managed over a million acres of farmland. One wonders how many additional farm families and rural merchants will be unable to compete because of this concentration of economic power.

agricultural employment, such as food processing, transportation, and exporting. A. MANCHESTER, AGRICULTURE'S LINKS WITH U.S. AND WORLD ECONOMIES 11 (U.S. Dep't of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, Agriculture Information Bulletin No. 496, 1985).

III. Costs of the Crisis

The seriousness of losing family land and a valued way of life is not difficult to understand. More is involved, though, than just moving to a new location and starting a new job. There is the loss of that unique relationship between the farmer and the land, a relationship that defines the very identity of the rural family and the rural community. Loss of land involves a severe cultural uprooting that carries high human, social and even spiritual costs for those who experience it. It is the destruction of that unique relationship described in the Old Covenant between God, the land and His chosen people.

The seriousness of the growth of highly capitalized, absentee-owned farm enterprises is much less obvious. In an economy where large scale businesses and conglomerate corporate structures prevail in so many sectors, it may be difficult to think of reasons why they should not be tolerated or even encouraged in agriculture as well. Herein lies the essential difference between rural and urban life. It is not a question of which is better; it is only that they are different. Both are good for America.

Is this the way Americans want their food and land controlled? Farming has become less and less a matter of caring for the land, given to all peoples by God for all times, and more and more a matter of managing investment capital. This may make business sense to some, but does it make sense for the American food system and for the American people?

IV. The Value of the Family Farm

Our nation has had a long and fruitful experience with the family farm as the primary producer of food. An assured supply of food, modest food prices, diversity in production and distribution, and vital rural communities are a few of the blessings of the family farm system. Can we assume that corporate agribusiness and huge farm-management will have the same incentives to produce, process and market food at the present low cost, only 16 percent of Americans' income, so that even the poor can enjoy a healthy diet, when profit rather than preservation of a way of life is the motive?

Agriculture is the foundation of the local economy throughout much of rural America. Farm families buy their supplies from local dealers and sell their crops to local processors. They support local business people, governments, civic groups and churches. Most studies show that the quality
of community life in small towns surrounded by family farms is superior to that in towns controlled by absentee-farm management or agribusiness.  

The value of these vibrant rural communities reaches beyond the communities themselves. Farm and rural people have a life experience different from urban people. This diversity is valuable to our country. This diversity is necessary and important. But the massive out-migration from rural America, 30 million people during the past half century, has represented a substantial loss of this social diversity. It also has contributed greatly to the problems of urban unemployment, housing shortages, and many other strains on urban life. Most of all, it has caused tragic suffering in the lives of millions of people who are forced from familiar homes and communities and lose their ties to the land and to the people of rural America.

V. THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH

If our nation's government policies have, to a great degree, caused today's crisis in agriculture, what should we as a nation do? Specifically, what is the role of the Church in assisting those suffering today? And in preparing for tomorrow?

The Catholic Bishops of the United States, in their Pastoral Letter "Justice for All: The Church and the U.S. Economy," strongly affirm the family farm as a valued way of life and endorse government policies that would reject agribusiness as the future for the food industry in America and in the world. The Bishops state in the chapter on "Food and Agriculture": "Farm owners and farm workers are immediate stewards of the natural resources required to produce the food that is necessary to sustain life." Further, they assert: "moderate-sized farms operated by families on a full-time ba-


sis should be preserved and their economic viability protected."

The Church bears a special responsibility as an advocate of social justice. The social encyclicals of the past century, the Second Vatican Council and the 1971 Synod of Bishops have moved this concern to the center of the Church's self-understanding in teaching that justice is an essential element of the Gospel. The right of every human being to food at a reasonable price, the right of producers to a fair return on their investments of labor and capital, and the responsibility to steward the natural resources given by God to provide the necessities of life are all justice concerns. Catholic leaders at all levels are calling for appropriate public policies and responsible actions by private individuals.

Catholic social teaching insists that justice must be applied in all areas that pertain to the "common good". Thus, discerning where the common good lies with regard to farm and food policy is an area of concern proper to the Church. The Church is challenged to determine how the ownership and use of food producing resources can be structured to best serve the needs of all people, especially the poor and the powerless.

Since land, water and air are consumable resources, this question applies to our children and grandchildren in ways that many other issues of social justice do not. The choices we make today about the ownership and use of land will influence the capability of future generations to meet their food needs. It is the task of the Church and of all right-minded people to recognize that future inhabitants of this planet have a claim on present resources; our responsibility is to make this claim heard.

5. *Id.* para. 233.
6. In *Justice in the World*, for example, the Bishops write:

According to the Christian message, . . . man's relationship to his neighbour is bound up with his relationship to God; his response to the love of God, saving us through Christ, is shown to be effective in his love and service of men. Christian love of neighbour and justice cannot be separated. For love implies an absolute demand for justice, namely a recognition of the dignity and rights of one's neighbour. Justice attains its inner fullness only in love. Because every man is truly a visible image of the invisible God and a brother of Christ, the Christian finds in every man God himself and God's absolute demand for justice and love.

While the right to food is among the most fundamental components of the common good, it is far from the only element. The quality of community and national life is another. It is important because it defines the environment within which people realize their own human dignity and potential, and in which they seek and find God.

The quality of life is enhanced by social diversity. Small town and rural life has had a beneficial effect upon urban values and lifestyles, even as urban values have had beneficial effects on rural life. The rural life has kept us aware of our dependence on God’s creation. This is not to argue that rural life is better than urban life, only that both lifestyles rest upon different but equally important values.

Catholic social teaching also has strongly defended the right to private ownership of productive property. This component of the common good must be qualified by the rights of members of society to the necessities of life. But if these necessities can be produced in more than one way, Catholic tradition would argue for the approach which maximizes distribution of ownership.

The common good is served when food is available to the public in a secure and responsive way. America’s family farm system has demonstrated a remarkable capacity to produce food in abundance. A loss of the competitiveness inherent in family farm agriculture represents a threat to the common good. It is this threat that has led the Church to defend the family farm and challenge the growth of large-scale corporate agriculture.

In its application of the principle of commutative justice, Catholic social teaching insists that when one segment of society bears the burden of a shift or change in that society, it is entitled to fair compensation. The farm families leaving agriculture today against their wishes are not being compensated. They are being denied unjustly by political and economic forces over which they have no control. If, as some argue, this evolution is leading toward a healthier structure of agriculture for our nation, then justice demands that those who are benefiting must reimburse those who are bearing the costs.

The larger issue, of course, is that it is not at all certain that the nation or the world is benefiting or will benefit by the loss of family farming. The present status of food and

7. Pastoral Letter, supra note 5, para. 114.
8. Id. para. 69.
agriculture in some nations verifies the evils of large scale control of food and agriculture. What assurance do we have that large-scale agribusiness will maintain a sustainable agriculture according to the laws of God’s creation?

**Conclusion**

Catholic tradition insists that nothing is inevitable in human, social and economic systems except that which we choose to let happen or cause to happen. It will, however, take a much more profound sense of the nature of our present “food and agriculture” crisis to arouse the public will necessary to stem the present flow of events in U.S. agriculture. The media has made us very much aware of what is happening. Public debate is now critical in determining the best way to assure that American agriculture in the future will provide food for all Americans and for the peoples of the world, especially the poor.

As the Church is so much a part of the lives of rural people, this statement would not be complete without a special reference to those who have suffered the loss of their homes and land. Some farmers and ranchers lose their reason to live when they lose their farms. Painful as this material loss may be, we should not value our property more than our lives, our families, our loved ones, our God. Our worth as human beings may never be measured by our economic wealth.

Most farmers, ranchers and rural merchants who are in serious trouble today are good, hard-working, productive, God-fearing and God-loving people who are experiencing great pain because of circumstances over which they have little or no control. Christian cooperation challenges each of us to be concerned for more than just “me and my family,” as important as that is. Our love must reach out to our hurting neighbors.

With regret, we must acknowledge that some farms and rural businesses cannot be saved. It is then necessary for all

---

9. The food shortages and rationing required in the Soviet Union are an outstanding example. The same is true of certain nations in Africa, especially along the Sahara, where governments control agricultural production. The Peoples Republic of China is another example of a government that completely controls its land and natural resources, although with more success (China is virtually self-sufficient in the production of food). Poland is yet another example of food shortages caused by government control of production, although in Poland most of the farms are farmed by families rather than as collectives.
of us to seek out and support such friends and neighbors in their pain rather than to permit them to suffer alone in their helplessness. Our parishes should be especially interested and helpful, as become Christian communities.

Not all family farmers and ranchers are hurting. Those among us with financial resources, in themselves gifts from God, should be willing to invest in the future of the rural community. There also are many people in the cities who care. With the help of all, political and economic structures can be changed to serve the best interests of all citizens. United, great numbers of rural and urban citizens can change life on the farms and in the cities from pain and anguish to new hope and new life.

We must see that the good earth, the gentle breeze, the soft rain, the warm sun are all God’s gifts for all peoples. We must never give up the struggle to see the land as a gift from God. We must see to it that as many people as possible live on the land and enjoy its fruits. We must see that we are not only “Strangers and Guests”¹⁰ on the land, but also that “This Land Is Home To Me”¹¹.

---

¹¹ Bishops of Appalachia, This Land is Home to Me, in Renewing The Earth 472 (D. O’Brien and T. Shannon eds. 1977).