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# Rural Catholic Action

by

Reverend Edgar Schmiedeler, O. S. B., Ph. D.,  
Director of the Rural Life Bureau of the  
National Catholic Welfare Conference.

Two addresses delivered in the Catholic Hour, sponsored by the National Council of Catholic Men with the co-operation of the National Broadcasting Company and its Associated Stations.

(On Sundays, July 24 and 31, 1932)

- I. Rural Catholic Action—Its Objectives.
- II. The Rural Parish.



**NATIONAL COUNCIL OF CATHOLIC MEN**

Sponsor of the Catholic Hour

1314 Massachusetts Avenue

Washington, D. C.



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## FOREWORD

An estimate issued July 15, 1932, by the United States Department of Agriculture showed a farm population gain of 648,000 in 1931. "This increase," the Department report adds, "was the largest and most significant recorded by the Bureau of Agricultural Economics in the ten years in which the Bureau has been estimating changes in population." "For seven years of this period," it continues, "annual decreases were reported and only in 1930 and 1931 were appreciable gains indicated."

This is indeed heartening to those who are interested in the Rural Life Movement—those who for the past ten years have been searching eagerly for ways and means of stemming the great tide from the country to the city, because of their sincere conviction that rural life offers many and genuine advantages to the individual and the family, and many benefits to the Church and the nation.

Only the most meager mention could be made in these two sixteen-minute talks of the aims and activities of that enthusiastic and ever increasing number of individuals who are interested in a program of rural betterment. It is to be hoped, however, that enough has been said to bring to our country people a realization of the fact that there is such a group of individuals and that their interest is deep, determined and unflinching.

## DEDICATION

It gives us the keenest pleasure to dedicate these talks to the rural families of America and to all their individual members.



# RURAL CATHOLIC ACTION—ITS OBJECTIVES

Address delivered on July 24, 1932.

Several years ago, by what proved to be a very happy combination of circumstances, I was brought of an evening to a rural homestead in the West. The chores for the day had just been finished, and since it was the season of Lent, the family members were assembling for a Lenten devotion within the home.

Kneeling before a picture of the Holy Family was the father, the head of the household. In a half-circle around him knelt seven children. The mother, with a babe in her arms, sat at the rear of the group. In a spirit of respectful devotion all joined in answering the Rosary and Litany, led by the father. Then in closing they sang the hymn appropriate to the penitential season, the *Stabat Mater*.

The devotions finished, the father and mother related many interesting anecdotes of their life history. The children listened with eagerness to this lore of family living.

It was seventy-five years now, the father pointed out, since the paternal grand-parents had erected on the plains this little domestic fortress. The place had indeed become hallowed, sacred.

A great wealth of traditions had gradually clustered there where for more than a lifetime associations had been gathering until every figure in the carpet, every panel in the door, and every casement of the window had a chirography of its own, spelling out something about father or mother, son or daughter, about a friend who had tarried there, or about one who had gone on before. The very trees, in

fact everything about the premises, were linked with their history. But particularly in the home itself was there centered the great family heritage. In this room such a one was born. By that window grandfather sat during his declining years, smiling pleasantly upon the work of his hands. Here is the place where we said farewell to our son. He did not return from France. What a shrine of memories! Even as a son sees beauty in the careworn face of his mother, even so these lovers of this old homestead saw a beauty there that nothing could dispel or erase. Age might mellow or soften it, but nothing could destroy it.

There are about five or six million rural homes scattered over the broad expanse of our American acres. Somewhat less than one million of these are Catholic homes. In many ways we may be sure they are not unlike the one we have just described. And they are well-springs of noblest impulses, sources of keenest joy. They are foundation stones of the nation, supports of the social structure. Today as in the past the rural home is the classic example of togetherness, of co-living.

The Church has ever recognized this close relation between the farm and the family and among the objectives of Rural Catholic Action *the farm home* has ever stood out prominently. Thus the impelling motive behind the deep interest of the *Central Verein* in our rural population over a long period of years was undoubtedly the fact that the country affords so many natural advantages to Christian family living. The same motive again predominated in the development of the Catholic Rural Life Movement on a national scale during the past decade.



Among the objectives of the Rural Life Bureau of the National Catholic Welfare Conference, established by the American hierarchy in 1921, and of its companion agency, the Catholic Rural Life Conference, the preservation and enrichment of the farm home is pre-eminent; and many of the activities of these nationally organized expressions of Rural Catholic Action point directly to this end.

These organizations have, for example, heartily endorsed the further introduction into the rural home of modern conveniences, of labor-saving devices. They consider these things good in themselves and desirable since they serve to lessen the round of arduous duties of farm women and thereby release their energy and activity for many of the higher and finer things of life, for the more cultural and spiritual values of homemaking.

The development of a literature on child care and training and the establishment of parent education study clubs in country districts is another type of Catholic Action in behalf of the rural home. Through these media the latest development in the field of child guidance are made accessible to rural parents. Particularly in this phase of activity are the diocesan councils of Catholic women rendering significant service.

Catholic Action is also interested in the *health* of the rural population. The country offers certain advantages to the physical well-being of the individual members of the rural home just as it offers natural advantages to the family life of the rural population. It is primarily in the country that one may expect to find pure air and pure water, pure food and abundant sunshine, factors so essential in

the promotion of sound health and vigorous vitality.

Unfortunately, however, the country has lagged woefully behind the city in the matter of modern health facilities. The hospital, for instance, the key to the health situation, has remained in very great part an urban institution. Much the same is true of nursing service, of clinics, and of the many other health facilities and agencies that have become more or less common to the larger town and the city. Catholic Action is interested in seeing how these services of the city can be extended to the country and also how better co-operation can be brought about between the rural people and the available health agencies in the country.

Organized Rural Catholic Action, moreover, has shown a very active interest in the promotion of sound health through study, through media such as rural parish schools, religious vacation schools, parent education clubs, and other adult study groups.

Since the leaders of the Catholic Rural Life Movement are interested in the development of a higher and more satisfying rural culture, it is but logical that they should show the keenest interest in *rural education*. The professional training of the farmer and his children, for instance, is recognized as of first-rate importance and every approval is given the use of the excellent facilities for this purpose that are provided in our country by governmental and other agencies.

With regard to the school system, Rural Catholic Action stands for the parish school as the ideal. It urges, however, that the school be not made an instrument of educating children away from the country but that it include in its curriculum such

elements as will tend to give the pupils an ever greater appreciation of the genuine values and opportunities of farm life. Extra-curricular activities, such as boys' and girls' 4-H Clubs, promoted by the United States Department of Agriculture, have been heartily endorsed by the Catholic Rural Life Conference because of their professional training value and also because of their social possibilities. The Conference, moreover, emphasizes the importance of rural sociology for priests and teaching Sisters who are to work in the country districts.

In the *economic field* the objectives of Rural Catholic Action naturally center in the realization of a comfortable living for the rural family. A comfort standard is commonly more easily attainable for the masses of people in agriculture than for those in other industries. While the returns of the farm are not large as a rule and the general level of rural prosperity never rises to the heights enjoyed by the favored economic groups, it is equally true that dire poverty is not a permanent feature of American farm life, except perhaps where inferior lands have unfortunately been brought under cultivation.

As aids to the attainment of a comfortable living for the farm population Rural Catholic Action is interested in the promotion of family land ownership as opposed to any system of large corporate holdings. It is interested in the financial co-operatives on a parish basis known as the credit union, and also in other forms of rural co-operative enterprise. The single family farm meets with approval because it is the most sound socially and economically. It provides the most ideal situation for wholesome home life. It makes for the wide distribution of property

ownership as opposed to that concentration of wealth in the hands of the few that is proving so disastrous in our modern industrial system.

The small parish banks or credit unions, so-called, have both a social and an economic value. They naturally lead the way to other co-operative enterprises. And co-operation is the Christian mode of industry. It cultivates a spirit of mutual helpfulness. It makes for teamwork, not for cutthroat competition.

It is quite natural, of course, that the *abatement of religious antipathy*, the great foe of harmonious co-operation in rural sections, should be an objective of Rural Catholic Action. The Catholic Rural Life Conference realizes that it is only by making the Church better understood through instrumentalities such as the press, seminarian catechists, and the like, that the way can be effectively paved for co-operation in buying and selling, or in any local works that are for the common welfare of the entire community.

Finally, it goes without saying that a prime objective, indeed, *the* prime objective of Rural Catholic Action is the promotion of the farmer's religious life or his personal sanctification through the provision of suitable facilities for both religious practice and religious instruction. Rural Catholic Action is interested, therefore, in the promotion of the Lay Retreat Movement among rural people and in the promotion of religious practices and religious instruction within the family circle. Undoubtedly its greatest accomplishments have been in the field of religious instruction through agencies such as vacation schools, Confraternities of Christian Doctrine,



religious correspondence courses, and various types of adult education.

There is no question that rural life affords peculiar advantages to wholesome Christian living. Country people, if they are spiritually-minded at all, live very close to God in their daily lives. They see Him in a thousand manifestations about them and feel Him aiding them in their merely human efforts to nurture the growing plants of the fields. Who could imagine an unbeliever out in the great open spaces of God's luxuriant countryside, out where the mighty and harmonious concert of creation constantly chants the glory of God? What a pity if these natural advantages were offset by lack of facilities for religious practice and instruction!

It is apparent, then, that Rural Catholic Action is in reality all-embracing. It envisages the whole life of the farmer. It aims at helping each member of the great rural family to develop in his domestic and wider relations a well-rounded and satisfying life. It aims at enriching his life by adding to the natural advantages of the countryside more of the varied benefits and the helpful facilities that modern progress has brought to mankind.

Only a few decades ago the United States was a rural country. Today the nation is predominantly urban. Indeed, only about 31 million of its inhabitants can properly be classed as farmers. Rural Catholic Action is interested in again bringing about a better balance between our urban and rural populations. It aims to accomplish this by so enriching the lives of country people that a greater proportion of those born in the country will remain there and that even some of those who have unfor-

tunately left the country will again return to it. It feels that only in this way will the American countryside be enabled to render to the welfare of both Church and State its maximum contribution.



## THE RURAL PARISH

Address delivered on July 31, 1932.

It is a great feast of the Blessed Sacrament, the Feast of Corpus Christi. Nature is robed in her richest garments out in the great open acres of the western wheat belt.

At St. Mark's, one of the largest and oldest rural parishes in the Sunflower State, all is in readiness. The Sacrifice of the Mass has just ended. In deepest reverence the congregation kneels as the priest turns towards them and intones the old familiar Eucharistic hymn, the *Pange Lingua*. Choir and organ take up the strain. The beautiful chimes of St. Mark's ring out jubilantly over the countryside. The people file into ranks for the procession that is to carry in triumph Christ, their Eucharistic King, out into the vast open shrine of nature created by the Great Architect Himself. Young men and maidens, fathers and mothers, young and old, one and all join ranks behind the flowing banners of their respective parish organizations. And lastly, the priest holding aloft in his consecrated hands his precious burden, the body and blood of the Savior hidden beneath the outward form of bread.

Onward they move, alternately praying and singing. For a full mile they move slowly-forward before the procession halts at a wayside altar. And there, out where earth with her thousand voices daily praises God, the touching strains of the immortal *O Salutaris Hostia* are wafted heavenward with the smoke of the incense. There is a momentary hush, a period of intense silence. Nature herself seems to hold her breath as nature's God is raised aloft in

benediction. Out in the midst of their own acres of golden wheat, Christ, their Eucharistic King, He who had forever dignified the farmer's profession by choosing for the Mystery of the Sacrament of the Altar that lowly support of physical life, the wheat of the field, is raised aloft to bless them.

Many other such religious festivals occur throughout the course of the ecclesiastical year and the people of St. Mark's—the parish to which we shall first direct our attention—observe them with all the dignity of the Church's two thousand years of liturgy. There are the beautiful rites that mark the opening and closing of May Devotions, the solemn services of the high feasts of Christmas and Easter, and all the impressive ceremonies of Holy Week. Most solemn and inspiring, too, are the occasions on which the parishioners gather to honor the chief shepherd of the diocese as he comes to confirm their little ones, or on which they assemble to rejoice with one chosen from their midst for the dignity of the priesthood.

It goes without saying that none of the customary services of Sunday or week day is lacking. The parishioners boast a splendid grade school and high school that assure the religious training of their children. Their revered and energetic pastors have but one aim in life, the abiding welfare of their people.

It is not surprising to find, therefore, that uppermost in the minds of these people and foremost in their daily lives there is that greatest of all commandments: "Thou shalt love the Lord, thy God." Nor is the law of love of neighbor forgotten. A host

of common interests serves to promote its observance in their midst.

The large auditorium of St. Mark's is admirably adapted to serve as a parish center. In it the parishioners often gather to enjoy themselves even as they assemble in Church to worship God together. There are many and varied occasions that serve to unite them and to bind them into an ever closer and more harmonious Christian center. There is, for instance, the great annual church bazaar, a gala day for the entire countryside. There are the wedding festivals at which the parishioners gather to honor and rejoice with the newly wed couples of the parish. Again, there are the home talent musical and dramatic programs, the athletic events for the younger generation, the social events of the various parish organizations.

All these serve to enrich the lives of the people and to integrate the parochial family. One would have to look far and wide indeed, in city or in country, to find a place where the spirit of youth is more carefree and genial, where the life of middle age is more sociable, or where old age has a greater variety of pleasant interests.

In other ways, too, the parish provides opportunity for fulfilling the great command of the love of one's neighbor. Sickness enters a home and the kindly interest of fellow parishioners and their neighborly visits do much to make pain seem more bearable. Perchance a long illness ensues calling for the help of willing hands and for an active neighborly spirit. It may show the practical value of their Parish Benefit Association. Neither faithful care nor medical aid must be wanting in such trying

times. Particularly when difficulties arise must the parishioners "bear one another's burdens" that so they may fulfill the law of Christ.

When the hand of death reaches into a home and claims a loving son or daughter, an affectionate father or mother, the entire parish feels the loss. As the deep-toned bell of St. Mark's tolls for the Requiem, all are present to pay their last respects and to pray that God may grant rest eternal to the soul of their departed friend and parishioner. In the very shadow of old St. Mark's they lay him to rest. There he will not be soon forgotten.

Thus in joy and in sorrow, in pain and in pleasure, these people live their lives together. They worship together; they rejoice together; they share one another's burdens. As a result there is ingrained in their daily lives the observance of that two-fold law, the very heart and soul of Christianity, the love of God and neighbor.

St. Mark's is typical of the larger and better organized parochial units. St. Michael's, some miles to the west, stands in striking contrast. It is typical of the smaller rural parish. The parishioners are fewer in number, the facilities of the group are much more limited. There are perhaps forty families scattered over a wide expanse of territory.

It was here that Father John was sent on his first appointment. How different he found it from the large home parish of his childhood! There were many things that puzzled him. How could he reach the children to instruct them? How could he expect to build up a parochial spirit, a sociable and neighborly attitude among this small group of scattered people? But Father John was a man of action.



During the summer vacation he assembled the little ones of his scattered flock for six weeks of intensive religious training. Two Sisters, the first ever to appear in that community, volunteered their services as teachers. A seminarian of the diocese zealously offered his assistance. Generous help was extended by the Council of Catholic Women.

Speedily the Sisters won their way into the hearts of the little ones. The latter seemed soul-hungry for the great truths of their religion. They showed the keenest interest in the picture studies, the bible stories and catechetical instructions that followed. No less appealing to them were the singing of sacred hymns, the religious devotions, the lessons in Church etiquette called for by the daily program. The free time was also intensely interesting. It was the first time in their lives that these children had all been able to play together. And how they marveled at the endless number of games that the seminarian was able to teach them! There were special features, such as the interesting health stories told them by the nurse who came for a few days from the city. And for next year she had promised a dental clinic.

The last Sunday of the vacation school will not soon be forgotten. It was the First Communion Day for twenty of the parish children. The Church was fittingly decorated. There was an entire band of Mass servers. With flawless accuracy the children sang the old sacred hymns of the Church. In perfect order and with deepest reverence all approached the Holy Table. Perhaps in their own childhood days, in some other land afar, the grown-ups had witnessed such scenes before and had heard these

same hymns sung, but this was the first time at St. Michael's.

The school closed with an entertainment by the children, with the awarding of prizes for special merit and with an out-of-door picnic for the entire parish.

The parishioners note a new life in the parish. It is difficult to judge whether it is the young or the old who are the most elated. Certain it is Father John is highly enthusiastic. His vacation school has exceeded all his fondest expectations. He attends the next Catholic Rural Life Conference and as a result other activities are soon under way. The Confraternity of Christian Doctrine is established to follow up the work begun by the vacation school. The continued interest of the Council of Catholic Women is eagerly welcomed. This wider contact with their Sisters in the faith has meant very much to the women of the parish. The establishment of a small parish bank, a credit union, soon proves a success and leads the way to further co-operative efforts. The 4-H Club of the young folks is rapidly coming to the fore in the county and is creating a new enthusiasm for country life among the members of the younger generation.

Through these and other activities the people of St. Michael's are rapidly developing many common interests. More and more are parish bonds being fused. Indeed, St. Michael's is rapidly becoming a St. Mark's in miniature. Father John hopes it will eventually become a replica.

Many other pastors today are imitating this splendid example of Rural Catholic Action and sharing the same high expectations. Within the short



space of a decade rural vacation schools have been established in upwards of 1500 small parishes and hundreds of teaching Sisters, of lay teachers and seminarians have found in them most inviting fields for missionary endeavor. A host of organizations have seen fit to lend assistance to this alluring program of Rural Catholic Action. This movement has become a home missionary enterprise of first magnitude. Other activities—social, recreational and even economic—are following suit and are leading to the rejuvenation of the small rural parish. Those interested in Catholic Rural Life are hopeful that the movement will eventuate in the building of several thousand strong rural parishes, dynamic parochial groups from which will radiate the true spirit of genuine neighborliness and exemplary Christian living.

Few social groups in our present civilization can compare in stability and efficiency with a well-organized rural parish. The latter stands today like a rock of Gibraltar in the midst of the restless and shifting sea of modern life. Its members are drawn together into harmonious unison through a similarity of aspirations and hopes, ideals and ambitions, through sameness of fundamental beliefs in faith and in morals. They are closely knit together by the ties of many common interests. In spite of all our disturbing spirit of modern social change, the rural parish remains a thoroughly integrated and highly influential unit of society.

Someone has well pointed out that water is more than Hydrogen and Oxygen, that it consists in rainbows and cataracts, dews and stormy seas. So, too, is the rural parish more than so many buildings,

families or individual parishioners. It contains something that eludes the statistician. It has a spirit, an atmosphere, a soul. And this vital spirit is constantly nourished by the many common activities of the members, all surcharged with the energizing and elevating influence of Religion.

The result is an ideal center of Catholic Action, a social group motivated by genuine neighborliness—the love of fellow-man; a group that strives zealously after even the highest fulfillment of the law—the love of God—through the common practice of Religion. And in this two-fold observance consists the whole law and the Prophets.

## CARDINAL HAYES STATES AIMS OF THE CATHOLIC RADIO HOUR

(Extract from his address at the inaugural program in the Studio of the National Broadcasting Company, New York City, March 2, 1930).

Our congratulations and our gratitude are extended to the National Council of Catholic Men and its officials, and to all who, by their financial support, have made it possible to use this offer of the National Broadcasting Company. The heavy expense of managing and financing a weekly program, its musical numbers, its speakers, the subsequent answering of inquiries, must be met. That responsibility rests upon the National Council of Catholic Men. . . .

This radio hour is for all the people of the United States. To our fellow-citizens, in this word of dedication, we wish to express a cordial greeting and, indeed, congratulations. For this radio hour is one of service to America, which certainly will listen in interestedly, and even sympathetically, I am sure, to the voice of the ancient Church with its historic background of all the centuries of the Christian era, and with its own notable contribution to the discovery, exploration, foundation and growth of our glorious country. . . .

Thus to voice before a vast public the Catholic Church is no light task. Our prayers will be with those who have that task in hand. We feel certain that it will have both the good will and the good wishes of the great majority of our country-men. Surely, there is no true lover of our Country who does not eagerly hope for a less worldly, a less material, and a more spiritual standard among our people.

With good will, with kindness and with Christ-like sympathy for all, this work is inaugurated. So may it continue. So may it be fulfilled. This work of dedication voices, therefore, the hope that this radio hour may serve to make known, to explain with the charity of Christ, our faith, which we love even as we love Christ Himself. May it serve to make better understood that faith as it really is—a light revealing the pathway to heaven: a strength, and a power divine through Christ: pardoning our sins, elevating, consecrating our common every-day duties and joys, bringing not only justice but gladness and peace to our searching and questioning hearts.

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