

The Family Farm

A STATEMENT
OF THE COMMITTEE
ON SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT
AND WORLD PEACE

The Family Farm
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Farmers



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Policy Statement on the Family Farm

INTRODUCTION

The history of the Catholic Church in the United States is bound up with our great urban centers and the growth of organized labor. Nourished by the faith of countless immigrants who built city parishes and forged a living in the blackened factories of the Industrial Revolution, the Church fought for justice where the need was most pressing. The Lord in his goodness blessed this effort with spectacular success. Today's industrial worker would seem a marvel of prosperity to his forebears who crept in poverty through the streets of New York and Boston, and Catholics are proud of their part in fostering this transformation.

Yet the Church, in its social ministry, has never focused solely on urban problems. The society of the Bible was essentially an agricultural society. The question of who would manage the land, and for what ends, was central to the health of the nation. Many passages in the Old Testament that refer to Israel's covenant with God reflect this practical interest. We read in the Book of Proverbs, for example: "For the upright will dwell in the land, and the honest will dwell in it; but the wicked will be cut off from the land, the faithless will be rooted out of it" (2:21-2). In the same way, the custom of the Jubilee Year aimed to ensure that not even the humblest family was divorced forever from its ancestral fields. The New Testament continues this general theme. As the language of his parables shows, Jesus spoke out of a rural tradition, and his proclamation of justice for the poor has immediate application to rural life.

Scripture thus provided the basis for social action in town and country America. The founding of the National Catholic Rural Life Conference in 1923 merely formalized a concern that has expressed itself, undramatically perhaps, since Catholics helped settle the wilderness. That concern was reaffirmed most recently by the delegates to the 1976 conference, *A Call to Action*. Among the resolutions they approved was one seconding "those movements and organizations designed to preserve the land both as a gift from God and as a precious natural resource. The activities of [appropriate] offices and agencies will include support of legislation to stop the abuse of land speculation; exploitation

of agricultural workers, including the undocumented alien; large agribusiness and concentrated land holdings; and will express continued support of the family farm.”¹

THE FAMILY FARM: MORAL IMPLICATIONS

In referring to the family farm, the Call to Action delegates take a position that characterizes the Church as a whole. Pope John XXIII's encyclical, *Mater et Magistra*, which devotes entire sections to social justice in rural settings, gives defense of a family-based agriculture special emphasis. The Holy Father says: “However, those who hold [humanity] and the family in proper esteem . . . surely look toward some form of agricultural enterprise, and particularly of the family type, which is modeled upon the [human] community wherein mutual relationships of members and the organization of the enterprise itself are conformed to norms of justice and Christian teaching. And these [people] strive mightily that such organization of rural life be realized as far as circumstances permit” (142).

Pope John's endorsement of the family farm system finds a ready echo in American hearts. The family farm is one of our most pervasive cultural symbols. Statesmen since colonial times have heaped praise on the institution, and such landmark legislation as the Pre-Emption Act of 1841, the Homestead Act of 1862 and the Reclamation Act of 1902 has elevated its encouragement and preservation to the status of national policy.

Nevertheless, it is in a state of rapid decline. The number of farms in the United States peaked at some 6.8 million in the mid-1930s. Today there are less than 3 million. While the trend has been decelerating in recent years, we are still losing about 30,000 farms annually.² These statistics take on a human face when set beside a second set of figures. In the 59 years since 1920, the number of those living on farms has dropped 76 percent, from 32 million to about 8 million. No one knows how many families these people represent, but it is clear that in the middle years of the 20th century the family farm, so prominent in the American imagination, has been terribly weakened as an American institution.

The number of acres under cultivation has not fallen. Farms have simply grown much larger. The structure of American agriculture is a pyramid, with a great number of small, part-time farms at the bottom, a layer of substantial operations in the middle and a very few large farms at the top. Economic power in modern farming lies near the apex of the pyramid. In 1977, 69 percent of our farms (1,875,000) were small enterprises with gross incomes of less than \$20,000. Though they formed the majority, they accounted for only 11 percent of all agricultural sales. Twenty-five percent (669,000) earned between \$20,000 and \$100,000, and accounted for about 36 percent of agricultural sales.

The largest six percent of our farms (162,000), those with gross incomes in excess of \$100,000, sold a staggering 53 percent of the agricultural products in that year.³

Americans are receiving their food from fewer and fewer hands, and the pace of change is dramatic. A recent study estimates that by 1986 nearly all the agricultural products sold in this country may come from just 10 percent of the farms.⁴ If this prediction proves true, it is hard to see much future for the family farm. Most of the operations in that 10 percent will still be controlled by families. They will be so large, however, and there will be so few of them, that traditional family farming as a significant element in our economic structure will be virtually a thing of the past.

The observation that many giant farms are family farms raises the question of definition. What is a family farm? Because conditions and crops vary so widely across the country, one cannot realistically assign an arbitrary size to the family operation. A family growing vegetables on irrigated land in California can make a living on 10 acres. At the other extreme, one large family can cultivate several thousand acres of wheat in North Dakota.

It is essential that the definition take into account the demands of social conscience. In *Gaudium et Spes*, the bishops of the Universal Church said: "By its very nature private property has a social quality deriving from the communal purpose of earthly goods. If this social quality is overlooked, property often becomes an occasion of greed and of serious disturbances" (71). We challenge the notion that the size of the family farm is limited only by the number of acres a farmer can cover with sophisticated machinery. For us, the family farm is a unit engaged in the production of food, fiber or timber which is owned or managed by a family or partnership of families that does all or most of the work of running it, which implies a personal relationship to the land, which is intended for transfer from generation to generation within the family, and which is small enough to allow for widespread ownership of agricultural land by resident farmers and to permit the responsible stewardship of natural resources.

In defending the family farm, then, we are primarily interested in those operations that fall into the small and moderate-sized range, where the family earns a substantial part of its income from agriculture. These two classes of farms face somewhat different problems, because the small farmer is almost always a part-time farmer. There is sufficient similarity between the groups to justify treating them together, however.

Human Values Related to Family Farming

The twenty-fourth Psalm opens with these words: "The Lord's are the earth and its fullness; the world and those who dwell in it." Although it has been romanticized in American folklore, farm life can be hard. It confers no automatic nobility upon the individual; farmers face the same temptations to materialism and superficiality as the rest of us, and

perhaps as often succumb. Nevertheless, those who see agriculture as more than an occupation feel that farmers are uniquely situated to realize the central truth the psalmist states. They live in close touch with the earth, cooperating with nature in the production of nature's gift of food. Dependent for their livelihood on forces they cannot control, farmers have their hand on the pulse of the created world and feel the rhythms running through all life, plant, animal and human. Once clarified by an acceptance of revealed religion, this inner knowledge can inspire a reverence for the land and the inhabitants of the land. Then farmers can become like the "little people" of the Bible, open in their humility to the ways of the Lord.

These values apply to the individual. We must not forget, however, that the farm is essentially a communal enterprise, providing a solid foundation for family life. While strong families thrive in all settings—urban, suburban and rural—the farm environment encourages the development of patience, self-reliance, a simplicity of outlook and the particular bond that comes when father and mother and children join in earning their common bread. This aspect of life on the land deserves special emphasis at a time when the Church in the United States is preparing for the Year of the Family in 1980.⁵

Mention of the farm mother raises an important consideration. To the popular mind, the American farmer is a man who preserves the family heritage by passing on his land to his sons. The woman is always



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quietly in the background. This image distorts reality. At least one-half the people on farms are women. Besides serving as wife and mother, many of them contribute heavily to the operation of the family business. In some cases, indeed, a woman is the head of the household; the “farmer himself” is really the farmer herself.

Our defense of the family farm is in part a defense of the private and family values it can foster. These values have had the firm backing of the Church. In *Mater et Magistra*, Pope John remarks: “Since everything that makes for [humanity’s] dignity, perfection and development seems to be involved in agricultural labor, it is proper that [people] dedicate work of this kind to the most provident God who directs all events for the salvation of [humanity]” (149). It is interesting to note that secular society seems to be adopting some of the same attitudes. The last decade has witnessed a “back to nature” movement, characterized by a reversal of migration patterns from rural areas, new commitments to the simple way of life and the establishment of group farming operations. These developments, though their depth is yet unproved, point to the power with which the land and rural ways still call to modern humanity.

The Family Farm and Food Production

Besides its implications for personal values, the small and moderate-sized family farm is the basis for a humane, responsible and effective national food production system. The alternative to this system is one dominated by large investor-owned corporations and massive farms. The possibility of a corporate takeover seems remote if we consider only the number of acres that publicly-held firms own. As yet, relatively few farms are in corporate hands, and most of the corporations in question are family businesses. It is not necessary to own farmland in order to control agricultural production, however. Many farmers sign sales contracts with large firms in which they agree to grow their crops to certain specifications and deliver them at a certain time. The company agrees in turn to buy the produce at the price the contract specifies.

Using the contract system and their holdings in agricultural land, investor-owned corporations are now extremely prominent in the production of poultry, sugar, citrus fruits and vegetables for processing, and have substantial interests in other commodities. The 1974 Census of Agriculture notes that they control over one-fourth of our total farm output. It is reasonable to believe, given the high price of land and the economic advantages to be gained, that the corporate share in agricultural production will grow at an even more rapid rate in the years ahead.⁶

The consequences of a massive transition to a corporate-controlled system of food production are already becoming apparent. Sensitive consumers are aware of the decline in nutrition and taste that corporate practices seem to impose, and have begun to protest the introduction of such innovations as the hard tomato bred to withstand machine picking. Of even greater concern is the potential for price manipulation in food

marketing. The Church and the United States Congress have stated that every person, rich or poor, has a right to eat regardless of his or her ability to pay for food. What assurance is there that this right would be secure if our food supply came under the control of corporations?⁷

The Family Farm and Land Ownership

The family farm system is a system of land ownership. One of the strongest guarantees of human dignity and of democratic freedoms is the widespread personal ownership of productive property. The decline in the number of small businesses, including family farms, is a symptom of the erosion of this guarantee. According to calculations based on the 1974 census, 62,000 farmers own 24 percent of all privately-held land in the United States.

Statistics on farm consolidation can be somewhat misleading, however. Census data reveals that in 1974 about one-third of agricultural land was rented. The great bulk of this land is in small parcels. Non-farm investors of various kinds own it, ranging from the speculator to the heir no longer active in agriculture. While the concentration of ownership remains an important issue, it is a singularly difficult one to define, since large numbers of individuals still hold title to American farmland.

The problem, then, is not so much private ownership as farmer ownership. The ideal family farmer is the resident owner-operator, the man (or woman) whose land is his home and livelihood. The land is a gift from God, and the farmer should pass it on unimpaired to the next generation. The renter may not hold his lease five years from now. No matter how conscientious he may be, he cannot be expected to have the same feel for his farm as the person who sees it as the link that binds his family together in space and through time. Stewardship of our most basic natural resource depends heavily on maintaining the farm as a stable homestead.

This ideal is quickly slipping away. Agricultural land prices have tripled in some areas since 1970. In many cases, the only way a family can make a start in farming or control enough land to compete successfully is to rent part or all of its holdings. This sad reality leads us to acquiesce in the rental system for the present, but we strongly oppose it as a permanent feature of the agricultural economy. The future must provide opportunities for tenants to become owners. Farmers, consumers, the fabric of American culture in general will be the poorer in the absence of such opportunities.

The Church's Interest

In summary, concern for the individual and family values associated with farm life, for a family-based food production system, and for principles related to the ownership of land and the stewardship of natural resources converge to determine the Church's interest in the preservation of the family farm. It is primarily a moral interest. One cannot discuss the situation without dealing in practical ways with economic

issues, and we address these issues in this document. Our primary purpose, however, is to treat the decline of the family farm, and suggest ways of halting or even reversing that decline, in the context of our commitment to social justice. In doing so, we join other Christian denominations that have already made formal statements on agricultural policy, including the United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., the Church of the Brethren, the United Methodist Church, the American Lutheran Church and the Lutheran Church in America.

THE DECLINE OF THE FAMILY FARM: CAUSES

Economic and Cultural Developments

The reasons for the precipitous decline of the family farm in this country are clear enough in outline. America flourished with the Industrial Revolution and the capitalist system that fueled it. Especially in the 20th century, the focus of economic activity has shifted from the small town with its light industry, limited services and surrounding farms to the city with its huge business and financial concerns. As the sphere of the agricultural sector narrowed and rural America stagnated, people inevitably were forced off the land. Lured by the hope of employment, they rushed to the growing metropolitan centers.

This economic shift has been compounded by a cultural shift to urban life and urban values. In literary image, the idyllic world of Tom Sawyer shrank and grew dark until, by a strange magic, it emerged as the dull, cramped Main Street of Carol Kennicott. Considering this atmosphere, where people espousing traditional rural ways were hicks and hayseeds, it is small wonder that Johnny left the land. Not only did he need a job, he was under psychological pressure to be modern, to go where the action was. To some extent, this set of attitudes still operates to alienate the rural resident from cultural roots.

The “Bigger Is Better” Philosophy

The American economy has evolved rapidly from one dependent on relatively small-scale structures to one based on national and multinational corporations. This development has spawned a certain orientation summed up in the phrase “bigger is better.” We achieved unmatched material prosperity by adapting technology to ever larger production and distribution systems. As a result, the majority of Americans has uncritically accepted the idea that greater size equals greater economic efficiency and that greater economic efficiency alone spells progress. This belief stimulates a drive for expansion in all sectors of the economy as the keystone of our national pursuit of wealth.

The Industrialization of Agriculture

American farmers have been as deeply affected by the “bigger is better” philosophy as any other group, and the industrialization of agriculture

has enabled them to put their ambitions into practice. Since the days of the horse-drawn reaper, machinery has progressively replaced labor in agricultural production. The increasing refinement of farming technology and the availability of abundant cheap energy have made it possible for a single farm family to cultivate more and more land, spurring a decline in the number of farms.

Of course, farm machinery is extremely expensive. These technological developments would have had little impact in the absence of capital to take advantage of them. Since World War II, the requisite capital has poured into agriculture from a variety of sources. Farmers themselves have generated much of it. Successful individuals used their profits and equity to buy machines and the additional land to utilize them efficiently. Other capital has come from non-farm people, the American or foreign investor who sees farmland as a sound buy, or wants to take advantage of the tax laws. Finally, corporations have invested in agriculture with the same motives as individuals or, in some cases, with the hope of increasing their profits through vertical integration.

Thus, the dynamics and even the spirit of our economic system have worked powerfully to bring about a growing consolidation of produc-



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tive land in fewer and fewer farms. In 1954, 65 percent of all purchases of farmland involved complete farm units. Less than one-half as many transactions, 29 percent, were for farm enlargement. In 1977, 58 percent of the purchases were made for purposes of enlargement, while 29 percent represented the transfer of complete units.⁸

The economic patterns at work are self-perpetuating. It is generally recognized that the fully mechanized one-person farm produces food and fiber about as efficiently as large operations.⁹ These bigger farms still enjoy competitive advantages, however, because they generate higher net incomes, they can buy and sell in volume and they have the financial base to withstand a bad year or two. As long as farmers see benefits in growth and as long as the technology and capital that facilitate growth are present, large farms can expand by swallowing small farms. The size factor, left to operate without modification, may well render the small or moderate-sized family farm an economic impossibility.

There are at least three things that could reverse this gloomy outlook. The first, government policy, is discussed below. The second is the depletion of worldwide supplies of oil. Large farms are highly energy-intensive. If petroleum products grow scarce and prices skyrocket, the profit margins of these operations might erode dramatically. In that case, the nation might be forced to adopt a "post-industrial agriculture" based on relatively small, labor-intensive, localized farms.

The third possibility is a change of heart among farmers. With characteristic zeal, Isaiah declares: "Woe to you who join house to house, who connect field with field, till no room remains, and you are left to dwell alone in the midst of the land!" (5:8). Our genuine concern for all farmers leads us to beg them not to crush one another by engaging in destructive competition.

Restricted Entry into Farming

The forces that encourage farm consolidation combine with other economic trends to deny access to families seeking to enter agriculture. The growth policies of large operators, the activities of foreign and domestic speculators and corporate investors, the pressure to develop farmland for residential or other uses, and general affluence and inflation all work to push up the price of land. As a result, would-be farmers need prohibitive amounts of capital; in the Midwest, they have to raise at minimum a quarter of a million dollars. It is no accident that the figures given above on farmland purchases show a great reduction in farming "starts."

Government Policy

Some would argue that government policy, especially on the federal level, is at least as important as market forces in speeding the decline of the family farm. Tax laws favor the larger operators or make it difficult to hold a farm together.¹⁰ Federally-supported research through-

the land-grant university system has historically stimulated the spread of ever-bigger farms.¹¹ Department of Agriculture policy, in ways both subtle and blunt, has worked to the disadvantage of small family enterprises.¹² Finally, the economic benefits of federal commodity and insurance programs, which are based on volume of production, have gone disproportionately to large farms. In 1976, the top 17 percent of American farms in terms of sales received 60 percent of government payments.¹³

Other Causes

The wide abandonment of diversified agriculture has had a negative impact on family farming. The farmer who raises both corn and cattle is less vulnerable to market fluctuations than the one who specializes in corn only. Moreover, urban sprawl takes many acres of agricultural land out of production each year, while the construction of the interstate highway system and the proliferation of electric transmission lines have made cultivation more difficult on thousands of farms. Credit policies tend to increase the advantages of large operators since, in general, the greater the size of the loan the less interest the lender charges. Though relatively minor in themselves, all these elements contribute to the truly desperate situation family farmers face in the America of the 1970s.

THE DECLINE OF THE FAMILY FARM: CONSEQUENCES

Economic Considerations

As we have seen, many would defend the movement towards consolidation in agriculture as progress. From a certain perspective, it is progress. If bigger is better, American agriculture has immeasurably improved from its condition prior to World War II. The nation produces its food with much less labor, freeing people to work at other tasks. Output has risen dramatically even as the number of farms has fallen. Marketing and processing concerns find it easier and cheaper to deal with a relatively small group of big producers, resulting in economies of scale. The continuation of present trends seems to promise more benefits along these same lines.

Upon closer examination, however, the matter is not quite so simple. Some fundamental questions suggest themselves, even when we confine ourselves to economics. The family farm system produces an abundant food supply. Why alter it when there is no indication that total production would rise with increased consolidation?¹⁴ The family farm system is already efficient. Why seek further economies which are likely to be marginal, if they materialize at all?¹⁵ Finally, do economic gains in agriculture necessarily mean economic gains for the society as a whole? Can the industrial sector absorb those displaced from the land? It is hardly progress if farm families find distasteful, unproduc-

tive jobs or, worse, become statistics in employment offices or on the welfare rolls.

The Common Good

While economic arguments and counterarguments have their place, they flow from a terribly narrow perspective. The Church has consistently held that the excellence of a society depends upon the extent to which it fosters justice and serves the common good. Even if one could demonstrate that some absolute economic gain could be realized from further concentration in the agricultural sector, that gain would not be worth the price paid in social terms. It would cost this country an important and universally-praised feature of its culture, and further limit the number of our people engaged in the production of basic necessities. It would increase the risk that control over our food production system would be forfeited to powerful corporate interests. It would all but destroy a system of widespread farm ownership by resident operators that is conducive to responsible stewardship. To suggest that such a prospect serves the common good is a mockery.



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Stewardship

The question of stewardship is complex. We have noted that the owner-operator has incentives to preserve the health of the land that the renter cannot be expected to share. Speculators and corporations that farm suffer from the same disadvantage. They will make sure that their property is well managed in order to protect their investment. That personal love of the land, that commitment to the homestead is missing, however.

The owner-operator's motivation to practice good stewardship is a valuable asset to American agriculture. It should be fostered and encouraged wherever possible. This encouragement is necessary because, sad to say, many family farmers cultivate their land in a wasteful and imprudent way. Quick and easy farming techniques such as straight-line plowing and concentration on a single crop have helped create a very serious erosion problem. Farmers have become partners with the forces of wind and water as they carry off our fertile topsoil.¹⁶ In the same way, undue irrigation depletes underground aquifers, wasting precious water. Nature can renew both land and water over time, but it cannot rebuild as quickly as humanity takes away.

The use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides has greatly increased agricultural production, and most farmers would find it difficult to set them aside entirely. It is well-known, however, that the indiscriminate application of these substances wears out the land over a period of years. Chemicals also contribute to water pollution when they are borne as runoff into surface and subsurface water supplies; this problem is most severe where heavy use is linked with heavy irrigation. Diversified family farmers can reduce their dependence on chemicals by employing organic fertilizers produced on the premises. Moreover, they can experiment with integrated pest management systems combining pesticides and biological controls, and make an effort to get by with as little irrigation as possible. Contrary to popular opinion, moving towards the adoption of organic farming methods does not appear to damage the farmer's competitive position.¹⁷

Stewardship also involves the conservation of scarce energy reserves. Fertilizers and pesticides are mostly petroleum-based. To the extent that farmers can replace these chemicals with organic and biological alternatives, they can help stretch the remaining supplies of fossil fuels. Generating energy on the farm from renewable sources (sun, wind, agricultural products) can serve the same purpose.

Some of these considerations apply to farm mechanization as well. Few would urge American farmers to abandon their machines. In our time, much of the backbreaking work of raising the country's food and fiber has been eliminated, and that is all to the good. Government support should be available for the purchase or rental of equipment that enables farmers to operate economically. Mechanization can be carried to harmful extremes, though. The labor of family members that contributes to the good of the whole has a legitimate place on the farm. If



adequate funds were invested in machinery that left scope for voluntary family labor, farmers could cut back on their use of fuel.

Impact on Individuals

The continued decline of the family farm will have a direct impact on the lives of thousands, perhaps millions of people. Despite revolutionary changes in urban-rural migration patterns in this decade, about 600 nonmetropolitan counties are still losing population. For the most part, these counties have a large minority representation and an agricultural economy.¹⁸ Besides documenting the ongoing travail of the small farmer, the statistics highlight a phenomenon that has only recently received widespread attention. Earlier in our history, thousands of Hispanic farmers were driven from their land. Now the number of farms owned by black people is falling at a frightening rate, presumably because members of minority groups are least able to withstand the economic pressures leading to farm failure. Black people represent 11.6 percent of the total population, and in 1970 black farmers represented nine percent of the farm population. By 1977, that percentage had been cut to five.¹⁹ The racial problems that beset America surface in the farm situation, as in so much else.

In the past, a high percentage of the families who left the farm came to the cities, exacerbating the conditions of unemployment and overcrowding they found. There is no reason to believe that farmers displaced in the future will not follow the same path. Once again, minority people are likely to suffer the most. The same lack of resources that renders them vulnerable in rural areas will make life with dignity difficult in our urban ghettos.



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Those who harvest much of the produce we eat, the migrant workers, are also largely members of minority groups. The Church has played a significant role in encouraging the unionization of these workers, but many of the injustices basic to the migrant system remain. The gradual disappearance of the family farm tends to perpetuate that system, since most migrants are employed by large growers or corporate enterprises. The small family farmer, by and large, can use family labor or local labor, obviating the need for the migrant “stream,” with all its attendant evils.

Impact on Rural Communities

Farm residents and farm workers, as important as they are, make up only a small percentage of our nonmetropolitan population. In terms of human suffering, the broadest implications of the decline of the family farm lie in its effect on rural communities. Farm-related businesses—the feed store, the grain elevator, the machinery dealer—are important cogs in their towns’ commercial structures. Moreover, the people on surrounding farms nourish the community with their trade and their support of local schools, churches, health facilities and civic activities. A famous study done in California over 30 years ago and partially replicated in 1977 confirms what common sense would suggest. The rural community serving as a trading center for many small farms is more vigorous both socially and economically than a town serving a few large farms.²⁰ The widespread failure of family farms poses a distinct danger to small towns all across America.

Conclusion

In a way, it seems superfluous to plead the case of the family farm, since it pleads its own case so well. We cannot believe that its further decline will benefit this country. That same decline, meanwhile, can mean significant losses in the social, cultural, political and environmental spheres, and can have very disturbing economic side-effects. Farmers themselves, the government, even the Church must move immediately to defend the family farm system. They must act boldly and with vision. The industrialization of American agriculture has rightly been called a revolution. Now the nation needs a second revolution to contain the effects of the first within reasonable bounds.

PRESERVING THE FAMILY FARM: THE CHURCH’S ROLE

Catholics, joining in the general mobility of society, have spread through all parts of nonmetropolitan America. In 1970, some seven million, or 15.5 percent of the total Catholic population, lived in rural counties.²¹ This development, coupled with a heightened concern for all people in our small towns and open countryside, has prompted a growing rural involvement on the part of the Church. Sixteen years after the establishment of the National Catholic Rural Life Conference, Father William Howard Bishop founded the Glenmary Home Mission-

ers, an order of priests and brothers dedicated solely to a rural apostolate. Many dioceses have launched programs in nonmetropolitan ministry, and the National Conference of Catholic Charities is encouraging its member agencies to place more emphasis on rural parishes in their allocation of services.

We have tried to show how, as it seeks to promote social justice, the Church naturally becomes a firm advocate of the family farm system and the values that system upholds. The Church's role in the struggle to save the family farm may not be a decisive one. Nevertheless, it has a clear responsibility to minister to farmers in their need. While the good sense and creativity of Church leaders on the local, diocesan and national levels will determine the precise form this ministry takes, we would like to point out a few areas where action would be especially helpful.

1. *In parishes and dioceses, hold up for praise the individual and family values traditionally associated with American agriculture. Educate people on the social, economic, cultural, political and environmental issues posed by the decline of the family farm.* The moral dimensions of agricultural trends must be clarified if Catholics are to rally in defense of the family farm. It is essential, first and foremost, that consumers understand the structure of the system by which their food is produced. They should also be knowledgeable on land issues, on the activities of agribusiness corporations, on the impact of governmental policies on agriculture, on the problems of minority farmers and on related questions. This education should by no means be restricted to parishes and dioceses in rural areas. The future of the family farm may well depend on the strength of the support it receives from urban dwellers.

2. *In parishes and dioceses, encourage or establish programs that help the family farmer to survive.* Such programs might include providing human services and easing access to government assistance, supporting the formation of cooperatives and mutual-aid associations among farmers, and experimenting with direct farmer-to-consumer marketing systems (food buying clubs, roadside stands, farmers' markets in urban areas, and so on).

3. *On the diocesan level, ensure that a fair proportion of priests with special leadership abilities are trained for rural ministry and located in rural parishes.* In the past, rural ministry, which receives little attention in seminary curricula or continuing education programs, has often suffered for lack of adequate clerical leadership. Rural pastors will become even more effective if qualified sisters, brothers, deacons and lay people are recruited to assist them in guiding their parishes.

4. *On the diocesan level, help farm workers who wish to obtain farms of their own.* Through support of their efforts at unionization, the Church has ministered to farm workers within the prevailing system. Now is the time for a new initiative to aid them in escaping that system. Those who till the land should have the opportunity to own it.



5. *On the diocesan level, examine Catholic institutional land holdings to see if these holdings could be used in any way to stimulate family farming.* Small or beginning farmers, especially low-income people and members of minority groups, might be given preference when agricultural land is to be sold or leased, for example.

6. *On the diocesan level, consider putting resources into and/or encouraging farmers to invest acreage and money in land trusts that guarantee the use of the land in perpetuity for family farming.*

7. *On all levels, advocate and work for changes in public policy favorable to family farming.* Political action groups can be formed in parishes and dioceses to monitor current state and federal legislation and administrative action that has an impact on the agricultural sector. The information such groups gather can form the basis for advocacy. The United States Catholic Conference, the National Catholic Rural Life Conference and other national agencies are in a position to disseminate information on farming issues and to impress the Catholic viewpoint on legislators and government officials in Washington.

8. *On all levels, work in cooperation with other Christian denominations wherever possible.* The major Churches long have shared an interest in ministry to farmers and farm workers. This ministry, therefore, presents an excellent opportunity for witness to Christian unity. Moreover, because the issues involved touch so many people, ecumenical activities are more likely to be effective than those sponsored by a single denomination.

PRESERVING THE FAMILY FARM: THE FARMER'S ROLE

While the Church can lend its moral authority and, in some cases, its material resources to the effort to preserve the family farm, the major responsibility for reform falls upon farmers themselves and the governments that set agricultural policy. The determination farmers feel to defend their individual and group interests must lie at the core of any campaign in support of a family-based agriculture. They are the people most centrally concerned in the struggle, and they will bear the heaviest consequences of failure.

Farmers will be successful only to the degree that they recognize and accept their relationship to the economic system. Their pride in their independence is proverbial and, if one considers the operation of the farm in isolation, this independence is very real. Assuming that they hold title to the land they work, farmers are their own bosses. Subject only to the demands of the common good, they can manage their businesses as they wish.

They are often in debt, however, and must rely on private and public sources of credit to stay in farming. They may need the revenue from federal price support programs for the profit margin essential to sur-

vival. Moreover, depending on the size of their operation, they occupy a certain place in the hierarchy of American agriculture. For most family farmers, this position is a highly vulnerable one. As our discussion of the forces fueling farm consolidation indicates, the small farmer lives in danger of being driven out of business by the large farmer and, by the same logic, the large farmer is subject to extinction by corporate competition.

Finally, farmers must buy fertilizer, seed and machinery and must sell what they grow. When they view themselves in relation to the enclosing supply and marketing systems, their independence must seem elusive indeed. They have little choice but to buy from giant companies whose economic power dwarfs them. Just two firms accounted for 57 percent of all tractor sales in 1972, for example.²² In the same way, unless they sell directly to local consumers, farmers usually deal with large handlers who are in a position to set prices to their own advantage.²³ If the farmers do not like what is offered, their only alternative is to make use of the federal government's reserve program. Their situation with respect to the companies that buy their products is analogous to the situation of industrial workers with respect to their employers. While the workers sell their labor, farmers sell their products. In the absence of the power that only determined collective action can provide, neither group has much control over its economic fate.

These are some of the harsh realities family farmers face in working towards a more promising future for themselves and their peers. Pope John XXIII had a particular concern for the powerlessness of the modern farmer. In *Mater et Magistra*, he wrote: "Nor may it be overlooked that . . . farmers should join together in fellowships, especially when the family itself works the farm. . . . They should strive jointly to set up mutual aid societies and professional associations. All these are very necessary either to keep rural dwellers abreast of scientific and technical progress, or to protect the prices of goods produced by their labor. Besides, acting in this manner, farmers are put on the same footing as other classes of workers who, for the most part, join together in such fellowships. . . . For today it is unquestionably true that the solitary voice speaks, as they say, to the winds" (146).

Historically, farmers have lacked a group consciousness. Each individual has preferred to be the "solitary voice" ruling a separate kingdom. It seems to us that farmers caught in the subtle web of the economic system need a new independence — not an independence from one another but a spirit of common rebellion against those forces, physical and psychological, that threaten their way of life. We urge farmers and their representative organizations to take a wide range of actions to meet this challenge. These actions might include the following:

1. Renounce the "bigger is better" philosophy that ultimately poses a danger to all family farmers. If farmers themselves see agriculture simply in business terms and condone the "cannibalism" whereby one producer swallows up another's land, there is no hope of preserv-

ing the family farm as an American institution. Rather than seeking enlargement, farmers might adopt more economical methods (organic techniques; a diversified approach; use of smaller, more appropriate machinery) that enable them to obtain a profit adequate for decent family support with the land they have.

2. *Make individual efforts to help neighbors survive in farming.* A group of farmers could share labor and equipment instead of competing, for example.

3. *Form and loyally sustain bargaining cooperatives to offset the advantages that large producers enjoy in buying from supply firms and selling to marketing and processing firms.* As with industrial workers, farmers must take united action to gain essential economic leverage. They must be content with obtaining just prices, of course, and not seek to generate excessive profits at the expense of consumers. The collective bargaining process should always take the interests of farm workers into account.

4. *As a complementary strategy, encourage existing marketing cooperatives to cooperate, especially in the export trade.* If the consortium thus formed could gain control of a substantial slice of the market, it could compete successfully with the huge corporations dealing in grain and other commodities.

5. *Loyally support other mutual-aid organizations whose purpose is to cut production costs, provide managerial assistance, develop economical farming methods, establish direct farmer-to-consumer marketing systems and so on. Form new organizations if the existing ones no longer fulfill their roles as cooperative ventures.* In the past, a lack of member loyalty has routinely undermined the effectiveness of cooperatives. Successful cooperatives have sometimes abandoned the principles on which they were founded and adopted the methods of investor-owned business.

6. *Through national farm organizations, mount an intensive educational campaign to present the farmer's case to the consumer.* All Americans should be aware of the implications of a shift from a family-based agriculture to an agriculture dominated by corporate interests.

7. *As individuals and through national farm organizations, advocate and work for public policy favorable to the family farmer.* Farmers should use all legal and peaceful means at their disposal to bring their point of view to the attention of government on the state and federal levels. National farm organizations are in a position to represent their members' interests before Congress and administration officials in Washington.

PRESERVING THE FAMILY FARM: THE ROLE OF GOVERNMENT

We hold to the principle of subsidiarity enunciated by Pope Pius XI in his encyclical, *Quadragesimo Anno*, and reaffirmed by Pope John



XXIII.²⁴ In order to preserve citizen liberties, action to promote social justice should be taken at the lowest practical level within a society. Functions properly performed by individuals should not be given over to groups, functions properly performed by small groups should not be given over to larger groups, and government should act only when it alone is competent to achieve the desired end. This is why we have reserved discussion of the role of government in preserving the family farm until last.

Government does have a legitimate and very important part to play, however. Pope John remarks: "Where, on the other hand, appropriate activity of the state is lacking or defective, commonwealths are apt to experience incurable disorders, and there occurs exploitation of the weak by the unscrupulous strong . . ." (*Mater et Magistra*, 58). As we have seen, government policy itself has contributed to the grave situation in which family farmers find themselves. Further, only government is powerful enough to temper the economic forces that lead inexorably to consolidation in the agricultural sector. Farmers complain about the weight of government regulation, and certainly regulation should never be imposed in such a way as to add to the burdens of the small operator. Some regulation is necessary, though, if the family farmer is to survive in the prevailing economic system.

In recent years, there have been salutary changes in state and federal government policy that respond to the needs of small and moderate-sized family farms. This movement towards reform must expand and grow stronger if the efforts of the Church and the farmer to defend a family-based agriculture are to succeed. We support government action that would:

1. *Structure federal commodity and insurance programs so that farmers who derive a substantial part of their support from agricultural sales can attain an annual income adequate to meet their families' needs.* "Income" should be defined to include revenue from both farm and non-farm sources. Commodity and insurance programs must be carefully designed and administered to preclude discrimination against women and members of minority groups.

2. *Structure federal commodity and insurance programs so that no farmer receives payments in excess of the amount required to provide an annual income adequate to meet his or her family's needs.* Programs now in force permit subsidies to the wealthy.

3. *Stimulate rural development so that farmers who need to supplement their agricultural incomes have the opportunity to find off-farm employment.* Ideally, all farm families with reasonable assets in capital and land should be able to support themselves from agriculture alone. The primary goal of government agricultural policy should be to make this ideal a reality. As long as farmers find it necessary to take off-farm jobs in order to stay on the land, however, these jobs should be available to them.

4. *Address the social needs of rural America so that farmers, especially low-income farmers, have better access to basic human services.* Families are more likely to remain in agriculture if adequate health care, housing assistance, special nutrition programs and other services are readily available.

5. *Structure production control programs in keeping with the interests of small and moderate-sized farmers.* These programs should be designed to eliminate loopholes that undermine their usefulness. Of course, production control should never be so stringent as to threaten the existence of sufficient reserves to keep prices within reasonable bounds and to satisfy the hunger of the poor at home and abroad. The United States has a continuing responsibility to give free food assistance to other nations when necessary, while helping these nations to move towards self-sufficiency in food production.

6. *Encourage the entrance of new families into farming, and improve the competitive position of existing small farmers, through grants or low-income loans, technical assistance and training, and preferential treatment in the sale or lease of government-controlled land (including "excess lands" made available through the provisions of the 1902 Reclamation Act).* Governments on the state and federal levels might also explore the feasibility of establishing land trusts under public auspices to serve the same purposes. Any program aimed at maintaining or increasing the number of family farmers must be carefully designed and administered to preclude discrimination against women and members of minority groups.

Particular attention should be paid to the needs of farm workers whose jobs may be taken by mechanization or, conceivably, by a resurgence of the family farm system. Government should help displaced workers to become farmers in their own right if they choose to do so or, failing that, should retrain them for other dignified and substantial employment.

7. *Continue and expand credit programs to help small and moderate-sized farmers retain control of their land under economic pressure.* While the simple extension of credit cannot solve farmers' long-term problems, it can help them to survive bad times or to stay in business while building up equity in their holdings. Credit programs must be carefully designed and administered to preclude discrimination against women and members of minority groups. Many black farmers in the South, for example, are at present denied participation in these programs because their land is "heirs' property."

8. *Change the overall thrust of agricultural research and information delivery to support family farmers.* More money might be devoted to developing ways of making optimal use of family labor; employing smaller, more appropriate machinery; generating energy from renewable sources; diversifying operations; and using organic techniques and integrated pest management systems. An equitable share of research funds should be allocated to the black land-grant colleges, and women and members of minority groups should be fairly represented in agencies providing agricultural services.

9. *Encourage the growth and effectiveness of bargaining cooperatives and other mutual-aid organizations for farmers, especially new and low-income farmers.*

10. *Encourage the development of direct farmer-to-consumer marketing systems.* Such a thrust implies placing a priority on fostering localized farming. By selling directly to local consumers, farmers can escape a large part of the charges they now pay for transportation, lowering their overall production costs and contributing to the conservation of fossil energy. Consumers, of course, benefit from the opportunity to buy fresh farm produce at prices unaffected by wholesalers, processors and retailers.

11. *Reform the tax laws that stimulate farm expansion, that favor large operations, that cut heavily into farm profits without regard for ability to pay and that encourage absentee ownership and speculation in agricultural land.* Tax policy on both the state and federal levels has a great impact on the structure of American agriculture.

(a) Tax savings associated with investment credits and accelerated depreciation allowances, available primarily to farmers and investors with high incomes, fuel farm expansion. A system of tax incentives should be devised that encourages maintaining farming operations at a moderate size.

(b) Property taxes can be crippling, especially when farmland is assessed at its potential development value. Agricultural land should be zoned for agricultural use and assessed according to its capacity for producing agricultural revenue. Moreover, property taxes on farms should be graduated to inhibit the consolidation of land holdings; the small landowner should be taxed at a lower rate than the big landowner.

(c) Tax rates on capital gains and provisions permitting the practice of "tax-loss" farming form a strong stimulus to outside investment and speculation. Applicable sections of the tax code should be revised to promote the prevalence of resident owner-operators in agriculture.

12. *Bar the purchase of agricultural land by large investor-owned corporations, especially those engaged in food processing and/or marketing.* Anti-trust laws that bear on the activities of investor-owned businesses in the agricultural sector should be tightly enforced. Government action should prohibit advance sales contracts that have the effect of giving corporations strict control over food production.

13. *Preserve farmland.* Care should be taken now to ensure that America will always have sufficient agricultural land. Government should be very cautious in setting aside good farm and range land for recreational purposes or for designation as wilderness. Positive steps to maintain the land base might include agricultural zoning, directing development away from prime farmland and establishing effective land use commissions.



CONCLUSION

Those who propose a major new thrust for society must be prepared to count the costs, or risk having their proposals dismissed as idle dreaming. The most common measure of cost is hard economics. Is an all-out campaign to preserve the family farm really practical, or would it force unacceptable increases in taxes and food prices? We noted earlier that slowing the trend toward further consolidation in agriculture would affect prices only marginally, if at all. The impact of stopping or reversing that trend might be greater. How much greater is hard to judge. Establishing an organized system of direct farmer-to-consumer markets would result in sharply lower prices for produce, and the adoption of more economical farming methods would cut production costs. On the other hand, food prices would go up if farmers succeeded in obtaining more equitable returns through collective bargaining, and if linkages in the agribusiness chain of production, processing and marketing were loosened. In order to maintain a family-based agriculture, consumers might have to pay more at the supermarket, but the effect on any one individual would be small. We cannot imagine that the American people would resent the added cost if they knew it guaranteed family farmers a decent income.

The same is true of taxes. The bulk of the benefits under present farm programs go to large farmers, many of whom have incomes well above the level adequate to meet a family's needs. To some extent, therefore, we are calling for a redistribution rather than a broad expansion of federal payments. Some expansion would be necessary, though. At the same time, new programs aimed at helping families get started in farming or providing off-farm jobs would require funding. State and federal expenditures in the agricultural sector would certainly rise, and these increases might not be entirely offset by the savings in aid to displaced families and weakened rural communities that preservation of the family farm system would yield. Once again, however, each taxpayer's share in the additional financial burden could not be heavy.

There are more important considerations than debates over prices and taxes. We have tried to show that the continued decline of the family farm involves hidden social costs in restricted opportunities for farmers to own their land, in corporate control of the food system, in environmental deterioration, in the growing dependence of our culture on ever larger, more impersonal structures. We fear these costs more than the others because they threaten freedoms basic to the American experience and cloud the future.

Most of all, we seek for justice. As servants of God, we defend the rights of farmers and consumers caught up in the whirling gears of an economic system that seems to have lost its human face. To preserve the family farm is to cherish a fading link with the earth and the earth's creator. It reminds us that there are values that endure, even in the noise and rush and flashing change of modern civilization.

FOOTNOTES

1. The Call to Action Conference, Resolution #3, "The Church and the Rural Community," *Neighborhood*. Quoted in *A Call to Action: An Agenda for the Catholic Community/Resources for Parish and Diocesan Programs* (Washington, D. C.: National Conference of Catholic Bishops/United States Catholic Conference, 1977), pp. 102-103.
2. There were 2.77 million farms in 1975, 2.74 million in 1976, 2.71 million in 1977, and 2.67 million in 1978. *Farm Numbers* (Washington, D. C.: Crop Reporting Board, U. S. Department of Agriculture, 1978), p. 1.
3. Peter M. Emerson, *Public Policy and the Changing Structure of American Agriculture* (Washington, D. C.: Congressional Budget Office, 1978), p. 10.
4. Leo V. Mayer, *Agricultural Financial Issues and Policy Alternatives Raised by the Farm Protest Movement of 1977-78*. A Congressional Research Service Report, March 10, 1978, p. 19.
5. See *The Plan of Pastoral Action for Family Ministry: A Vision and Strategy* (Washington, D. C.: National Conference of Catholic Bishops/United States Catholic Conference, 1978). Among the developments that "can contribute to an erosion of the health and vitality of the family," the bishops list "the spread of giant agribusiness at the expense of the small family farm" (p. 6).
6. V. James Rhodes and Leonard R. Kyle, "A Corporate Agriculture," *Who Will Control U. S. Agriculture?* Special Publication 28 (Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois, 1973).
7. For a fuller discussion of the implications of corporate control of agriculture, see Jim Hightower, "The Industrialization of Food," *The People's Land*, ed. Peter Barnes (Emmaus, Pa.: Rodale Press, 1975), pp. 81-85.
8. Larry A. Walker and John F. Jones, *Farm Real Estate Market Developments, February 1977 to February 1978* (Washington, D. C.: Economics, Statistics and Cooperatives Service, U. S. Department of Agriculture, 1978), p. 13.
9. The classic study on this point is Warren R. Bailey, *The One-Man Farm*, ERS 519 (Washington, D. C.: Economic Research Service, U. S. Department of Agriculture, 1973). Both earlier and later studies confirm Bailey's findings. For a more recent analysis, see Bruce F. Hall and E. Philip LeVeen, "Farm Size and Economic Efficiency: The Case of California," *American Journal of Agricultural Economics*, Vol. 60, No. 4 (November 1978), 591, 597.
10. Emerson, p. 51.
11. Emerson, p. 55.
12. Emerson, p. 45. "In this section, six areas of public policy involvement that affect the structure of farming are examined. A major conclusion is that federal policy has on the whole discouraged small farm operations and led to greater concentration in farming."
13. Mayer, p. 39.
14. Harold F. Briemyer and Barry L. Flinchbaugh, "A Dispersed, Open Market Agriculture," *Who Will Control U.S. Agriculture?* Special Publication 28 (Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois, 1973), p. 4.
15. Emerson, pp. 67-68. The author projects the probable consequences of decelerating, maintaining and accelerating the current trends towards farm consolidation between now and the year 2000. With respect to food prices, he says, "Therefore, accelerating the current trend would probably decrease retail food prices 3 to 5 percent, while slowing the current trend might increase food prices by 3 percent." Emerson makes no prediction on the impact of maintaining the current trend, but logic indicates that such a prediction would fall between the two extremes. In a footnote, he adds, "Other experts do not believe that retail food prices would differ under the al-

ternative farm structures considered here. They argue that any economies of size realized by a shift towards larger farms would be offset as the processing and marketing of food is further transformed toward promotional instead of price-based competition."

16. Luther J. Carter, "Soil Erosion: The Problem Persists Despite the Billions Spent on It," *Science* (April 22, 1977). Reprinted in the *Congressional Record* (May 16, 1977), S 7677-79.
17. Sue Lukens, "On the Competitiveness of Organic Farms," *Ag World*, Vol. 5, No. 6 (June-July 1978), p. 18.
18. Subcommittee on the City; Committee on Banking, Finance and Urban Affairs; U. S. House of Representatives, *Small Cities: How Can the Federal and State Governments Respond to Their Diverse Needs?* (Washington, D. C.: U. S. Government Printing Office, 1978), pp. 10-11.
19. *Farm Population of the United States: 1977 (Advance Report)*. Series P-27, No. 50 (Washington, D. C.: Bureau of the Census, U. S. Department of Commerce and Economics, Statistics and Cooperatives Service, U. S. Department of Agriculture, 1978).
20. The Small Farm Viability Project, "The Small Farm in California: An Examination of Its Viability," *Center for Community Economic Development Newsletter* (February-March 1978), p. 14.
21. These figures represent unpublished data developed by the Glenmary Research Center, Washington, D. C.
22. Jim Hightower, *Eat Your Heart Out* (New York: Crown, 1975), p. 140.
23. Emerson, pp. 13-14.
24. See *Mater et Magistra*, 51-58.



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