



# Joining the Struggle for Rural America

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**T**HE LORD JESUS CHRIST PRAYED, “GIVE US TODAY OUR DAILY BREAD”; DWAYNE Andreas (former chair of Archer Daniels Midland) has said, “The food business is far and away the most important business in the world.” As members of church communities who are also citizens of this country, how shall we think about agriculture? What troubles us about its future? Considering such issues, especially the relation between industrialization and sustainability, I will report recent activities of the media and the government, and eventually make suggestions for the church.

## I. THE MEDIA

Listen to a few recent news items on rural issues from the *Des Moines Register*:

- On food safety: The *Register* reported that a researcher at Iowa State University was “excited about” the prospect of irradiating meat. But the article also noted that irradiated meat will cost five cents more per pound, that the

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*The agricultural struggle in rural America is between globalized industrialization and local sustainability. The church must find effective ways to support sustainability.*

beef will be darker than usual, the pork and poultry redder, and that there will be an odor when you open the package.<sup>1</sup>

- On research: According to the *Register*, tax dollars are being spent at Iowa State to design a new artificial udder to relieve tired sows and an electronic Piggy Blanket for piglets.<sup>2</sup>
- On legislation and the farm crisis: On the same day that the *New York Times* featured an article on the Iowa hog crisis, the *Register* ran instead a story on how *well* the Freedom to Farm bill was working, especially with crop insurance and forward contracting.<sup>3</sup>
- On low hog prices: On another occasion, I recall that the *Register* asked *cattle* industry spokespersons about problems in the pork industry. The cattlemen pointed to the cyclical nature of business, referred to the fact that cattle prices had been low for five years, and stated that now it was time for pork prices to be low.

The incongruities in these articles cause one to wonder about the media's commitment to investigative reporting or a critical assessment of the future of rural America. Much of the media seems strongly to advocate the industrialization of agriculture rather than serving as a proponent of a sustainable rural future.

## II. THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT

Another of the shapers of culture, the federal government, has recently proposed the following:

- The U.S. Department of Agriculture has gotten an exception to the policy that disallowed poultry to be sent to Mexico's restricted zones (as classified by the U.S. government) for processing. These zones have been declared free of microbial illnesses, so that former restrictions on the shipping of whole carcasses from the United States to Mexico for processing and re-shipment back to the U.S. no longer apply.
- In January 1998, the National Commission on Small Farms, U.S. Department of Agriculture, issued a report on small farms in the United States. The report, *A Time to Act*, stated that 94% of American farms fit the definition of small farms.<sup>4</sup> Recently, most of the members of the National Commission on Small Farms issued a report card to the USDA, grading the department on the implementation of the report's agenda. They gave several Ds, including one in market access and another in efforts on behalf of farmworkers.
- In Cartagena, the United States recently blocked a treaty on genetic modi-

<sup>1</sup>Jerry Perkins, "Rules for Treating Meat with Irradiation Unveiled," *Des Moines Register*, 13 February 1999, 1(A).

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Kevin O'Donoghue, "Forward Contracts + Crop Insurance = Freedom to Farm Victory," *Des Moines Register*, 13 December 1998, Farm & Country section, 1.

<sup>4</sup>*A Time to Act*, Section VII, n.p. [cited 8 February 2000]. Online: <http://www.reeusda.gov/agsys/small-farm/report.htm>.

fication of agricultural products. While more than 120 countries supported the treaty, the United States led less than ten countries in opposing it. The treaty would have limited the market for genetically altered foods, a market the U.S. has entered with little attention to the unintended consequences of such a policy decision.

- The Environmental Protection Agency has just concluded an agreement with the National Pork Producers' Council to allow environmental self-audits by hog factories. The agreement was concluded behind the scenes while ostensibly public hearings were underway to determine how the EPA was to enforce regulations for confined animal feeding operations (CAFOs). The recent film *A Civil Action* tells the story of two large corporations in Eastern Massachusetts that fought identification as toxic polluters. Given the track record, can one expect hog factories to police themselves reasonably and responsibly?

### III. GLOBAL ECONOMY VERSUS LOCAL COMMUNITY

In his essay "Conserving Communities," Wendell Berry analyzes the forces at work in our globalized economy. He sees a movement toward a two-party system that divides over the fundamental issue of community. On one side is the party of the global economy; on the other is the party of local community.

The natural membership of the community party consists of small farmers, ranchers, and market gardeners, worried consumers, owners and employees of small shops, stores, community banks, and other small businesses, self-employed people, religious people, and conservationists. The aims of this party are only two: the preservation of ecological diversity and integrity, and the renewal, on sound cultural and ecological principles, of local economics and local communities.<sup>5</sup>

In Mexico, Pope John Paul II, in January 1999, clearly aligned himself with those who support local cultures and the environment against the forces of "neoliberalism" and "homogenization":

However, if globalization is ruled merely by the laws of the market applied to suit the powerful, the consequences cannot but be negative. These are, for example, the absolutizing of the economy, unemployment, the reduction and deterioration of public services, the destruction of the environment and natural resources, the growing distance between rich and poor, unfair competition which puts the poor nations in a situation of ever increasing inferiority.<sup>6</sup>

The Church in America is called...to cooperate with every legitimate means in reducing the negative effects of globalization, such as the domination of the powerful over the weak, especially in the economic sphere, and the loss of the

<sup>5</sup>Wendell Berry, *Another Turn of the Crank* (Washington, DC: Counterpoint, 1995) 18.

<sup>6</sup>John Paul II, *Ecclesia in America* §20, n.p. [cited 8 February 2000]. Online: <http://www.petersnet.net/research/retrieve.cfm?RecNum=819>.

values of local cultures in favor of a misconstrued homogenization.<sup>7</sup> More and more, in many countries of America, a system known as “neoliberalism” prevails; based on a purely economic conception of man, this system considers profit and the law of the market as its only parameters, to the detriment of the dignity of and the respect due to individuals and peoples. At times this system has become the ideological justification for certain attitudes and behavior in the social and political spheres leading to the neglect of the weaker members of society. Indeed, the poor are becoming ever more numerous, victims of specific policies and structures which are often unjust.<sup>8</sup>

The “loss of the values of local cultures” of which John Paul II speaks will include the loss of rural churches; a “misconstrued homogenization” will result simply by allowing “neoliberalism” to prevail. Legitimate means for countering such homogenization and predatory economics include political advocacy, education, and pastoral care of the victims.

Wendell Berry’s analysis and that of John Paul II coincide significantly. “Globalization” refers to the process in economics and communication currently being driven by multinational corporations through economic integration and restructuring. Berry’s “local” or “community” party would be made up of forces that support local cultures and resist “homogenization.” As a nation we take food for granted; as a church we pray for our “daily bread.” We will need to pay more attention to the economic, political, social, cultural, personal, and religious dimensions of the food system. Consider, for example, the following questions:

- Milk: Did the dairy farmer inject the cows with recombinant bovine growth hormone?
- Bread: Was the grain grown by an independent wheat farmer struggling to stay afloat amidst falling commodity prices, diminishing federal subsidies, and multinational interests muscling him from all sides?
- Bacon: Was the pork from one of the massive hog producers and packers gaining control of the industry and polluting rural communities with stench amid tons of waste?
- Cereal: Does the package tell you whether the corn was patented and genetically engineered? Was it grown with pesticides?
- Eggs: Were the chickens raised organically, allowed to range freely, or penned in massive cages? If the label says organic, what does that mean?

#### IV. INDUSTRIALIZATION: AN ASSAULT ON THE FAMILY FARM

The number of family farms has dropped precipitously—by 300,000 since 1979—as multinational agribusiness corporations have gained more control over farm production, commodities, and markets.

In January 1999, people in at least 13 states got sick and several died after eating hot dogs contaminated with the bacteria *Listeria*. The Centers for Disease Con-

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., §55.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., §56.

trol has linked the dramatic increase in food-borne illnesses to the industrialization of agriculture and the enormous size of many processing plants. Still, Agriculture Secretary Dan Glickman recently left open the question of whether the growing concentration in our economy was a good thing or a bad thing.

I believe that is, and should remain, an open question. It's important that agriculture become more productive, more efficient, and more globally competitive. But it's also important that these changes do not come at the expense of family farmers and ranchers who also deserve a fair shake in the marketplace.<sup>9</sup>

But, given the big-farm bias of the USDA, Secretary Glickman is here being disingenuous; government policies do not, in fact, give family farmers the fair shake that he encourages.

James T. Bonnen of the department of agricultural economics at Michigan State University has called the support for family farm agriculture "agrarian fundamentalism," a myth proposed by cynical farm interests and the media. Such agrarian fundamentalism, he says, calls upon people to "save the family farm...from being gobbled up by the evil bankers and corporate America." Bonnen argues that a rural transformation is absolutely inevitable. He blames the other many problems in rural America on the advocacy of the family farm.<sup>10</sup>

In a similar vein, Jim Chen of the University of Minnesota School of Law writes that the agrarian tradition is really one of racism, factionalism, and archaism. "The time has come to retire agrarianism, once and for all," for there is no such thing, he claims, as agrarian virtue:

Those who place their faith in any romantic agrarian ethic—premised on an expectation of enlightened dominion or benign stewardship over the land—will surely be disappointed. In a fallen agrarian world we will surely find that farmers, agribusinesses, and consumers behave less like actors in a morality play pitting dominion against stewardship and more like the ruthless parasites, predators, and competitors that drive evolutionary biology. Farmers are not created; they evolve in a constant struggle for survival. Many adapt; most die. The central institution of agrarian romanticism, the family farm, rests on the shakiest of foundations, the implausible assumption that family owners conserve "natural, human, and financial resources for [their] heirs." The cold, hard reality of survival in this depraved world is that most people, "left to their own devices will not save enough for their own old age," much less leave a legacy for their supposedly beloved heirs. We will have a sustainable system of family farms on the snowy day in Satan's domain when the taxpayers of America decide to stop retiring on the backs of other people's grandchildren and lobby Congress for the wholesale demolition of the Social Security Administration.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup>Dan Glickman, "Remarks" (address to the annual conference of the American Farm Bureau Federation, Albuquerque, NM, 12 January 1999) n.p. [cited 8 February 2000]. Online: <http://www.usda.gov/news/releases/1999/01/0013>.

<sup>10</sup>James T. Bonnen "The Political Economy of U.S. Rural Policy: An Exploration of the Past with Strategies for the Future," *Rural Development Policy Perspectives* (Washington, DC: USDA, 1996) 2.

<sup>11</sup>Jim Chen, "The American Ideology," *Vanderbilt Law Review* 48/4 (1995) 101.

Both Bonnen and Chen predict the inevitable extinction of the family farm and the growth of industrial agriculture. Indeed, they not only predict the success of globalization and industrialization, they encourage it.

What kind of future can we envisage in rural America? Investment agriculture—the industrial or agribusiness model—will likely continue its growth, most notably in grains, poultry, and pork. The role of the traditional family farmer will be limited. These farmers may well be reduced to employee-like status in an increasingly corporate-owned, concentrated, and vertically integrated global system.

Thomas Urban, when president of Pioneer Hi-Bred International, commented: “Production agriculture in the Western world is now entering the last phase of industrialization—the integration of each step in the food production system. Each step is integrated to achieve efficiencies in the use of capital, labor, and technology.”<sup>12</sup>

The growth of industrial agriculture was condemned by the agricultural economist Harold Breimyer of the University of Missouri, Columbia:

The founding of our country was basically an escape from the feudal system in Europe in which the Lords owned all of the land and the serfs worked it for them. Now we’re moving into an industrial situation where the farmers become wage employees, and the masters are a few large corporations.<sup>13</sup>

The current shakeout among family farmers is the result of family farms trying to compete or to hold their own in an increasingly industrialized world. A common characteristic of these farmers is uncertainty about their future in agriculture. They face many questions: Do I take the leap and become bigger? Do I get out now? How long will it be before I’m forced out? The older farmers may hope to ride out their remaining years by holding out until retirement. Current proposed legislative changes in “populist” North Dakota tell us how the scramble for survival is playing out: Several bills have been introduced in the state legislature that would strengthen the “Right to Farm Act” and make the regulation of confined animal feeding operations more difficult. Senate Bill 2366 would exempt animal waste from solid-waste law. Senate Bill 2355 would prevent counties or townships from regulating or zoning CAFOs. House Bill 1397 would prevent any agricultural operation from being regulated locally. All lead inexorably to the further industrialization of agriculture.

## V. SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE AND THE RESPONSE OF THE CHURCH

Another possible direction is that of sustainable agriculture, which argues that no agriculture can be successful in the long run, or even the short run, without

<sup>12</sup>Quoted by Neal Hamilton, “Agriculture without Farmers? Is Industrialization Restructuring American Food Production and Threatening the Future of Sustainable Agriculture?” *Northern Illinois University Law Review* 14/3 (1994) 613.

<sup>13</sup>Harold Breimyer (dinner speech at the annual meeting of the Organization for Competitive Markets, Omaha, NE, August 1998).

caring for the resources needed for its operation. It is this direction that I believe the churches ought to support.

*A Time To Act*, the report of the National Commission on Small Farms, said:

The pace of industrialization of agriculture has quickened. The dominant trend is a few, large, vertically integrated firms controlling the majority of food and fiber products in an increasingly global processing and distribution system. If we do not act now, we will no longer have a choice about the kind of agriculture we desire as a Nation.<sup>14</sup>

In November 1998, the National Catholic Rural Life Conference was joined by the National Farmers' Union, the National Farmers' Organization, the Iowa Attorney General's Office, FARM AID, the National Family Farm Coalition, and others in calling for a Green Ribbon Campaign. This has been taken up as a common effort in many parts of this country, as well as in Canada and England.

The Green Ribbon Campaign is the effort of the Roman Catholic faith community to call attention to the plight of family farmers, to support a safe, healthy environment, to advocate for humane treatment of animals, to seek dignity for immigrants in the food processing plants and for farmworkers, and to support healthy local communities. We wear a green ribbon to show our support, that "we care through prayer."

What else can we do as church people?

- We can oppose the industrialization of agriculture, animal factories, and policies that depopulate the countryside, give us food insecurity, gamble with food safety and food production, put family farmers out of work, and despoil the environment.
- We can encourage church leadership to speak out and encourage grassroots organizations to act.
- We can support an alternative food system that is sustainable or regenerative. We can use the often commercial-quality kitchens in parishes, church halls, and other institutions for local processing centers and incubators for local food production.
- We can use our halls and parking lots for farmers' markets and direct marketing.
- We can have our institutions buy locally and support a regional food system.
- We can support policies that work against the loss of prime farm land, control urban sprawl, and develop balanced approaches to growth.
- We can promote cookbooks for our local communities that provide recipes for local foods and that celebrate special days, seasons, and events for a wider connection between spirituality, the land, and the use of food.

<sup>14</sup>*A Time to Act*, Section II, "Executive Summary" (see note 4).

- We can frequent restaurants in which food is produced by sustainable family farmers from the region.
- We can encourage and support efforts like pasture poultry, pasture pork and beef, and fresh, locally produced vegetables.
- We can encourage labeling that tells us who produced the food, where it was produced, and how it was produced.
- We can support anti-trust activity in food production.

We can do these things to support an alternative to the industrialization of agriculture that has been continuing at an increasingly rapid speed. The churches have always prayed: "Give us this day our daily bread." Now it is time to ensure that our prayer becomes more focused on how that "daily bread" is "given." More and more it comes with hundreds of negative consequences. The church has a role to play in ensuring that quality is an essential element in the future of rural America. It can play that role through moral leadership, issuing advocacy statements, preaching clearly, supporting legislative policies, funding pastoral remedies, and promoting community organizing and other grassroots activities. ⊕