

***For I Was Hungry & You Gave Me Food:
Catholic Reflections on Food,
Farmers and Farmworkers***

*[excerpts from the U.S. Catholic Bishops'
11/03 statement on agricultural issues]*

We seek to address agriculture through the lens of our faith because so much is at stake in moral and human terms. Food sustains life itself; it is not just another product. Providing food for all is a Gospel imperative, not just another policy choice. For many, farming is a way of life, not just another business or industry. Agriculture is the way farmers, ranchers, and farmworkers provide a decent life for their families and help feed a hungry world. It is not just another economic activity.

Agriculture is different because it touches all our lives, wherever we live or whatever we do. It is about how we feed our own families, and the whole human family. It is about how we treat those who put food on our table and those who do not have enough food. It is about what is happening to food and farming, rural communities and villages, in the face of increasing concentration, new technology, and growing globalization in agriculture.

Too many in our Church and nation do not know the world of agriculture. For some, agriculture is a distant reality, little seen and less understood. When we go to the supermarket, we rarely think about where our food comes from, who produces it, who harvests it, or what it takes to process, package, and distribute it. When many of us think about agriculture at all, we worry about the economic cost of groceries and not the environmental cost to our land or the human cost to farmers, farmworkers, and rural communities in the United States and around the world.

We seek to challenge this lack of awareness, which can lead to indifference or excessive self-interest. We focus on the ethics of how food and fiber are produced, how land is protected, and how agriculture is structured, compensated, and regulated to serve the common good.

Six criteria provide a framework for measuring policies related to agriculture in light of Catholic social teaching and the requirements of the common good. They are not comprehensive, nor do they suggest predictable positions on important issues. We hope they will encourage serious, thoughtful debate and dialogue on U.S. agricultural policy, the global agricultural system, and the impact both have on human dignity.

Overcoming Hunger and Poverty

The presence of so much hunger and poverty in our communities, nation, and around the world is a grave moral scandal. The primary goals of agricultural policies should be providing food for all people and reducing poverty among farmers and farmworkers in this country and abroad. A key measure of every agricultural program and legislative initiative is whether it helps the most vulnerable farmers, farmworkers, and their families and whether it contributes to a global food system that provides basic nutrition for all.

***Providing a Safe, Affordable,
and Sustainable Food Supply***

Agricultural systems in the United States have been remarkably successful in providing sufficient, safe, and affordable food for consumers. These strengths should be directed toward serving better the needs and interests of hungry and poor people in the United States and abroad. Caring for land and water resources has become an increasingly important focus within U.S. agriculture. Farmers should expand the use of environmentally sustainable methods so that farmland in the United States can

provide food for generations to come. We are concerned that as a society we continue to lose productive farm land for development as communities and transportation expand. In other parts of the world, agricultural and food supply systems also need to be strengthened. An important measure of international trade and agricultural policies should be how they promote safe and affordable food and sustainable, environmentally sound farming practices.

Ensuring a Decent Life for Farmers and Farmworkers

Food can remain safe and affordable without sacrificing the incomes, health, or lives of farmers and farmworkers. Catholic social teaching insists that all workers deserve wages and benefits sufficient to support a family and live a decent life. Farmers must be able to support themselves and their families through their work and to provide for important needs such as health care and retirement. Farmers and their employees receive less and less of every dollar spent on food. This is a matter of justice that should be addressed.

Agricultural policies must take into consideration the risks associated with farming that are beyond a farmer's control, such as weather and changes in global markets. Trade policies should better reflect the right to economic opportunity of all farmers wherever they may live. Agricultural policies should help ensure basic income security and provide opportunities for economic initiative for farmers in the United States and throughout the world, with special attention to small producers.

Likewise, public policies must address the needs of agricultural workers. A key measure of agricultural, immigration, and labor policies is whether they reflect fundamental respect for the dignity, rights, and safety of agricultural workers and whether they help agricultural workers to provide a decent life for themselves and their families.

Sustaining and Strengthening Rural Communities

In rural areas of the United States and throughout the world, small towns and villages are the backbone of social and economic life. As rural populations decline and rural economies suffer, basic structures of rural life are at risk. Public policies should encourage a wide variety of economic development strategies in rural areas. They should continue to promote and support farming, especially family farms, as a strategy for rural development. Likewise, the practices and policies of Catholic institutions on leasing and ownership of farmland should be consistent with our principles, especially in the area of encouraging young people to enter farming. A key measure of agricultural and development policies is whether they encourage widespread diversity in farm ownership and advance rural development in this country and abroad, promoting and maintaining the culture and values of rural communities.

Protecting God's Creation

Care for God's creation is a central calling for believers. Agricultural and food policies should reward practices that protect human life, encourage soil conservation, improve water quality, protect wildlife, and maintain the diversity of the ecosystem. An essential measure of agricultural and food policies is whether they protect the environment and its diversity and promote sustainable agricultural practices in the United States and abroad.

Expanding Participation

To achieve an agricultural system consistent with these criteria, widespread participation and dialogue in the development of agricultural policies should be encouraged. Truly effective policies will be developed when people who are most affected have adequate information, time, and opportunities for real contributions to legislation, regulations, programs, and trade agreements.