



I.C.R.A.

International Catholic Rural Association



CATHOLIC RURAL LIFE



Faith, Food & the Environment

Vocation of the Agricultural Leader

Integrating Faith with Agriculture and the Environment

A REFLECTION

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Today, the world produces more food than ever before, as incredible advances in agricultural technology and models of heightened efficiency have combined to create bountiful yields and a surplus of life-giving sustenance.¹

Yet the development of globalized and industrialized food systems has not come about without its share of alarming consequences: family farms are being squeezed out of existence by the powerful forces of a global market; new technologies, while promising greater food security, pose ethical challenges and threaten long-term sustainability; and industrialized systems of food production all too often lend themselves to wasteful and destructive practices that degrade the environment and have an impact far beyond the farm. Furthermore, despite the bounty provided by contemporary models of farming, there has been a failure to ensure that all are being fed, as an alarming number of men, women, and children around the world go hungry or are undernourished due to structural flaws in our food systems and public policies.

“Agriculture should be thought of as a *vocation*, a form of life through which God can be known, served, and glorified.”

These troubling consequences are not a result of any particular practice or technology. Instead, they are the product of an approach that treats agriculture solely as an economic endeavor, one only concerned with maximizing profits and minimizing costs, and disconnected from larger questions concerning the social, material, and spiritual well-being of all.

This approach is problematic and harmful to the vitality of humanity and the planet that sustains us. Clearly, the dominant modern approach to agriculture is in need of an ethical foundation, one that prioritizes the dignity of the human person and the common good and connects farming and food to principles beyond economic metrics.

This foundation can be found in the Christian tradition. This tradition teaches us that producing and distributing food is not a transaction devoid of moral content and ultimate significance. Instead, agriculture should be thought of as a *vocation*, a form of life through which God can be known, served, and glorified. Inspired by knowing that the Father freely created the earth for man’s well-being, we have a duty to “cultivate and to keep” this gift. Farmers uniquely cooperate with God’s plan by feeding his children and acting as stewards of his creation. This vocational understanding of agriculture, that God calls us to be stewards of his earth and each other, must be explored and expanded, thereby enabling leaders in food production and distribution “to see,” “to judge” and “to act” in accordance with a faith-based perspective.

SEEING

There are many factors shaping global food systems and its impact on farming communities and the environment. Five areas in particular demand urgent attention:

1. **Globalization of Industrialized Agriculture:** The world market and the expansion of industrialized methods have stacked the deck in favor of powerful, private interests. This is observable at the local and international level, as family and small-scale farmers are pushed off their land and into poverty, and developing countries are pressured into trade arrangements and practices that are detrimental to their long-term well-being.
2. **Financialization:** Agriculture is increasingly and exclusively thought of in terms of profit, resulting in many short-sighted practices that have harmful results for both human communities and the natural environment.
3. **Agricultural Knowledge and Technology:** New technologies have created solutions to many perplexing problems, but often implementation is not guided by a mindset with the well-being of the human person as a focal point. Use of technology in this matter threatens ecological sustainability, a fair and competitive marketplace, and access to work that affirms human dignity. Additionally, research is typically driven by large agribusinesses at the expense of smaller operations.
4. **Technocracy:** An overemphasis on examining problems exclusively through technical perspectives has diverted our attention from larger questions of human flourishing.
5. **Ecological Impacts and Balances:** An excessive reliance upon the use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides has caused demonstrable and significant degradation of the natural environment. This not only hurts members of the human family now, most usually the poor and the marginalized, but it also threatens long-term ecological sustainability.



*“So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything,
but only God who gives the growth.”*

1 CORINTHIANS 3:7

GLOBALIZATION OF INDUSTRIALIZED AGRICULTURE

21. *Globalization* and the process of integrating national economies on a worldwide basis have created a global exchange of agricultural commodities and goods. Aided by information and communication technologies, there has been increased linkages and concentration at almost all stages of the food production and marketing chain. From a purely market-based and capital-growth measurement, globalization is an unprecedented success for those with enough economic power and influence to profit from its realization.

22. Food production on a global scale must be placed not merely at the service of corporate profits, but at the service of authentic human development. For those left on the margins of this new world economic order, globalization has left national and local governments and economies often ceding fundamental sovereignty as their regional agricultural production becomes increasingly subject to larger international entities. Unable to compete due to their disproportionately diminished ability to participate in markets, many local food producers are forced to abide by the demands of larger, foreign, international entities, whose regard for local traditions and customs are rarely considered. This situation leads to disenfranchisement of local producers, economic dislocation, rural-to-urban migration, and the inability of governments to properly regulate capital flows and enforce environmental protections.

23. Globalization and international economic policies can have positive effects, such as competitive pricing and efficient distribution, but these possibilities are often not realized in practice. Large-scale, industrial agricultural enterprises can sometimes be undertaken without regard to the needs of and implications for local communities, leading to the potential abuse of the regional lands, animals, or the dehumanization of the peoples called upon to work in such environments. Many of these abuses are also identified in *Vocation of the Business Leader*, *Terra e Cibo*, and *Laudato Si*.⁹ Faith-filled agricultural leaders are charged with a special task to face such challenges with honesty and hope as the consequences of globalized agricultural operations are often left unexamined.

18. It is therefore imperative that agricultural leaders exercise the courage to call out and break any cycle of dehumanization and environmental degradation that can often accompany large-scale operations. It is only a failure of our moral imagination, not technology itself, which contributes to widespread abuse. When agricultural leaders commit to faith-filled service to authentic human flourishing, it is sure to yield a more creative and constructive solution, one that achieves its aims, not merely from an economic vantage, but from a humane consideration of the peoples it is called to serve. As the *Vocation of the Business Leader* states: “[Businesses] contribute best when their activities are allowed to be oriented toward, and be fully respectful of, the dignity of people as ends in themselves who are intelligent, free, and social.”⁸

19. Among the many factors that shape agriculture and food production around the world, there are five that have profound ethical dimensions and are currently the source of great moral concern. In one sense, these factors have shaped the method and development of agriculture throughout the modern era. In a more urgent sense, these factors appear to be leading to serious problems and conflicts with the sustainable supply of food.

20. We identify these as: (1) globalization of industrialized agriculture; (2) financialization of agricultural commodities; (3) technocracy; (4) agricultural knowledge and technology; and (5) ecological changes and balance. There are other factors that have a bearing on agriculture and food production today—state regulation, international standards and rules, food consumer movements, peasant farmer campaigns, water availability, to name a few—all which deserve analysis. In this reflection we will focus on five.

“But if anyone has the world’s good and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God’s love abide in him?”

1 JOHN 3:17

24. The pressures from globalization on a larger scale have left many small-scale producers vulnerable to volatile international market conditions and international competition. According to the International Assessment for Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development, the globalization of agriculture has been accompanied by concentration of market power away from multiple producers into the hands of a limited number of large-scale trade and retail agribusiness companies.¹⁰ Corporate concentration has taken over every link in the agri-food value chain. Some believe this creates a more efficient flow of food; others see it as a chokehold on farmers and consumers alike. With costs continuing to rise for agricultural inputs and food products, which spiked for consumers in 2007–08, corporate agribusiness conglomerates continue to exercise a disproportionate dominance. Globalization and trade liberalization have been uneven for the many kinds of farmers and farm operations around the world; they have been notably worse for the family and peasant farmers, particularly those struggling to emerge from rural poverty.

25. The agricultural leader is called to see that the life of faith entails the fundamental obligations to justice and equity. Markets must be understood as ordered to the integral development of peoples, not merely as venues or exchanges for the sake of profits alone. It is not consistent with one’s life in Christ to ignore the total context of decisions and their impact on communities, especially the poor. As Pope Francis has written:

Civil authorities have the right and duty to adopt clear and firm measures in support of small producers and differentiated production. (LS 129)



FINANCIALIZATION

26. Financialization of business enterprises worldwide, clearly including agribusiness and agricultural commodities, has intensified tendencies to commodify the goals of production and to emphasize wealth maximization and short-term gains at the exclusion of working for the common good.

27. In recent decades, macro-economic conditions have made farmland and primary food production more attractive to investors and corporate entities. This global economic restructuring of agriculture has spread to more and more countries, which in turn often leads to fewer, larger, and more highly industrialized farms. Agribusiness conglomerates seek capital to fuel further consolidation in order to achieve economies of scale in agri-food production processes. As a result, agricultural investment firms are purchasing farmland in various regions and for a variety commodity crops. Rather than families farming on the land, who have a greater investment in the local economy, whose aim for a successful enterprise would also include a commitment to upholding the dignity of those involved in the operation, farm management is carried out by more anonymous entities: the firm, tenant farmers, or other third parties.¹¹

28. While abuses of local regions and cultures is certainly not an inherent feature of corporate investing, agricultural leaders must have the courage to conduct an honest evaluation of their existing financial practices in light of their deeper vocation in Christ and their responsibility for the common good. Tradition affirms that an account will indeed be required of each of us, precisely in terms of how we have served “the least” among us. As Pope Francis has expressed:

Land grabbing, deforestation, expropriation of water, inappropriate pesticides: these are some of the evils which uproot people from their native land. This separation is not only physical, but existential and spiritual because there is a relationship with the land. This sad separation is putting rural communities and their special way of life in notorious decline and even at risk of extinction.¹²



29. Agriculture, even on a large scale, as a legitimate business endeavor, can create opportunities for communities to participate fully in their own integral development. To approach agriculture merely as the creation of a market commodity to be exchanged exclusively in light of maximum profits reduces this noble undertaking to mere profit-taking. The agricultural leader has the unique responsibility to guide financial endeavors in accord with human flourishing, not merely the making of money. By serving the common good through the creation of and participation among fair exchanges, the agricultural leader can be a catalyst for authentic human flourishing.

“For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

MATTHEW 6:21



AGRICULTURAL KNOWLEDGE AND TECHNOLOGY

30. Food production in today’s contemporary setting often relies on sophisticated technology and the cooperation of several distinct communities. It is part of the dignity of man to exercise his ingenuity and develop the resources of the earth. The processes of development, however, can sometimes obscure the fundamental reality that God is He who provides our daily bread. “For in Him we live, move, and have our being” (Acts 17:28). Food reveals our complete dependence upon the earth for our lives; food production and agricultural development do not displace the presence of God, but allow us to participate in God’s care for us.

31. New knowledge and technology have created solutions and products for improved agricultural production, including aquaponics and the manipulation of crop seeds and animal breeds. But ethical questions are raised in respect to such manipulation as well as overall farm practices, livestock production, resource management, environmental impacts, international trade, and more. Additional questions are raised about control of the research agenda by large and powerful entities and whether this favors corporate agribusiness interests over family and peasant farms and local communities.

32. How do we design agricultural science and technology as an institution that will forthrightly examine the growing social and economic disparities among the world’s farmers and the degradation of ecosystems in many parts of the world? To ask this in a positive way, who will lead agricultural science and technology to have a positive impact on development of rural communities (including and respecting indigenous peoples)? Such questions cannot be resolved by the application of mere technical assistance. Instead, a genuine conversion of heart and a vision for the dignity of those participating in the food production chain are essential. Such a re-imagining of our food chain demands the mature efforts of leaders working in deliberate co-operation with all of the members of the production process, including farm managers, food processors, distributors, and financial institutions.

33. We are encouraged by the unique effort that led to an International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development (2009) that articulated the importance of studying and understanding the demands that are likely to be made on all manner of agricultural systems in the future: crops, livestock and pastoralism, fisheries, forestry and agro-forestry, biomass, commodities, and ecosystem services. Their synthesized report made clear that society must evaluate the agricultural goods and services we will need under different scenarios in order to achieve the goals related to hunger, nutrition, human health, poverty, equity, livelihoods, and environmental sustainability.¹³ The result of such studies can lead to a realistic guide for agricultural policy and decision-making.

“Do nothing from selfishness or conceit, but in humility count others better than yourselves.”

PHILIPPIANS 2:3

TECHNOCRACY AND POWER

34. Whereas the previous factors we have identified—globalization, financialization, and agricultural knowledge and technology—emerged out of our symposium discussions supported by research studies and organizational reports, this next factor was articulated by Pope Francis in his encyclical, *Laudato Si’*. In chapter three of his letter, addressed “to all men and women of good will,” he writes about our technical prowess and how this “creativity and power has brought us to a crossroads” (LS 102).

“O Lord, how manifold are your works! In wisdom you have made them all; the earth is full of your creatures.”

PSALM 104:24

35. We are the beneficiaries of two centuries of enormous waves of change, he wrote, which have brought about the invention and development of steam engines, railways, electricity, automobiles (including tractors and farm equipment, we might add), chemical industries, information technology and, more recently, biotechnologies. “It is right to rejoice in these advances and to be excited by the immense possibilities which they continue to open up before us, for ‘science and technology are wonderful products of a God-given human creativity’” (*LS 102*).

36. “Technology has remedied countless evils which used to harm and limit human beings,” Pope Francis goes on to say, so how can we not feel gratitude and appreciation for this progress? Besides great improvements in the fields of medicine, engineering, and communications, we can add agricultural improvements in seeds, crop yields, livestock production, and virtually all along the food chain line from field to fork.

37. But Pope Francis warns that technology is also powerful, and not every increase in power is an increase of progress. We need a “culture and spirituality genuinely capable of setting limits and teaching clear-minded self-restraint” (*LS 105*) in order to use technologies ethically. Science and technology are not neutral. Many environmental problems stem from the tendency to make the method and aims of science and technology a “one-dimensional paradigm” that shapes the lives of individuals and the workings of society. Our current dominant technocratic paradigm has gone awry to the serious detriment of the world around us.

38. We need to “slow down and look at reality in a different way,” so that we can “appropriate the positive and sustainable progress which has been made” and “recover the values and the great goals swept away by our unrestrained delusions of grandeur” (*LS 114*).

39. Whereas men and women have constantly intervened in nature, there was a time we did so in tune with nature—receiving what nature itself allowed, as if from its own hand. (*LS 106*). Now, by contrast, we are the ones to lay our hands on things, attempting to extract everything possible from the land while frequently ignoring or forgetting the reality in front of us. Our relationship has become confrontational; we are squeezing the planet dry by going beyond every limit. This behavior is enabled by the false notion that “an infinite quantity of energy and resources are available, that it is possible to renew them quickly, and that the negative effects of the exploitation of the natural order can be easily absorbed.”¹⁴

40. The technocratic paradigm also tends to dominate economics and political life, and this of course has a substantive impact on the primary sector of any economy: agriculture. Every advance in technology is hailed according to its efficiency in generating profit; less concern is given to impacts on the environment and in some notable cases, human beings and communities. We are slow in learning the lessons of environmental deterioration; financial interests fail to heed more balanced levels of production, a better distribution of wealth, concern for the environment and the rights of future generations. We appear blind to the deepest roots of our present failures.

ECOLOGICAL IMPACTS AND BALANCES

41. The call to be protectors of the land and creatures of the earth is integral and all-embracing, as we are called to serve as stewards of the earth. As Christians, we are called to protect and care for both creation and the human person. These concepts are reciprocal and together they make for authentic and sustainable human development. Dominion over the earth can only be exercised in communion with God, among men, with all living beings, and with the whole of creation.

42. A 2014 pastoral letter of the Irish Bishops echoes this point: “Our earth is complex, its systems of life are interdependent and finely balanced. Small changes in one part of the planet’s rhythms and systems can have significant, if not dramatic consequences for the whole of the earth and its creatures.” For the natural environment to be respected, the human environment and its objective moral structure must also be respected. When we ignore or neglect one, it has a destructive impact on the other.

43. Stating the obvious, agriculture requires some degree of change to the natural ecosystem in order to produce the food, fiber, and other needs of human use and development. Agricultural production produces amazing yields, but without proper stewardship it may compromise soil quality, lessen biodiversity, and create a concentration of by-product wastes. Small-scale farming can also damage the local environment, but the emergence of agro-ecological practices and sustainable land management technologies are exemplary remedies aimed at an improved agriculture that benefits both the land and the human family. The challenge for large-scale industrial agricultural leaders is to strike the necessary balance between sufficient yields of agricultural commodities without undermining the natural environment. The runoff of fertilizers and concentrated sources of livestock waste damage aquifers, rivers, lakes, and even oceans—with costly effects on drinking water quality and other water uses.



44. Climate changes will intensify the impacts of these ecological changes and imbalances. Many parts of the world are experiencing extreme weather events, such as prolonged droughts and epic storms and floods. More insidious impacts include the drawdown of water resources and the increased presence of pests and diseases. Agricultural leaders, if they are to guide us through this coming era of environmental imbalances and climate change, will need to wisely integrate a multitude of functions that sustain soil, water, biodiversity, a wide variety of producers and ecosystems, ample nutrition for a growing world population, and food security for all.

45. Now is the time for concerted action. Appropriate governance structures and institutions related to the interrelated issues of food, water, energy, and climate change will be crucial for the future of the world, and more immediately for the poor and hungry. In order to do so, let us remind ourselves and reflect upon the ethical principles—the values—that create the impetus for fair, just, and right-minded action.



“Trust in the Lord, and do good; dwell in the land and befriend faithfulness.”

PSALM 37

JUDGING: A VISION FOR THE AGRICULTURAL LEADER

46. It is essential to remember, if we are not to lose hope, that the shortcomings of our present circumstances identified above are not meant to indict those who earn their livelihood from agribusiness or food production. If anything, these observations are meant to awaken a profound sense of the great promise and responsibility God grants to those who serve others in the production, processing, and distribution of nutritious food. Whether directly through farm management, more remotely in corporate centers of global food enterprises, or in the national and international policy arenas, the agricultural leader is entrusted with a task of immense importance. If attention is brought to the genuine difficulties of the present situation, it is not in a spirit of futility, but one of hope and expectation—a hope that is made possible through a deeper appropriation of one’s Christian vocation. When faced with the extraordinary challenges of creating more just and sustainable food systems, it is essential to keep in mind the consoling words of our Lord Himself: “For mortals it is impossible, but for God all things are possible” (Mt 19:26).

SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE AND THE FAMILY

47. The term “sustainable agriculture” is now used by many actors and stakeholders in the agricultural world. This has the effect of making the term pliable to the needs and purposes of many differing groups and perspectives, so much so that the term may be losing its original meaning. We wish to affirm the basic meaning of sustainable agriculture:

- to satisfy human food and fiber (for clothing, products, etc.) needs;
- to enhance environmental quality and the regenerative capacities of the natural resource base upon which the agricultural economy depends;
- to make the most efficient use of nonrenewable and on-farm resources and integrate, where appropriate, natural biological cycles and controls;
- to sustain the economic viability of farm and ranch operations; and
- to enhance the quality of life for farmers, ranchers, and society as a whole.¹⁶

48. We assert, however, that sustainable agriculture is a meaningless goal unless it includes a consideration of human life, especially the life of the family. For as Christians, we are not called merely to sustain some biological homeostasis. Instead, we are tasked with fostering the natural conditions in which each human person may come to their full stature as a son or daughter of God. This is the noble vision we anticipate and call forth from agricultural leaders. Each one of us must honestly examine our practices and address the question: how do I give witness to the promotion and sustainability of a culture of life?

49. Pope Saint John Paul II spoke of the need to respect the constituent and inter-related elements of the natural world: “One cannot use with impunity the different categories of beings . . . animals, plants, the natural elements—simply as one wishes, according to one’s own economic needs. On the contrary, one must take into account the nature of each being and of its mutual connection in an ordered system, which is precisely the cosmos.”¹⁷

50. The call to be protectors of the land and the earth is integral and all-embracing. As Christians, we are called to protect and care for both creation and the human person. These concepts are reciprocal and together they make for authentic and sustainable human development. Dominion over the earth can only be exercised in communion with God, among men, with all living beings and with the whole of creation. For the natural environment to be respected, the human environment and its objective moral structure must also be respected. When we ignore or neglect one, it has a destructive effect on the other. The trans-genetic modification of creatures, for example, is not merely an instance of making changes at the organic level of a particular kind of creature. Its impact includes ecosystems and social networks of food production as well. Such modifications of a creature must be undertaken only in deliberate deference to the order and wisdom of creation of which it is a part, with utmost care and prudent circumspection, when proportionate goods are clearly identified and reasonably expected, and other reasonable alternatives have been considered, including the modification of our lifestyles of consumption. As *Laudato Si'* confirms,

The precautionary principle makes it possible to protect those who are most vulnerable and whose ability to defend their interests and to assemble incontrovertible evidence is limited. If objective information suggests that serious and irreversible damage may result, a project should be halted or modified even in the absence of indisputable proof. Here the burden of proof is effectively reversed, since in such cases objective and conclusive demonstrations will have to be brought forward to demonstrate that the proposed activity will not cause serious harm to the environment or to those who inhabit it. (*LS* 186)

THE IMPORTANCE OF FAMILY FARMS

51. No obligations to care for the environment, however, ought to distract us from the primary duty to protect human life, especially the family. For many generations, and in many countries to this day, the essential community of production is the family, including its extended members. The family farm allows for the creative participation on the part of many members of the community, children, and the elderly in particular, who in more industrial urban centers are now often marginalized in terms of their contribution to the well-being of the household.

52. Contemporary circumstances make the reality of the family farm more difficult. Without retreating into an overly romantic view of the past, we can say that the situation is a cause of grave concern for a number of reasons. Communities are depleted and unable to sustain themselves due to the lack of participating members and future generations. There is an ironic quality to rural communities; namely, that despite the remarkable tradition of abundance and productive efficiency, the communities themselves are struggling to survive. Again, the widespread endorsement of an industrial approach to what is fundamentally an organic reality contributes to the creation of these social contradictions.

53. In many countries of the world, those who worked the land had remarkable gifts of hospitality and sharing, due to their own understanding that the earth itself was a gift. Such traditions are not entirely dormant. Retrieving these habits of solidarity, even in industrialized societies, can be possible. The result is not only the production of wealth but the overcoming of individualism and selfishness.



SUSTAINABLE NUTRITION AND FOOD SECURITY

54. Healthy food itself is not simply a product like any other. Food is essential to human flourishing; its production is therefore yoked to the very fundamental demands of what is due in justice to one's family and neighbors. Its sustainable production is therefore a fundamental obligation. The right to nutritious food is intimately linked to the right to human life and must be respected in its entirety. It is not possible to love one's neighbor and have no regard for the quality or reliability of his food sources.

55. This connection between food production and regard for the other, especially the poor, is affirmed in the ancient prohibition against "second harvesting," or gleaning, meaning to gather (e.g., grain, etc.) after the reapers or regular gatherers, which was expected of Israel precisely as a consequence of their covenantal relationship with God. Agriculture, in that setting, was not merely an occupation, but a responsibility—a response to what God has done for his people.

56. The right to food encompasses steady and regular access to nutritious food. Be it nourishment for a society, city, community, or family household, food security exists when all members, at all times, have access to enough food for an active, healthy life. World summits and global declarations on food security regularly commit to the fight against hunger wherever food insecurity persists. Given that it is secure access to food that is the critical problem (as opposed to insufficient production of food), the question is closely tied to market access, poverty, and politics.

57. While some argue for the expansion of free and open global markets to reduce food insecurities, others call for the development of local agriculture appropriate to a region or area. Care must be taken, however, not to create a dependency on a single agricultural commodity, especially for export, in the promise that this "economic development" will create local employment and income. For as a region's "land wealth" is exchanged through its exports, the temporary income this may achieve can leave the community impoverished as more and more imported foods are then needed in order to sustain healthy local communities. A fair and balanced commodity of goods for the market and local food production is a prudent course.

RESPECTING THE DIGNITY OF FARMERS

58. That farmers and their families are tied to the land in a fundamental way is a seemingly obvious fact, but one that is easily overlooked in our increasingly industrialized and urban lifestyles and imaginations. Farmers engage in a distinctive endeavor where they are not at liberty to simply “pull up stakes and go” when things do not turn out according to their plans. They are invested in a place, and therefore a community, sometimes for several generations. Their expertise is not capable of easy transport from one set of circumstances to the next. It is precisely due to their long-term commitment to a specific place and their promise of stability that makes family farms successful. It is necessary, therefore, that prudent safeguards be put in place to protect family farms from the vagaries of market and climate volatility. Farming is about patience and endurance, courage and hope, steadfastness and commitment, as it is an enterprise whose outcome is not always guaranteed. The success of farmers is essential to human flourishing and ought to be regarded with a spirit of encouragement and hope. Agricultural leaders are to take as their model the farmer described in the letter of St. James, who is routinely patient before the Lord and his ways. “Behold, the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient over it until it receives the early and the late rain. You also be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand” (Jas 5:7). If committed to a spirit of Christian service and humility to one’s family, one’s neighbor (seen and unseen), and God, agricultural leadership can be a path of heroic sanctity.

59. Agricultural labor is often arduous and is, in many circumstances, undertaken in solitude. The Church’s spiritual patrimony seems especially suited for this reality. Both the traditions of the Christian East and West have affirmed that faithful labor has been a path to sanctity. To all agricultural laborers she says: your work often unfolds in secret, but you are never alone. The loving eye of our heavenly Father looks upon you; St. Joseph the patron of workers, Sts. Isidore and Maria, and the communion of saints are among you; indeed, the whole Church enjoins you in your efforts when she prays at her liturgy the ancient prayer of blessing: “Blessed are you, Lord God of all creation, for through your goodness we have received the bread we offer you” and the whole of the faithful responds: Blessed be God forever! The heroic efforts of you, agricultural workers, are not ignored. Instead, united with the prayers of the whole Church, your efforts to transform the world, to bring to fruition the Providence of the Father, are brought to a culmination in each Eucharistic sacrifice.

60. The *Vocation of the Business Leader* speaks of the importance of developing a spirituality of God’s presence throughout life, especially in one’s work situation. In agriculture especially, developing the spiritual posture of receptivity, of recognizing that one’s capacity to produce something of value is due to one’s prior status as a creature sustained by God seems especially fitting. Citing Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, the document affirms that the person, “comes in the profoundest sense to himself not through what he does but through what he accepts” (67). Perhaps in no other occupation is dependence upon the Creator more pronounced than in that of agriculture. This is not mere pious rhetoric or the musings of a romantic, but a central insight into the vocation of the agricultural leader. Those who work so closely with creation work in the company of God.

THE ETHICS OF EATING AND CONSUMING

61. As a final social principle to bear in mind, we ask agricultural leaders to heed the growing voice of consumers who want to purchase and consume foods that are not only nutritious, but produced in fair, just, and ethical ways. Just as men and women of faith are called to grow and care for what is good for the earth, we must also choose to eat what is good to grow. Organic, fair trade, all natural, cage-free, ecosystem-protected—these are just a few of the new food choices that consumers are making in solidarity with farmers who practice an ethical agriculture. We ask agricultural leaders to respect these choices and create the standards and practices for ethical food systems.

62. Agricultural leaders must also help overcome the great travesty of food waste. This is an unfortunate type of “consumption” that prevents food from reaching the mouths of those in need and, instead, goes to waste in fields, processing facilities, transportation services, supermarket discards, restaurant dumpsters, and even from our own tables. It is especially tragic considering the millions who go without adequate nutrition each day. A structural approach must be taken to ensure that the fruits of our fields reach those in need. It is imperative that we create a community in which the virtue of temperance, that is, taking personal responsibility for the moderate and balanced consumption of one’s food, be yoked to the virtue of justice, our concern for our neighbor.

63. In summary, the creation of a sustainable and just world calls for a virtue-based approach. Agricultural leaders, especially at national and international policy levels, know the extent of food, hunger, and poverty problems the world faces. A virtue-based approach—one we believe should be based on Christian values—can reshape the economy with a more human face. Only by locating the economy within the just needs of society and the ecological balance of the earth can we turn from the disastrous path we are on.

64. Therefore, now is the time for concerted action. Appropriate governance structures and institutions related to the interrelated issues of food, water, energy, and climate change will be crucial for the future of the world, and more immediately for the poor and hungry. What can Christian and faith-based organizations around the world do about these challenges? How can they walk alongside agricultural leaders in this urgent endeavor? Each in their own ways, how can agricultural leaders analyze their respective situations, apply the teachings of their faith, and provide a new course of action?



“But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.”

JOSHUA 24:15

ACTING: FROM ASPIRATIONS TO PRACTICE

65. We began this reflection by recalling our original vocation as the children of God: “To cultivate and to keep the earth.” Throughout human history, we have come to see agriculture focused on the family as the best model for living on the land. We hold a deep preference for the family farm and maintain a great respect for the farmer as a provider of food and a caretaker of the land. But we also realize that we operate in a world of globalized markets that are shaped and bent by the powers of financialization and technocracy.

66. It remains our concern that industrial-scale farming is given undue support and attention in comparison to family farms. Equally troubling is the increasingly adverse ecological impacts brought about by an industrial model of mono-cultural, energy-intensive, soil-depleting, and chemical-dependent production. The 2008 world food crisis was an important catalyst for realizing the need for a fundamental transformation of the assumptions that have driven food, agricultural, and trade policy for too long. So we ask agricultural leaders who share these concerns to enter into dialogue with the many stakeholders who seek to contribute and participate meaningfully once again in food production. This must urgently happen at all levels: political, economic, and social, from local decision-making to international agreements.

67. Central to such transformative dialogue is our fervent belief in the oneness of humanity as children of one God and common citizens of the one earth. We heard this refrain in our many conversations with farmers and other stakeholders around the world, both in developed economies and emerging ones. In the cultivating and keeping of their parcels of land, no matter how small or large, they felt a bond to a much deeper and greater common home, the earth. As Pope Francis has said: “Interdependence obliges us to think of *one world with a common plan*” (LS 164). Thus we ask agricultural leaders to serve the Lord in a spirit of faith, courage, and practical wisdom.

68. The fundamental transformation of agriculture may well turn out to be one of the great challenges for this century. International security remains a major challenge, but this will be aggravated (or eased) by the level of food security in various parts of the world. The nexus of food-water-energy calls for an ecological balance that cannot be regained under the current model or paradigm of technocratic production. The world needs a paradigm shift in agriculture: the “green revolution” of high inputs must now be converted into an integral ecology: one that considers both agricultural efficiency and integrity.

69. Therefore, the required transformation is more profound than simply making minor adjustments to the existing food systems. In line with agricultural research that properly addresses environmental impacts, it is time to institute more diversified and innovative forms of agricultural production that function in greater harmony with the environment, both natural and human. Various reports support such a systemic turn; the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, as one example, lists these elements of the ecological transformation now required for agriculture:

- increasing soil carbon;
- optimization of organic and inorganic fertilizer use;
- reduction of direct and indirect greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions of livestock production;
- reduction of indirect GHG emissions through sustainable land management;
- reduction of waste throughout the food chain (farm to market to consumer);
- changing dietary patterns towards climate friendly food consumption; and
- reform of the international trade regime for food and agricultural products.¹⁸

70. Despite the challenges, we are compelled to reiterate that farming is a noble vocation. Farming produces the most basic and fundamental form of wealth—and improves our world in doing so. It can be a fruitful source of prosperity for the areas in which it operates; it allows families to stay on the land, creating for themselves a decent life, which in turn carries out an essential service to the common good.

71. The agricultural leader who aspires to this vision can help create economic systems that are worthy expressions of our most noble human qualities—striving intelligently, boldly, and responsibly to promote a sustainable and equitable quality of life on the land. Agriculture has always meant work, and it cannot be forgotten that historically such work was seen as drudgery and low in social standing. But an enlightened and right-minded economy can overcome such dismal conditions. Again, we are inspired by the words of Pope Francis in *Laudato Si'*:

We were created with a vocation to work. The goal should not be that technological progress increasingly replaces human work, for this would be detrimental to humanity. Work is a necessity, part of the meaning of life on this earth, a path to growth, human development and personal fulfillment. (LS 128)



72. Political and institutional frameworks need to promote policies able to support sustainable practices and also able to dissuade agricultural producers concerning practices that harm farm communities and the land. Political activity—ranging from the local level to national policies—must also be directed to modifying industrial production, protecting biodiversity and other ecological goods, and planning for a diversified agriculture and the rotation of crops. Because each country or region has its own problems and limitations, there can be no simplified “one size fits all” solution. Through dialogue with the relevant partners, attending to the larger connections within the fabric of life, and a prayerful and honest discernment of the vocation of farming, newer solutions can be achieved. By possessing a more comprehensive vision of agriculture, social and cultural changes are set in motion toward a new kind of agriculture that our vulnerable world now needs.

“For truly I tell you, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you.”

MATTHEW 17:20

CONCLUSION: GRATITUDE TO THE AGRICULTURAL LEADER

73. Our confidence in Jesus Christ as both the Redeemer of the World and the one “through whom all things were made” ultimately transforms our relationship to the earth and creation at large. The task of cultivating the earth is intimately tied to our lives in Christ. The affirmation of the goodness of creation allows us to see the earth from a perspective different from that of mere use and efficiency. It is, rather, a gift to be shared in community with others and humility before God.

74. These insights shared here will require a new global solidarity, one in which everyone has a part to play and every action, no matter how small, can make a difference. Our solidarity with others has a two-fold dimension. The first is rooted in our dependence upon the one God, Father of us all. The second is rooted in our dependence upon the one earth, home for humanity. All of us share this dual heritage: created by God and fashioned from the earth. And so all of us are bound to care for the soil. In doing so, we care for each other. Whether we cultivate the soil directly or live off the labor of those who do, each one reveals the earth from where we came. Created immortal by God and destined for eternity, the human person, nonetheless, is of the earth. To cultivate it and to keep the earth is part of our promise to God and our solidarity with each other.

75. The complexity of these challenges will call forth humility and dialogue. Humbly listening to the message of God, our neighbors, and creation itself becomes the ultimate way through which these challenges will be met: dialogue with God in prayer and contemplation, dialogue with our neighbor in justice and solidarity, dialogue even with creation in humility, wonder, and gratitude. It will demand our earnest prayers, prayers for vision, for courage, for hope, for steadfast service to one’s family, neighbors, and future generations.

76. The numerous examples of faithful stewardship in the Sacred Scriptures and the many lessons from our Lord himself that draw heavily upon farming provide ample material for further reflection and encouragement. Tradition and charity allow us to imagine, that while Jesus had Mary’s eyes, he had Joseph’s way of seeing the world. It is not impossible to imagine that it was through the daily labors he shared with Joseph and all those who worked on the land that Jesus came to see the truth and dignity of agricultural labor, for He himself says “that the kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field” (Mt 13:27). Agricultural leaders, and farmers in particular, take pride in your work as witnesses of the ways of the Lord.



APPENDIX

Personal/Local

1. How do I live out my work as a farmer or rancher, or someone involved in the food industry, as a vocation given by God?
2. In what ways do I acknowledge that I am dependent upon the livelihoods of others, and thus my decision-making ought to include the perspectives of others, including the marginalized?
3. Do I recognize that my work plays an essential role in the building up of the common good of the human family?
4. Am I convinced I am an essential contributor in God's plan of justice for the human family?
5. Do I practice principles of justice and solidarity in my dealings?
6. How might understanding my work as one co-operating in God's provident care shape my approach to my daily tasks?
7. How do my practices promote the dignity of those around me?
8. How do I recognize that the Lord is the primary "owner" of my land?
9. How do my decisions reflect a commitment to contributing to an integral human ecology for generations to come?
10. How do I witness to faith, hope, and charity in my life as an agricultural leader?
11. How do I give witness to the promotion and sustainability of a culture of life?
12. Have I committed my life and livelihood in service to Christ?

Global

1. How do we design agricultural science and technology as an institution that will forthrightly examine the growing social and economic disparities among the world's farmers and the degradation of ecosystems in many parts of the world?
2. Who will lead agricultural science and technology to have an impact on development of rural communities (including and respecting indigenous peoples)?
3. What can Christian and faith-based organizations around the world do about these challenges?
4. How can they walk alongside agricultural leaders in this urgent endeavor?
5. Each in their own ways, how can agricultural leaders analyze their respective situations, apply the teachings of their faith, and provide a new course of action?

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, *Food Outlook—Biannual Report on Global Food Markets* (June 2016), 1–8.
- ² Pope John Paul II, Apostolic Journey of Pope John Paul II to the United States of America, Homily, Des Moines Thursday, October 4, 1979, §1.
- ³ The Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *The Vocation of the Business Leader* (2013), §10.
- ⁴ Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'—On Care For Our Common Home*, Encyclical Letter, (2015).
- ⁵ Archbishop Edwin V. O'Hara, in *Some Seeds Fell on Good Ground—The Life of Edwin V. O'Hara*, Timothy Michael Dolan (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1992), chap. 3.
- ⁶ Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development (IAASTD), *Agriculture at a Crossroads, Global Report*, 2009, 6.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.
- ⁸ *Vocation of the Business Leader*, 35.
- ⁹ Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Terra e Cibo*, (2015).
- ¹⁰ *Agriculture at a Crossroads, Global Report, 2009*, 6–8.
- ¹¹ See especially "Chapter 5: Social and Economic Effects of the U.S. Food System," in Nesheim, et. al., *A Framework for Assessing Effects of the Food System*, 2015. Institute of Medicine and National Research Council.
- ¹² Address of Pope Francis To the World Meeting of Popular Movements, October 28, 2014. https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/october/documents/papa-francesco_20141028_incontro-mondiale-movimenti-popolari.html
- ¹³ *Agriculture at a Crossroads, Global Report, 2009*, 6–8.
- ¹⁴ *Compendium of Catholic Social Teaching*, 462.
- ¹⁵ *The Cry of the Earth: A Call to Action for Climate Justice*. Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference (2014), 201.
- ¹⁶ *Sustainable Agriculture: Definitions and Terms; Sustainable Agriculture: The Basics*. Special Reference Briefs Series no. SRB 99-02. Compiled by Mary V. Gold, Alternative Farming Systems Information Center, National Agricultural Library, U.S. Department of Agriculture, 10301 Baltimore Avenue, Beltsville, MD 20705-2351. <https://www.nal.usda.gov/afsic/sustainable-agriculture-definitions-and-terms>. September 1999; revised August 2007.
- ¹⁷ Pope John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, §34.
- ¹⁸ *Assuring Food Security in Developing Countries under the Challenges of Climate Change: Key Trade and Development Issues of a Fundamental Transformation of Agriculture*, Dr. Ulrich Hoffmann, United Nations Conference on Trade and Development. Discussion Papers, No. 201, 2011. <http://www.unctad.org>

Vocation of the Agricultural Leader



COORDINATORS

Mr. James F. Ennis, MBA – Executive Director, Catholic Rural Life, Saint Paul, Minnesota, U.S.A., and President, ICRA (International Catholic Rural Association), Rome, Italy

Dr. Christopher Thompson – Associate Professor of Moral Theology and Director of the Center for Theological Formation, University of St. Thomas, Saint Paul, Minnesota, U.S.A.

CONTRIBUTORS

Monsignor Franco Appi – Ecclesiastical Assistant, ICRA (International Catholic Rural Association), Vatican City

Mr. Alan Merrill – President, Montana Farmers Union, Great Falls, Montana, U.S.A.

Dr. Vincenzo Conso – General Secretary, ICRA (International Catholic Rural Association), Vatican City

Mr. Doug Peterson – President, Farmers Union Enterprises and Minnesota Farmers Union, Saint Paul, Minnesota, U.S.A.

Mr. Michel-Thierry Dupont, MBA – Vice President for Europe, ICRA (International Catholic Rural Association), Orléans, France

Mr. Doug Sombke – President, South Dakota Farmers Union, Huron, South Dakota, U.S.A.

Dr. Robert Gronski – Policy Director, Catholic Rural Life, Saint Paul, Minnesota, U.S.A.

Rev. Rene Tacastacas, SJ – Vice President for Asia, ICRA, Academic Dean, Cagayan de Oro, Philippines

Mr. Stephen Kagoro – Vice President for Africa, ICRA (International Catholic Rural Association), Kampala, Uganda

Mr. Darin Von Ruden – President, Wisconsin Farmers Union, Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin, U.S.A.

Mr. Jose Fernando Arancibia Martinez – Vice President for South America, ICRA (International Catholic Rural Association), Santiago, Chile

Mr. Mark Watne – President, North Dakota Farmers Union, Jamestown, North Dakota, U.S.A.

EDITING

Elizabeth KELLY, Robert CZERNY, Polly KOLSTAD, William BOWMAN, Kelly SPIERING, Julian HERON, Kara STOREY

info@CatholicRuralLife.org • Ph: 651.962.5955 • Fax: 651.962.5957 • CatholicRuralLife.org
University of St. Thomas • Mail Number 4080, 2115 Summit Ave. • St. Paul, MN 55105



I.C.R.A.

International Catholic Rural Association



CATHOLIC RURAL LIFE