

# **A Joint Statement On Economic Hardships Affecting Rural Life**

Nebraska, located so prominently and proudly in America's Heartland, has a wonderfully rich tradition of rural life and family-based, owner-operated agricultural production.

As Catholic Bishops serving in this state, we hold this tradition in high esteem, and commend Nebraska's family farmers and ranchers. We respect their unique relationship with God's creation, the dignity of their labor and their special service, as food producers, to the well-being of society.

We also must express our mutual, deeply-felt concern over the hardships and economic losses being experienced by many family farmers and ranchers in Nebraska. Hard-working, independent producers are often adversely affected by economic forces largely beyond their control. What's more, there are ominous signs that even more serious difficulties lie ahead.

We are aware of the stresses and pressures which are being felt by many who are involved in family farming and ranching. Our rural pastors have been ministering to expressions of anxiety, distress, desperation and, most commonly, uncertainty about the future and about survival in agriculture. The economic hardships experienced by family farmers and ranchers exact a human toll: on personal relationships, marriages and family life.

Rural communities, and the communities of faith within them, are challenged by the social consequences of these economic hardships and stresses. The loss of family farms and ranches is not the fading of a nostalgic past, as some claim, but occasions of real loss for businesses, schools, churches, community services and a sense of shared responsibility for the community's well-being.

## **At Stake: A Way of Life**

We are concerned about the state of production agriculture, but even more we are concerned about the future of a cherished way of life. That is what is at stake in the struggle to save and sustain family-based, owner-operated farms and ranches. These institutions are being severely tested: by the trend toward corporate farming and ranching, which creates excessive concern about efficiency and market control and leaves little room for independent producers; by the shift from small and moderate-sized, family-based production to industrial-scale, "factory-like" production systems; by the increase in concentrated ownership; and by vertical integration of production, processing, marketing and retailing. All of these factors have contributed to a diminishment of open and competitive grain and livestock markets.

Trends in pork production have illustrated dramatically the economic conditions and hardships faced by family-based farmers and livestock producers. Record low prices for hogs, one direct result of concentrated production and private contracts that eliminate the open market, have caused severe economic pressure. (n-1)

Alarmingly, the trends toward greater concentration of ownership, private contracts and vertical integration are appearing in grain and other livestock production as well. This dictates concern as to the fairness of treatment afforded small and moderate-sized producers.

As pastors and teachers, we endorse and defend family farms and ranches as a viable way of life. We remain steadfast in our belief that small and moderate-sized farms and ranches operated by families on a full-time

basis constitute the most sustainable, efficient and morally responsible method for connecting with the land and for providing food for the world.

## Application of Catholic Social Teaching

While we do not pretend to have quick and easy solutions for these difficult situations and complex issues, we do propose that Catholic social teaching provides "principles for reflection, criteria for judgment and directives for action." (n-2)

- In the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* one finds this very fundamental teaching: "**Economic life is not meant solely to multiply goods produced and increase profit or power; it is ordered first of all to the service of persons, of the whole man, and of the entire human community.**"[# 2426] Also, "**Those responsible for business enterprises are responsible to society for the economic and ecological effects of their operations. They have an obligation to consider the good of persons and not only the increase of profits....**" [# 2432]
- In 1980, 72 Bishops from 12 Midwestern states joined together "**to preach the good news of God's concern for the people and the land**" in "*Strangers and Guests: Toward Community in the Heartland.*" They pointed out that the values which people have derived from their vocation as family farmers and ranchers--such as faith, hope, perseverance, generosity, trust-worthiness, honesty and concern for neighbor--"**have helped promote the stability, harmony and prosperity of rural communities.**" (n-3) They challenged the concentration of land ownership in fewer hands, the increasing domination of agriculture by giant corporations, and the harmful, unjust effects of vertical integration in the farm-to-market process.
- In 1986, The National Conference of Catholic Bishops issued "*Economic Justice for All: A Pastoral Letter on Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy.*" One of its foremost themes is that "**economic decisions have human consequences and moral content; they help or hurt people, strengthen or weaken family life, advance or diminish the quality of justice in our land.**" (n-4) In its section on "Food and Agriculture", this comprehensive pastoral letter urges that "**moderate-sized farms operated by families on a full-time basis should be preserved and their economic viability protected.**" [# 233]
- In 1989, in a statement entitled, "*Food Policy in a Hungry World*", the National Conference of Catholic Bishops elaborated on these themes and issues relating to agriculture and rural life: "**The pattern of farm ownership has a powerful and decisive influence on the quality of social and economic life in rural communities. We believe that widespread ownership of farms coupled with responsible public policy and effective farm management will preserve rural communities and ensure that more people have access to the food which is their right.**" (n-5)
- In 1982, the Bishops of Nebraska applied the social teaching of the Church by endorsing and actively supporting Initiative 300, the "Family Farm Preservation Act", now Article XII, Section 8 of the Nebraska Constitution. (n. 6) We hereby reaffirm our support for this public policy. It upholds a just hierarchy of values and a view toward the common good. We urge that it be conscientiously and effectively enforced.

## Emphasize Cooperation

As pastors and teachers, we call upon those involved in production agriculture to seek ways of working together and helping each other to overcome the economic hardships and problems. We believe that a spirit of cooperation will be better able to achieve this than a spirit of competition. In *Strangers and Guests*, the Bishops of the Heartland emphasized the need to work together and to help each other. (n-7) Cooperation rather than competition also was encouraged by the Pontifical Council in its statement, "World Hunger--A Challenge for All: Development in Solidarity," for the World Food Summit in 1996. (n-8)

A spirit of cooperation can best be attained when the focus is on needs, not wants; when the priority is the common good, not narrow self-interests; when interdependence is sought, not when absolute independence is demanded; when there is a willingness to compromise, not an insistence on "having it my way".

Cooperation also is achieved when those involved in production agriculture come together in faith and prayer, seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit in solving problems and resolving differences.

Through cooperation and collaboration, family farmers and ranchers can themselves make many of the needed changes in agriculture. Ongoing dialogue is essential, as is unified, consistent, sustained advocacy for just policies and fairer, competitive markets, but there also must be a collective resourcefulness and a process of thinking in different terms. Greater economic justice for family-based, owner-operated agricultural production will not happen by taking the path of least resistance.

## **Practical Recommendations**

One of the best and most practical ways in which cooperation and collaboration can take a positive direction, both as a matter of addressing the current hardships and as a matter of serving the common good, is the aggressive pursuit of new marketing strategies and processing opportunities for family-based producers. This involves identification, creation and stimulation of approaches through which products can be sold more directly to consumers. Cooperation and collaboration in this context presume imagination and fortitude; a willingness to consider and try alternatives and specialized practices.

The benefits to be realized from working together on processing and direct marketing opportunities include reduced exposure to price manipulation, increased economic power to compete in the marketplace and a fairer economic return.

Those who are not involved in production agriculture, including urban and suburban residents, should also participate in practical ways in these cooperative and collaborative efforts: by buying directly from local farmers and ranchers, by shopping at grocery stores which carry local products, by encouraging and participating in other community-supported marketing efforts, and by engaging in advocacy for public policies that provide family-based owner-operators with access to more competitive markets and a fairer share of each food dollar.

It is essential that cooperative and collaborative efforts be regularly and consistently evaluated in the light of sound moral principles and Gospel values. Otherwise, these efforts may ignore the common good and become part of the problem rather than a solution.

## **Parish Efforts**

As part of a more broadly based effort, our Catholic parishes can help to promote and facilitate a greater understanding of, and response to, the issues affecting family-based, owner-operated farming and ranching. It is important and worthwhile for these issues to be included as part of parish-based catechesis and adult-education activities, both in terms of relating them to the Church's social teaching and also raising awareness on practical topics, such as the elements of the "food chain", the quality and safety of food products, organic farming practices and public-policy issues, including those pertaining to trade and global food policies. Parish-based meetings to facilitate outside speakers, video presentations and group discussions are to be encouraged.

Rural parishes have a unique role to play in the lives of farm and ranch families. Often, the parish is also a focal point of social and emotional support as well as spirituality. Parishes have a special responsibility for seeing to it that hurting individuals and families are assisted and, when necessary, directed to proper resources, such as the farm-crisis hotline, mental health and financial counseling and food pantries. Also, it is important that these individuals and families are encouraged to stay involved in parish and community life, especially through effective outreach and attention toward affected children and youth.

## **Importance of Prayer**

Prayer brings us into solidarity with one another. Rural residents praying for urban residents and urban residents praying for rural residents unites us all through common concerns. Worship and prayer, both

individual and parish-based, should emphasize the value of, and respect due, family farming and rural life. For example, we recommend the special novena in honor of **St. Isidore, the Patron of Farmers**. Our diocesan rural-life offices will assist in identifying and developing other topical approaches for prayer and worship.

In closing, as pastors and teachers we reiterate our concern for and solidarity with those who are struggling and hurting during these difficult times for family-based, owner-operated agricultural production. It can be overwhelming to attempt to understand and deal with powerful economic forces. There is a great sense of helplessness about one's ability to withstand and change these forces, many of which are of a global dimension. Nonetheless, we feel it is important for us to let Nebraska's family farmers and ranchers know that we are aware, at least in part, of the difficulties they face in production agriculture today. We experience with them a sense of helplessness, for we do not have quick and easy answers or solutions. What we do have, however, we offer to Nebraska's family farmers and ranchers: our confidence in the goodness of God, our hope for the future, and our charitable concern for their well-being. All can and must repeatedly come together as God's people to be renewed in faith, strengthened in hope and united in charity.

Most Rev. Elden Francis Curtiss - Archbishop of Omaha  
Most Rev. Fabian W. Bruskwitz - Bishop of Lincoln  
Most Rev. Lawrence J. McNamara - Bishop of Grand Island

### Endnotes

1. Large confinement pork-production systems also have environmental consequences, threatening the quality of the air and the ground water in both rural and urban locations.
2. Since it was established in 1923, the National Catholic Rural Life Conference has applied Catholic social teaching to issues affecting rural life. The quoted words are used by NCRLC to describe this application as an "ethic". See, for example, "Animal Factories and the Catholic Rural Ethic", National Catholic Rural Life Conference, Des Moines, IA, December 11, 1998.
3. 1980 Heartland Project, "Strangers and Guests: Toward Community in the Heartland--A Regional Bishops' Statement on Land Issues", National Catholic Rural Life Conference, May 1, 1980 (7).
4. National Conference of Catholic Bishops/United States Catholic Conference, "Economic Justice for All: Pastoral Letter on Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy", Washington, D.C., November 18, 1986 (prologue, v).
5. National Conference of Catholic Bishops/United States Catholic Conference, "Food Policy in a Hungry World: The Links That Bind Us Together--Pastoral Reflections on Food and Agricultural Policy", Washington, D.C., November 8, 1989 (3).
6. On November 2, 1982, by a margin of 56% to 44%, Nebraska voters approved "The Family Farm Amendment" to the Constitution of the State of Nebraska. More commonly known as [citizens'] Initiative 300, its passage occurred after more than 10 years of frustrating efforts to persuade the Nebraska Legislature to enact similar measures in the form of state statutes. By virtue of Initiative 300, the Nebraska Constitution prohibits a corporation or syndicate, with certain exceptions, from doing either of two distinct things: (1) holding any interest in title to real estate used in farming or ranching; and (2) engaging in farming or ranching. "Farming or ranching" is defined to mean (i) "the cultivation of land for the production of agricultural crops, fruit, or other horticultural products, or (ii) the ownership, keeping or feeding of animals for the production of livestock or livestock products." The most significant exception to the prohibition is that made for family-farm and family-ranch corporations. A family farm or ranch corporation is defined as one in which the majority of the voting stock is held by members of a family related to one another within the fourth degree of kindred, or their spouses, at least one of whom is a person residing on or actively engaged in the day-to-day labor and management of the farm or ranch.
7. Ibid., "Strangers and Guests: Toward Community in the Heartland", paragraphs 106-111.
8. Pontifical Council Cor Unum, "World Hunger--A Challenge for All: Development in Solidarity," Vatican City, Palazzo San Calisto, October 4, 1996.

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### RESOURCES

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