

Rural Life (Service Commission Subcommittee)

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Farmers and ranchers grow and produce a basic human need: food. They do this season after season even as they endure uncertainties of Nature and Market. We hail our farmers by stating that they “feed the world.” To this end, we can say that farming and producing food is a sacred calling. But in the constant struggle to stay in business, farmers may wonder if they are still in line with the divine plan.

Catholic Rural Life, along with the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace and a number of farm organizations and academic institutions, organized a symposium in St. Paul, Minnesota, this past November to examine how faith can inform our natural connections to the land, plants, and animals; in a way that raises mundane business to the level of vocation, or a calling.

Long-time members of Catholic Rural Life will likely agree that there is something about agriculture — the most fundamental connection between Nature and Culture — that calls the humble farmer to contemplate the mind of God. This is not a lyrical overstatement. In the presentations by speakers at the Faith, Food, and the Environment symposium, their conclusions always led to this elevated point of view about the true place of humans in the world and our relationship with nature.

“The Vocation of the Business Leader,” an article issued by the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace and the John A. Ryan Institute for Catholic Social Thought, said: “Despite the challenges facing agribusiness leaders today — economic globalization, information technology, financial speculation — the Church urges those in agriculture and food industries to promote sustainable practices that provide for a hungry world while preserving the land and natural resources. The Church also has particular concern for family farms, small farmers and farmworkers.”

“From the very beginning, the Creator asks us to ‘till’ the earth and to ‘keep it’ (Gen: 2:15). It is part of our assignment as human beings. It cannot be ‘just a job’ if we treat it as part of God’s plan of love in history.” There are two main questions that we should ask ourselves, How does one’s vocation inform the complexities and challenges of the agricultural market? and How would one manage such complexities as if faith mattered?

The Theology of the Church states on agriculture and the environment that our view of farming, whether we are aware of it or not, implies a particular understanding of nature and the divine. This understanding shapes our relationship as human beings to the physical world, to other human beings, and to God the Creator. Many participants at the symposium did not hold back in questioning if conventional agricultural practices are in harmony with the physical, moral and spiritual world around us.