

## **A Catholic Rural Ethic for agriculture, food and community**

The National Catholic Rural Life Conference applies the following principles when considering economic, social and environmental policies on behalf of agriculture and rural communities:

**Human Dignity**  
**The Common Good**  
**Preferential Option for the Poor**  
**Universal Destination of Goods**  
**Integrity of Creation**  
**Subsidiarity**  
**Solidarity**

These principles of Catholic life are drawn from the [Scriptures](#) and [church traditions](#).

By these principles we are led as a faithful people to care for Creation and care for Community by the loving care of Christ.

### **Principle 1: Human Dignity**

Human beings are created in the image of God. In this image, we human beings have worth and value by virtue of our existence, and that our dignity shall not be taken away from us or diminished in any way. It is never permissible to use a human being to attain some proscribed end or purpose. The rightful purpose of an economic system, therefore, is to serve the human person; no one is meant to be a slave to the economy. Any reduction of the human person to increase economic production violates that dignity.

In a system of factory farms or debt-laden contract production, farmers and farmworkers are turned into modern-day serfs. This goes against the principle of human dignity. We as a society sometimes refuse to see the dignity of a farmer when he clings dearly to his land even as market forces work against him. We may be led to believe that such farmers are poor operators. They may also begin to see themselves no longer as farmers, but as failures. As fellow human beings, we should not tolerate this lowering of others. Human dignity is not to be defined by market forces or by manipulators of the market.

### **Principle 2: The Common Good**

The common good encourages individuals and communities to act on behalf of the good of all. What is the good of all? Surely a fundamental common good is the vital goods of human sustenance – food, water, the air we breathe, the

right to life. The common good is also social, which means that each of us finds comfort and happiness when we belong to community and when we are accepted for who we are. The common good is cultural, which gives meaning to our lives by allowing us to act in concert with others and leading each of us to live, work, play and believe together. Do we include farmers and farmworkers in how we bring meaning to our lives? Does rural life no longer retain a place in our modern world except as an idealized countryside image on a package of food?

Finally, we say as Catholics that the common good is religious, which deepens us as individuals and as a people in the sublime harmonies of the universe. The common good is at once a basic need and an ultimate end, the sharing of life's necessities and the love of one another and creation which flows from our love of God and God's love for us. Where the common good is ignored or disdained, then disharmonies in our social, economic, personal and ecological lives will grow like choking weeds around us.

### **Principle 3: Preferential Option for the Poor**

A fundamental moral measure of any society is to ask how the poor and vulnerable are faring. The poor are those who suffer from lack of basic goods and necessities. The poor bring before us a profound question about the order of the world, and whether this order is truly good. The option for the poor means that we should act - as individuals and as members of community - to overcome the structural injustice of social and world orders.

The National Catholic Rural Life Conference assists by helping to analyze structural problems in our food and agricultural system. As consumers, each of us can decide to end our support of certain foods and food processes that favor large global corporations over small farmers. At the political level, we can fight against social injustice by contacting our local, state and federal representatives and voicing our concern for the rights of farmers and farmworkers, the safety and security of our food, and a greater protection of the environment.

Finally, the preferential option for the poor in rural life means to design realistic alternatives to how we currently produce food in an intensively industrial way. The preferential option for the poor is a commitment to transforming society into a place where human rights and the dignity of all are respected. Let us begin to build a new earth based on our new creation as the faithful followers of Christ.

### **Principle 4: Universal Destination of Goods**

The earth is God's and is created for the well-being of all. Creation and all its goods are plainly for the good of all. We believe and accept that private ownership of goods is a natural right. So what is the best mechanism to distribute the goods of the earth? What is our measure of social equality that limits economic concentration of wealth and reduces the causes of poverty?

We say that on every private ownership there is a social mortgage: If bread is good for life, then bread for all is a goal worthy of us as human beings in universal solidarity. Greed, excess profits, and control by a few of the goods meant for many – these are contrary to God’s desire that creation is for the good of all.

The universal destination of goods is plain to see: each person in the world is meant to receive enough to eat and drink, enough to clothe and house themselves, and enough to live in human dignity. In rural life, we need to realize that farmers continue to be squeezed by those who control farm inputs/supplies and by those who farmers must sell to. In some cases, farmers are caught in the grip of a single firm both supplying inputs and receiving the food or fiber produced, leaving the farmer vulnerable to monopolistic practices.

The destination and accessibility of goods today is twisted by our society’s fascination with bigness and technology. The big operator or producer is favored over the small family farmer – these scales of size are weighed against the common good because global corporate interests win political and financial favors mainly for themselves. What might be called the "common good" is lost in the abyss between winners and losers, those who grow big and those who get pushed out.

### **Principle 5: Integrity of Creation**

As Catholics we believe that the earth belongs to the Lord. If this is true, then creation has an integrity and an inherent value beyond its utility or usefulness for human beings. Human beings are meant to be responsible stewards of creation, and indeed we can say that we work in harmony with God as co-creators. Just as God is One, the web of life is one and we are its caring stewards.

How we live on God’s land cannot be disconnected to how we live in community as social beings. If we are to sustain ourselves in authentic community, we must maintain a healthy environment, we must develop a beneficial economy, and we must build a just society. When we say "support the family farm", we are saying that the best proprietors of a farm is the family. Here nature and human life can live integrally and share the abundance of creation with the entire human family.

### **Principle 6: Subsidiarity**

In harmony with personal dignity, human beings hold the natural right to organize, to associate with one another, and to exercise responsible self-governance in their communities and local regions. No higher political authority - no state - should strip a person or local community of their capacity to judge and act on their own behalf.

Subsidiarity means local control and democratic participation, as long as people within the locality are willing and able to fulfill their necessary functions. Opposite to subsidiarity is centralized bureaucracies or economic concentration which rob people of their ability to act freely. Subsidiarity creates attachment to a real place - a person's town or city - which in turn creates strong feelings to the preservation of the nation and our constitutional republic.

In respect to international agreements and global authorities, interventions should be applied to correct economic, political, social and cultural imbalances, but then fade away as responsible local control regains its rightful place. The World Trade Organization, for example, may facilitate global trade, but not at the risk of superceding national or local labor and environmental laws. In many rural areas here and abroad, the land is turned into an endless stretch of commodity production for global export rather than a natural landscape of community imbued with rights. This we fight for in solidarity.

### **Principle 7: Solidarity**

The virtue of solidarity propels individuals and communities to go beyond their narrow selfishness or enclave mentality, and to care for their neighbors, their regions, even the world. Solidarity moves us beyond blind self-interest and private advantage; solidarity reminds us that we are social beings. In solidarity, we are joined in a greater body of being and the fruitful sharing of common desires.

For rural life, the principle of solidarity motivates us to care for the earth and the greater bio-community in which we ourselves are just a part. Solidarity in this sense means a stewardship of the land as we recognize that creation is a web of life in which we all cling together. What does not fall into the web of life? What is not a part of creation? We confess that all things are a part of creation, and solidarity extends this to say that all people and all living things are part of one community, the community of Christ - the new creation we seek in our modern lives.

### **CONCLUSION**

By these principles, we believe that farmers and eaters need to be in solidarity. We need to once again know and understand who we are as a people of God. We need to learn again how to share and sustain the common goods of Creation. The American farmer needs to be in solidarity with farmers around the world, working in solidarity to provide food for their own communities rather than ruinously competing with one another for a share of the global market. To learn how to put this Catholic Rural Ethic into practice, please see our [Green Ribbon Campaign](#) and the [Ethics of Eating](#).

In Peace,  
NCRLC

