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April 17, 2008

Dear Friends:

On April 22<sup>nd</sup> we observed “Earth Day”, a day set aside to reflect on our environment. On this occasion I want to bring to your attention a recent Pastoral Letter from the Commission for Social Affairs of the Canadian Conference of Bishops entitled “Our Relationship with the Environment: The Need for Conversion”. This letter in a brochure form is or will be available in your parishes, it can also be seen on the CCCB website indicated in your Sunday bulletin. It is a very good reflection on the issues facing our environment and our responsibility as Christians according to the Gospel values of stewardship and justice.

One particular issue would be that of the production and consumption of food products originating on our farms. The Rural Advocacy Committee of our diocese, established as an initiative of our Diocesan Pastoral Council in 2003 has been reflecting upon this matter as it impacts on our farming economy and rural families. With this input I wish to share the following thoughts with you.

We are living at a time and among a people for many of whom the idea of God and our Lord Jesus Christ has been replaced by the god of excess profit. Any action which contributes to increased consumption and the increase of profit is considered acceptable. The unthinking consumer can also be part of the problem.

We see some of these attitudes when the cost of inputs and machinery required in a farming operation increase at a greater percentage than any increase in the prices gained for farm produce. This is sometimes called “charging what the market will bear”. Often occurring very soon after a price increase in the sale of a farm product, this involves the unconscionable squeezing of every last particle of profit from producers. This tactic makes it very difficult for the farming community to make a fair living and to practice good stewardship with God’s gifts of land, water and animals, and to maintain rural society.

An added dilemma these days is the use of agricultural land to produce crops for the production of biofuels. This may have consequences relating to emerging world wide food shortages and the increased cost of food through continued reliance on present transportation methods. We must judge wisely the balance of resources.

When we consider the marketing of farm products, most of the costs of food sold in the stores have been added by brokers, manufacturers and sellers. Similarly, exaggerated or unnecessary packaging and other marketing ploys also drive up food costs for consumers. Meanwhile, manufacturing or marketing considerations sometimes result in non nutritious foods being offered to unwary shoppers. At base, very little of the price of the finished product on the shelf gets back to the producer on the land.

Consumers often, though sometimes because of poverty, buy the cheapest items without considering how such low prices may have been achieved, such as through workers not being paid fair wages. Also at times the eventual quality and safety of food products may be compromised by some chemicals and fertilizers harmful to the soil, water and air. We see this in the recall of products as well as in the increase of certain diseases.

What are we as followers of the Lord and his Gospel to do in these troubling times? Pray at church, at home, in public. Let us pray for a return to Gospel values in all our own dealings and for the growth of such values in all human commerce. As producers are our own practices compatible with gospel values and good stewardship? As consumers are we aware of the need to examine our lives and ways both in buying and using products? If we become convinced that some products or practices we use are harmful to the common good, to God's gift of the environment and to God's gift of our neighbours, then with God's help we can change them.

I invite you then to indeed pray for a true respect of God's creation and for a right relationship between all people based on the Gospel. And may these Gospel values feed our reflection, our decisions and our actions so as to achieve greater solidarity between all in our diocese, both rural and urban.

Sincerely in Christ

Most Rev. Albert LeGatt  
Bishop of Saskatoon

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