

REFLECTIONS ON THE SASKATCHEWAN RURAL SCENE

The following is the result of collaboration between the social justice office of the Regina diocese (Bert Pitzel with John Burton) and the Saskatoon office for Justice and Peace (Tony Haynes with Brian Murphy) in late 2006.

It was hoped that there would be endorsement by the three Saskatchewan Roman Catholic bishops, but it will now be presented at some future date to the Saskatchewan Kairos (ecumenical) church leaders and also to the Western Catholic Bishops when each group meets later in the year.

Much of Canada's Western development, particularly on the prairies, was based on agriculture. This gave rise to a rural society that was a central feature of life for many years. From the earliest days, those who gained a living by working the land faced an ongoing struggle to obtain a just due for their efforts. In addition to natural factors such as drought and insects, farmers had to contend with a host of economic and political problems that intensified over time. Periods of prosperity did occur but have never lasted.

This state of affairs raises concerns about the future for agriculture and rural society. Measures adopted over time and designed to provide rural people greater stability and control over their affairs, are now being eroded. This makes the rural economy more vulnerable to the relentless growth of corporate control over many aspects of rural life. The consequence is that many rural people have inadequate income and face an uncertain future. This impinges on both family life and community life. The resulting steady drift of rural people into urban society has depopulated rural communities and left many in an unsustainable position. Additionally, urban people who had many links with rural society in the past now have less interaction with it thus decreasing their awareness and understanding of the problems of rural society.

For Saskatchewan farmers and communities, the choice is to allow matters to drift or to take positive steps to ensure healthy, economically viable farms and rural communities. Hope for the future is key. Success can be found only if political and economic systems are based on sound principles.

Governments abrogate their responsibility of promoting the common good when they rely entirely on free market solutions. Their duty of creating conditions that guarantee economic security to those who work and produce so that they might enjoy the fruit of their labor, is often in conflict with the interests of publicly-traded, limited-liability corporations whose overriding goal is to maximize profits for shareholders. Healthy economies will only emerge as communities of people become engaged in creating just, sustainable, and fulfilling livelihoods for themselves, while seeking to contribute to the economic health and prosperity of the community. Rural communities, uniquely equipped as they are to provide a host of essential services, are a critical component of a healthy economy.

The Church, mindful of its duty to make moral judgments about economic and social matters when the fundamental rights of persons requires it,

offers the following social justice principles, as summarized in the Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, to serve as the basis for reflecting on this crisis in rural society.

1. The goods of creation are destined for the whole human race, to be shared in a way that leads to the development of each person.
2. True development involves physical, social and spiritual well being, directed toward increasing each person's ability to respond to their deepest potential and meaning. Any system in which social relationships are determined entirely by economic factors interferes with this priority, and thus is contrary to the nature of the human person and his acts. Everyone should be able to draw from work the means of providing for his life and that of his family, and of serving the human community.
3. The inherent dignity of all men and women make it essential that rural people have an integral role in making decisions that affect their future well-being. Consistent with the principle of subsidiarity, decisions imposed on rural people without their full input can only add to the atmosphere of instability, disquiet, and uncertainty for the future.
4. The principles of working for the common good and solidarity require that decisions ought not to be based on only narrow individual interests. Thus institutions created by humanity--public, co-operative and private--must be built so they work for the benefit of all concerned.
5. Programs and policies must be ecologically sustainable and economically just. In this way societies will be good stewards of the land and resources given to them by the Creator.

The application of these principles is particularly relevant to farmers and other rural people faced with the pressures imposed by the prevailing global economic system. The design of global corporate enterprises, characterized as they are by profit maximizing, unlimited size and power, and absentee ownership, and which seek to operate in an unrestrained, competitive free market, makes humanity and the environment the losers. The 5 principles stated above, favor approaches that promote enterprises that are human-scale, place-based, stakeholder-owned, are democratically accountable and life-serving, and show fair-profit returns.

Approaches that work toward achieving the goal of a stable and healthy rural community with viable farms include:

1. Working in a co-operative way to achieve common objectives that ensure that talents of all individuals are used to the benefit of all.
2. Working for greater farmer and local community control of economic enterprises designed to serve the needs of people. The alternative is to abrogate control to corporate interests whose inherent nature is to place profits ahead of people.
3. Ensuring that farmers and rural people have an effective voice in determining the future of institutions established to promote their well-being. The future of the Canadian Wheat Board is an example of such an issue currently under review.
4. Promoting the development and enhancement of institutions designed to serve the common good and the well being of farm and rural people.
5. Ensuring that the rural community has equitable access to public services.