

Partnership With God

Holiness and Farmers

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PARTNERSHIP WITH GOD.

“...their life is a laborious one; and they have in the culture of the soil, a school of virtue and sobriety, and follow that art which God introduced before all others into our life.”

(Saint John Chrysostom, Homilies on the Statutes, 19, 2.)

CHRIST GLORIFIED IN THE SACRIFICE OF THE FARMER.

(Address given by The Most Rev. Aloisius J. Muench, D.D., Bishop of Fargo, at the Sectional Meeting for Farmers, Ninth National Eucharistic Congress, Saint Paul, Tuesday, June 24, 1941.)

AMONG all classes of society, the farmer especially may hold himself to have been honored by Our Lord. Beginning His beautiful parable of the vine and the branches He does not deem it to lower the exalted dignity of His Father to call Him a farmer: “Pater meus agricola est — My Father is a farmer.” (John 15:1.) (A Vine-dresser.)

His teachings abound with references to and illustrations taken from farm life. He compared His kingdom to a vineyard, in the interest of which the manager went out to hire laborers. Again, He compares it to a sheepfold of which He Himself is the good shepherd. A Christian’s life, dying to the things of this earth, is like a grain of wheat, the grain is placed into the ground to die, and “if it die it brings forth much fruit.” (John 12:25.)

The world is a vast field of grain ripe for the harvest; but, alas, “the harvest is abundant but the laborers are few.” (Matthew 9:37.)

Thus, there is reference after reference to things of the farm to illustrate some point of His teaching.

But above all things the Lord used the product of wheat and of grapes, bread and wine, for the institution of the august sacrament of the Holy Eucharist. Bread and wine are the substances changed into the substance of the body and blood of our Blessed Savior. Their sense appearances are the carriers of the most precious gifts of Our Lord’s love to us. In the consecrated elements of bread and wine, Jesus Christ makes Himself present to be the spiritual food of men. He is the bread that has come down from Heaven; of which if men eat, they shall not die. With good reason, then, has Christian tradition used the sheaf of wheat and the vine with grapes, these precious products of the toil of a farmer, as symbols of the Holy Eucharist. Both adorn tabernacle and altar as symbols to give vivid expression to this great and loving mystery of our Catholic Faith; both play their part in beautifying Christian art and architecture, both enrich hymns and canticles composed to give honor to Our Lord in the Holy Eucharist. As he kneels in prayer before the tabernacle the farmer particularly has reason to glory in all this and to give profound thanks to His Lord and Master for

having honored his calling in so exalted a manner. The regard shown him for his work on the land ought to give him much encouragement.

Respect for his calling had not always been accorded the farmer. The pride and bombast of cities looked down with disdain upon his work. In the face of this “rural life became conscious of itself only to become ashamed of itself. The small farmer became apologetic. Rural living was something only to be endured.” (Boyle, “Democracy’s Second Chance,” page 8.)

With derisive sneer, snobbish urbanites spoke of the farmer as a hick, a hayseed, a honyack. They knew not whereof they spoke.

The farmer’s calling is a sacred calling. True, he does not wear a white collar as he goes out to his work; his face is begrimed by dirt as caressing winds press in on him while he follows the plough; his hard-horned hands give proof of the toilsome labor that is his on the farmstead. But, what a tremendous fallacy has laid hold of the minds of men that they have come to think that fine clothes, powdered faces, and dainty hands measure the true worth of man’s calling. The sacredness of the farmer’s calling rests on something more substantial than such external things.

His is a sacred calling because he is collaborator with God in continuing the work of His creation. In partnership with God he becomes to men a provider of the food, fiber, and shelter they need. Let the farmer, then, no longer depreciate himself in his own eyes. His calling is among the noblest in all the world. The Lord considered it so, and the farmer must think of it in the same terms. With God, he lives and works in the vast realms of His bountiful and beautiful nature. He is not one of the millions who in thick formations swarm through freedom-destroying factory gates. He is a freeman as he strides through his fields following a plough, or sowing his seed, or harvesting his crop. He breathes God’s free air uncontaminated by the dust and smoke of a factory town. He may lack some of the material things of city life. What does it matter? “There can be culture without comfort, beauty without luxury, machines without enslaving factories, science without worship of matter. Gigantic factories, office buildings rising to the sky, inhuman cities, industrial morals, faith in mass production, are not indispensable to civilization.” (Alexis Carrel, “Man the Unknown,” page 296.)

Let the farmer, then, think twice before he casts longing eyes city-ward as though he could work out his salvation there in better fashion as a slave of some machine or as a white-collared serf working under some master in a bank, store, or office. No, indeed; as the farmer stands before his door after the day’s work is done and surveys all that is his, he has reason to give praise to God for the independence and liberty granted him by and through the soil he calls his own. When hard times come and city dwellers, with harassed minds and dejected hearts, take their places in a breadline, beggars who must eke out a pitiable existence on the few crumbs that fall from the tables of the rich or that are doled out by well-paid relief officials of the state, the farmer can go to his well-stocked larder for bread, and meat, and other good things which a provident, home-making farm wife has stored away. In such days, particularly the farmer has reason to regard himself with a high sense of self-respect — self-respect based upon the independence and freedom that is his. In dark days when all the world is clutched by material distress, he may give thanks to God in deep humility of heart for the noble calling that has come to him. He is not a hapless white-collared worker who with his job has lost his personality; he is not a rebellious factory hand who has become an insignificant nobody in the great multitude of jobless, property-less, landless, homeless proletarians. In such an hour the farmer has reason indeed to give thanks to God that he was called to till the soil, reason to

offer up to his Eucharistic Lord the many sacrifices he must make on account of long hours of work, the loneliness of isolation, the lack of material comforts, or even of near-by facilities to practice his religion.

In truth, the farmer's calling is one that must command great respect. Much knowledge and much skill are required to manage well a farmstead with its land and fences, barns and granaries, tools and machinery. Farming is among the greatest of human arts. The farmer must be an artisan and a craftsman; a capitalist, financier, manager, and worker; a producer and seller. He must know soil and seed, poultry and cattle; he must know when to till the soil, cultivate his fields, and harvest his crops; he must know how best to combine and utilize his capital and his labor; he must know markets, when to buy and when to sell. Few occupations require such a combination of knowledge, skill, and experience as farming. The varied functions of a farmer require not merely a man of brawn but also a man of brain.

Certainly, it is not a calling for every man.

In the presence of his Lord, the farmer should recall all this, not in senseless vain-glory or in sinful pride, but in grateful appreciation of the calling that God gave him as a tiller of the soil. Praise and thanksgiving should rise in his heart as he reflects on the high regard the Lord showered on him and his work.

But other pious and fruitful thoughts come to his mind as he kneels in the presence of his Eucharistic Lord. The Holy Eucharist is a superabundant source of life. It is life in and through Christ, who is life, who came upon earth in order that men might have life and have it abundantly, who shares His life generously with those who abide in Him.

Through the Holy Eucharist, our membership in the Mystical Body of Christ becomes a living and fruitful membership so that with Saint Paul we may cry out: "I live, now not I, but Christ lives in me." (Galatians 2:20.)

Our Blessed Lord thought of our living with Him as an organic union with Him. "I am the vine, you are the branches," He said, "He who abides in Me, and I in him, he bears much fruit." (John 15:5.)

Organic life — that is the law of all life in nature and super-nature.

No one better than the farmer understands the meaning of organic life. Every day he sees it burgeoning, and blossoming, and bearing fruit. Organic life is all around him. He sees it in the blade of grass in his meadow, as well as in the stalk of wheat or corn that raises itself in gratitude to God to offer Him its precious, golden fruit. He sees organic life in the cattle peacefully browsing on rich green pastures, in the poultry as it forages about, now with lazy ease, now with greedy haste, to find its daily food; in the bees as they fly busily and industrially from flower to flower to gather from them sweet nectar on which to feed during long winter months. Everywhere nature teems with life, organic life. The very soil on which the farmer treads is filled with myriad forms of organic life, all called by their Creator to be about their respective tasks to help the farmer win from nature's storehouse the things needed for the life of men.

With the three young men who sang their canticle of praise in honor of God the Creator of the visible and invisible world, the farmer, too has cause to raise his voice in praise of Him who placed all this beauty and all this wealth of organic life round about him; indeed, put it into his hands to care for it as His manager and to draw from it life for himself and his fellowmen. The farmer works with organic life, not with lifeless, soul-deadening machines.

Machines have routed organic life. Machines have killed its soul. We live in a mechanistic age. Machines are found on every side — clanging and clicking, stamping and groaning, whirling and whirring machines — noisome, infernal machines, busy all day with their soul-killing routine. Men call them a product of civilization, yes, even of culture, despite the fact that they have created a slave civilization in which millions of workers are chained to the levers of machines.

It would be stupid, of course, to say that machines have not added to man's creature comforts, to ease and enjoyment of life. Indeed, they have, but let it be added at once that, while on the one hand they have given to large numbers of workers freedom from drudgery and freedom from hard and long labor, they have on the other hand brought little less than slavish dependence and certainly much insecurity to tens of thousands of other industrial workers. Worse still, products of man's ingenuity, now they are used for purposes of destruction of what is finest and best in civilization. They have become purveyors of death; they hurtle it from the sky, shoot it forth from gigantic guns, send it racing through the waters from out of the ocean's depths. They have become the symbols of mechanistic nihilism, destroying not only precious human lives but also precious things of art accumulated through long ages out of the sweat, and toil, and ingenuity of the labor of man.

Hardly any one better than the farmer senses the folly, yes, the crime of war. Instinctively he shrinks back from its terrible horrors because he has learned to know the real meaning of life. Daily he companions with life, with plants and animals, with insects and birds, with microbes and weeds, with organisms at their best and at their worst.

In his daily work, he becomes appreciative of the organic endowment and organic power of life. As the cavalcade of life passes daily before his eyes, even though he does not know how to express it in words, he senses the sacredness of life. Will it always be so? Will the machine invade the farmsteads of our countryside with its processes of mass production and its slavery of commercialized human activity? Will it bend the farmer low with debt and stamp his mind with the mentality of sellers and speculators on the markets of the world? Will it rob him of his contentment, all the while it brings him greater ease in his work, and rob him too of the sacred tradition of his forebears to work, produce, and live first for his family household and then out of his surpluses for the demands of the markets of the world? Will it make a grinding job of his daily task, shackle him with greed for more land, and make of him a landless worker in Rural America? The machine will not destroy his soul if the farmer ever remembers that he must remain its master and never allow himself to become its slave; if ever he remembers that God gave him the sacred calling of being the custodian of the life of His nature.

Such reflections will come to him as he hears again the voice from the tabernacle: "I am the life. I am the vine, you are the branches. I am the source of all organic life, its author, its creator. You, my beloved son, are its custodian. I have placed it into your hands. Keep it and guard it as a sacred trust."

Christ's life in the Church is an organic life. Our Lord Himself taught that when he compared Himself to the vine and us to the branches. We are all united in Christ. Indeed, we all who are baptized in Christ "are one body in Christ, but severally members one of another." (Romans 12:5.)

In other words, we belong to the Mystical Body of Christ. The Eucharistic Bread gives symbolic expression to this important and vital truth, for Saint Paul writes: "Because the bread is one, we though many, are one body, all of us who partake of the one bread." (1 Corinth 10:17.)

Catholic tradition expanded this idea by showing how the Eucharistic Bread has been made from many grains of wheat and the Eucharistic Wine from many grapes of the vine; so we also, being many form one bread, one body in Christ.

Supernatural life, then, is organic even as is natural life. All the life we see in nature is made of tiny living organisms, called cells. Each has its special function, but all combine to form a living being. Billions of such cells form the body of man; all are required for his well-being. Both nature and super-nature furnish the pattern for the farmer's social and economic life. He must not stand alone; he must not live his life in isolation from his neighbors. He must combine with his fellow farmers for purposes of cooperation. In the field of his material interests, these undertakings of cooperation are cooperatives. While co-operatives serve material and earthly interests they must be carried by ideals of religion, particularly the ideals of social charity. Social charity inculcates brotherly love in social relations, and inspires to mutual service and helpfulness. Without the spirit of social charity co-operatives will fail, because social charity is "the soul of the social order," to quote the meaningful words of Pius XI. Social charity is nothing else than Christian charity applied to the social relations of man. It teaches co-operators how to apply Christ's new commandment to their cooperative enterprises. "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; that as I have loved you, you also love one another." (John 13:34.)

In the spirit of this love co-operators will respect one another's opinions, seek to get along with each other, bear up under criticism, subdue jealousies, stop petty bickerings, in short, will be kind, respectful, and helpful one toward another. This service concept of social charity goes far beyond the relief or alms concept of social charity, as precious and salutary as this concept is under certain circumstances. Social charity is a bigger charity; it meets the great needs of fraternal fellowship in all social and economic, civic and political relations of men.

Viewed in this light, co-operatives do more than build up the material fortunes of co-operators. They build men. Because of this high ideal of co-operation, the Antigonish Movement has been eminently successful. Its chief leader, the inspiration of the whole movement, Father James J. Tompkins, has preached the doctrine in season and out of season: "We are not building cooperatives, we are building men." (Boyle, "Democracy's Second Chance," page 146.)

For the proper functioning of social charity devotion, generosity, and self-sacrifice are required. Where can a Catholic farmer learn that better than before the Eucharistic Tabernacle! There in the Sacrament of Love dwells the Divine Co-operator Who thinks not of Himself but of us; Who expends His love on us with superabundant devotion; Who laid down His life for us because He loved us and loved us to the end. No greater love has any man ever shown for his friends than Our Blessed Savior showed for us poor sinners. He continues to show that love for us.

Bound together by His golden bonds of love we meet together at this Eucharistic Congress deeply conscious of the great truth expressed by the incomparable Saint Augustine fifteen centuries ago when he exclaimed in praise of the Holy Eucharist: "O sacrament of love! O sign of unity! O bond of charity!" In truth, the Holy Eucharist is all that but especially the Sacrament of charity. It contains Him who is Divine Charity; it symbolizes charity; it effects charity.

As the farmer reflects on all that the Holy Eucharist means for him in his work, he will feel himself richly compensated for all the sacrifices he must make as tiller of God's land. He will give praise to the Lord for having called him to be the custodian and manager of the riches of His nature. He will labor with Him to enrich his own life and that of his fellows in society with the precious things that

are found in the vast and inexhaustible storehouses of the world, which God created for the use and enjoyment of men. To our Eucharistic Lord, who is immortal, invisible, the one only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.

{Thanks to the National Catholic Rural Life Conference.}

[The Antigonish Movement blended adult education, co-operatives, microfinance and rural community development to help small, resource-based communities beginning around Canada's Maritimes Provinces to improve their economic and social circumstances. It has since spread beyond Canada. A group of priests and educators, including Father James Tompkins, Father Moses Coady, Father Hugh MacPherson and A. B. MacDonald led this movement from a base at the Extension Department at Saint Francis Xavier University in Nova Scotia.

[The credit union systems of Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island owe their origins to the Antigonish Movement, which also had an important influence on other provincial systems across Canada and elsewhere. The Coady International Institute at Saint Francis Xavier University has been instrumental in developing credit unions and in asset-based community development initiatives in developing countries ever since.]
