

Diocesan Presentation

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Today, we are celebrating a great legacy with the centennial celebration of the Diocese of Des Moines. I am representing the rural segment of our diocese, specifically our home parish of Saint Boniface, Westphalia, in Shelby County.

My ancestors came here from Austria and Germany to find a better life and they found it on our family farms, our neighborhoods and in our small towns. Today one has to ask the difficult question: Are our best days behind us? What has happened in my lifetime is true for most of rural America: the farms have become much larger, and land ownership has become a rarity for most young and beginning farmers unless they are born into it. And a birthright has no guarantees for that, either. Small towns and rural counties keep losing population and opportunities for young people and others to come back to rural areas have been greatly diminished. Our small towns and churches have become more fractured. While we are still holding our own, how do you keep rural churches vibrant with an aging membership and fewer people attending weekly Mass and participating in parish life?

Why does any of this matter and why should we care? Issues of land and property ownership, food, and stewardship of God's creation are everywhere in our spiritual heritage, beginning with the Bible, and progressing with the teachings of Jesus and evolving with the messages of our popes and bishops.

It begins with the book of Genesis: "The Lord God then took the man and settled him in the Garden of Eden, to cultivate it and care for it." Stewardship means caring for God's creation.

Farming is my life whether it is the culture of it, the science of it, or the spirit of it. My faith has greatly influenced how I choose to farm. The culture of it translates into the hope for many diversified farms with many people on the land and thriving rural communities. Private property is good because of the benefits it confers on the many, not because of the advantages it gives a few. This was the Regional Catholic Bishops' Statement on Land Issues in 1980. It seems particularly poignant in today's political and financial climate where responsibility toward our less fortunate brothers and sisters is viewed with cynicism and even downright denial.

The late Bishop Maurice Dingman had a great influence on my faith. His tireless work for social justice for all and especially for farmers was a great source of inspiration. I have always considered him a prophet and like many prophets, he had his share of detractors who questioned why he was so concerned about issues of farmers and the land.

The science part of my faith struggles with some very difficult questions. Can God's creation, meaning our earth and its natural resources, continue to feed our insatiable appetites for food and fuel? It took until the year 1800 to reach one billion people on our planet. Today in 2011,

we have 7 billion and it is predicted that there will be 9 billion by 2050. Yet instead of feeding the hungry, 40% of our corn goes to feeding our automobiles causing food prices to rise much faster in poor countries. We have yet to reach a consensus with the science that says our climate is changing and that we have to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

Our goal in the business of farming has always been to grow great tasting, diverse, and healthy food for animals and people to eat. Society seems to have learned in my lifetime how to control much of the genetics of nature. This is perhaps no more self-evident than in the development of biotechnology and genetic modification where genes and gene traits from one species are inserted into another, something nature does not do even in mutations. This technology now controls more of the food we eat every day, more than any of us knows. To deny that there are any negative effects of these new technologies to the health of our soil, our food and ourselves runs counter to the science of how the intricate systems of nature function, and my faith runs counter to what much of the corporate world says we must do to “feed the hungry.” Let me try to explain: The spirit of my faith tells me that science and faith should not be at odds. Science is able to teach us much about how the world and nature was created but not why, for that we need to rely on our faith and the assurance of God’s great love. I believe that somewhere in God’s great love lies the principles of freedom and free will. Out of this, my faith suggests to me that God has allowed the world and nature and man to evolve, develop and slowly change over time.

Here we are now in the early part of the new millennium facing all of these seemingly impossible problems. This suggests to me the need for more farmers, not fewer, around the world and more right here in Iowa. This suggests that the over one billion small and poor farmers have a right to own their own land, grow their own food, and save and grow their own seeds. And the concept that they can be encouraged and taught to grow food in more sustainable ways must be respected and addressed. What will our individual and collective faith response be? Jesus clearly said that “I am the true vine and my Father is the vine grower. You are the branches. He who lives in me and I in him will produce abundantly, for apart from me you can do nothing.” The Church is the living vine and we are all its branches. Like nature, we will bear a fruitful harvest if we listen to what Jesus told us: “If you live in me, and my words stay part of you, you may ask what you will- and it will be done for you.” What a beautiful way for the church and each of us to respond.

I hope that we have the wisdom and humility to learn to live more in harmony with God’s creation and not destroy it or alter it in ways we can never get back. My faith says we can if we but listen to what God is saying to us. This is the daily practice of living out my faith as a steward of God’s creation.