

## Seed That Falls on Fertile Ground (Matthew 13:1–9): Catholic Higher Education and the Renewal of Agrarianism

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*Agriculture in the United States today faces myriad challenges, including soil erosion, biodiversity loss, climate change, water shortages, dependence on harmful chemicals, and a breach in the intergenerational transmission of agricultural knowledge. The scope and scale of the agricultural problems facing our nation today are an indication that we need a new culture of the ager (“field” in Latin)—a fundamentally new way of understanding and enacting our relationship to the land and the production of food. Catholic colleges and universities can make a vital contribution to this renewal through new agrarian curricular and research programs grounded in Catholicism’s sacramental epistemology, analogical metaphysics, interdisciplinary search for wisdom, and respect for the spiritual significance of agricultural and manual labor. In turn, the incorporation of agrarian practice, education, and research within Catholic institutions of higher education can contribute to the education of the whole person that is fundamental to Catholic pedagogy, the cultivation of the virtue of humility, and the enrichment of Catholic liturgical practice and Catholic culture.*

**Keywords:** Catholic higher education, agrarianism, Catholicism, culture

**A**FTER my husband, John, graduated with honors from Earlham College, a liberal arts college established by the Religious Society of Friends, he moved to the Dorothy Day Catholic Worker Farm in Williamsburg, Iowa. His father, who had not had the opportunity to attend college, was proud, but puzzled: “You went to college for four years—so that you could work on a *farm*?” In American culture, higher education is typically perceived as a means to leave behind muddy boots and bean fields for more prestigious professions, a way for rural youth to move from the farm to the city—not a

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path that should take a Pittsburgh-born honors student from the city to the farm.

The Dorothy Day Catholic Worker Farm consisted of an old gray clapboard farmhouse without indoor plumbing, a barn inhabited by five cats, a vacant chicken coop, and ten acres of land that was hilly or irregular in contour and therefore unsuitable for tilling with the large machinery that has become the standard means of farming the American heartland. Returning life to the neglected buildings and care to patches of gardens, a small community prayed together and grew vegetables for a Catholic Worker house in Iowa City and for their own use. They occasionally received guests in need of shelter, who, in order to reach the farmhouse, had to turn off a country road onto a winding dirt lane that ambled across a wooden bridge spanning a creek. The establishment of small farms such as this was central to Peter Maurin and Dorothy Day's sacramental and personalist vision of a world renewed by the love of God. The Dorothy Day Farm, however, had trouble attracting committed members, and the Catholic Worker community could not persuade the man who had title to the ten acres that they occupied to sell this parcel separately from the much larger tillable acreage of which the Day Farm was just a small part. Like so many families who have lost their farms, the community had to shutter the windows of the old farmhouse and leave.

The exodus of people from rural America is but one of many signs that all is not well with agriculture in the United States today. In this article, I briefly survey the origins of the dominant form of agriculture practiced in the United States today, the need for a new Catholic agrarianism, the contributions that Catholic colleges and universities can make to this renewal of agrarian traditions, and the enrichment that engagement with agrarianism can bring to Catholic higher education.

### **I. The Practice of Agriculture in the United States**

The first human beings, according to the book of Genesis, gathered lush fruits from trees and seeds from the plants of the earth in a peaceable garden (Gen 1:28). Although this Genesis story was never intended as a literal account of human origins, anthropologists confirm that the first members of the species *Homo sapiens* were indeed gatherers of food—but also hunters. For 350,000 generations, hunting and gathering sustained humanity. Ten thousand years ago, humans became tillers of soil, practicing a largely subsistence agriculture that supported us for 600 generations. For ten generations, agriculture coexisted with industrialism, and for two

generations we have practiced an industrialized form of agriculture that utilizes heavy machinery and chemical inputs to produce monocrops on large scales.<sup>1</sup>

Scripture portrays our transition from gatherers in a garden to tillers of the land as a form of exile. “Cursed is the ground because of you,” the Lord God said to the first man after he ate of the tree he was commanded not to touch. “In toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return” (Gen 3:17–19). In historical reality, humanity’s transition from a nomadic life of hunting game and gathering plants to subsistence agriculture was indeed extremely difficult.<sup>2</sup>

It was also, in many cases, harmful to the earth. The soil that is the basis of all agricultural production formed over geologic time through the weathering of rock enriched by the decaying remains of plants and animals. Harvard professor Nathaniel Southgate Shaler described the soil systems that resulted as the “placenta” of the earth, the matrix of all planetary life.<sup>3</sup> Wes Jackson, director of the Land Institute in Salina, Kansas, compares the human invention of till agriculture to a claw tearing at this soil, ripping it open to build civilization.<sup>4</sup> “So destructive has the agricultural revolution been,” he writes, “that, geologically speaking, it surely stands as the most significant and explosive event to appear on the face of the earth.”<sup>5</sup> Some of the scars and wounds that agriculture has left on the land were so deep that they contributed to the demise of civilizations as sophisticated as the Roman Empire and the Mayan settlement of Mesoamerica.<sup>6</sup> Yet there are also cultures that developed forms of agriculture that proved sustainable over millennia. In the Peruvian highlands, for example, a native agriculture has been carried on continuously in a challenging environment for 4,500 years, and the traditional agriculture of

<sup>1</sup> This time line, which puts our current practice in historical perspective, is from Jules N. Pretty, *Agri-Culture: Reconnecting People, Land, and Nature* (Sterling, VA: Earthscan, 2002), 5. On the history of agriculture, see also Marcel Mazoyer and Laurence Roudart, *A History of World Agriculture: From the Neolithic Age to the Current Crisis*, trans. James H. Membrez (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> Jared M. Diamond, *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies* (New York: Norton, 2005), 83–192.

<sup>3</sup> Nathaniel Southgate Shaler, *Man and the Earth* (New York: Johnson Reprints, 1971), 6.

<sup>4</sup> Wes Jackson, *New Roots for Agriculture* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1980), 8.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>6</sup> David R. Montgomery, *Dirt: The Erosion of Civilization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 49–81. See also Evan D. G. Fraser and Andrew Rimas, *Empires of Food: Feast, Famine, and the Rise and Fall of Civilizations* (New York: Free Press, 2010).

the Papago people of the southwestern United States was at one time comparably sustainable.<sup>7</sup>

The Europeans who eventually displaced the native peoples of North America found upon their arrival a continent astonishing in its natural richness. Extolling the superiority of the New World to the Old, Thomas Jefferson described America as a land blessed with every kind of climate, fertile soils, tall trees, and a great diversity of birds and animals.<sup>8</sup> Farms carefully stewarded were to be the foundation of the new democracy that he envisioned, schools of virtue, and a basis for economic independence. But the agricultural practices of the European settlers were not ecologically benign, and rivers that once ran clear turned brown with the stain of eroded soils. Jefferson called for soil conservation, and Edmund Ruffin's journal, *The Farmers' Register*, linked soil fertility with patriotism, enjoining his compatriots to practice crop rotation and contour plowing.<sup>9</sup>

In 1870, nearly one hundred years into the American experiment, farming provided a livelihood for 50 percent of our population. By 1910, as cities grew in size and number, the farming population dropped to 30.7 percent, and, by the 1920s, less than 25 percent of the population lived on farms.<sup>10</sup> Between 1940 and 1970, American agriculture was fundamentally reshaped by the development of new forms of machinery that replaced draft animals in the fields, the introduction of high-yielding plant varieties, and the application to agriculture of chemicals developed during World War II. Organophosphate insecticides, DDT, and other chlorinated hydrocarbons were made widely available to farmers, together with the foggers and aerial sprayers necessary to their application. Government gunpowder plants that had an excess of ammonium nitrate were sold to private firms which converted these factories to the manufacture of nitrate fertilizers. These developments are characteristic of what is often termed "industrial agriculture" or "factory farming," a term first used by Carey McWilliams in 1939.<sup>11</sup>

Federal agricultural policies shaped the contours of farming in the United States. Particularly influential were the policies of Earl Butz, an agricultural

<sup>7</sup> See Frederick Kirschenmann, *Cultivating an Ecological Conscience: Essays from a Farmer Philosopher* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2010), 267; Wendell Berry, "An Agricultural Journey in Peru," in *The Gift of Good Land: Further Essays Cultural and Agricultural* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 1981), 3–46.

<sup>8</sup> Robert Baron, ed., *The Garden and Farm Books of Thomas Jefferson* (Golden, CO: Fulcrum Publishing, 1987), 178.

<sup>9</sup> Kimberly K. Smith, *Wendell Berry and the Agrarian Tradition* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2003), 68.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

economist from Purdue University appointed secretary of agriculture under Richard Nixon in 1971. In order to boost productivity, Butz changed a price-support system in which the federal government purchased crops only in times of surplus to keep prices from falling too low to a system subsidizing every bushel of commodity crop that farmers could grow. This contributed to the transition of diversified farms cultivating a variety of grains, fruits, vegetables, and pastured livestock into farms that grow monocultures of commodities, including corn, soy, wheat, rice, and cotton. Farmers invested in large machinery and greater acreage, and then, in the 1980s, when interest rates rose and land values fell, many farmers lost their land to creditors. Meanwhile, federal policy stimulated the production of so much corn that the price plummeted, and it became economically efficient to remove cattle from pastures and raise them on corn in Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations (CAFOs). The surplus of golden kernels also spawned new industries that derived syrups and starches from corn for use in the manufacture of processed foods.

A stroll through the colorful aisles of an American supermarket readily gives the impression that our agricultural policies and practices are a phenomenal success. Never before in human history has a population had such a cornucopia of food at its fingertips, all produced with a minimum of human labor and sold at a price that is relatively inexpensive. Most Americans spend less than 10 percent of their income on food, a much smaller proportion than Europeans.<sup>12</sup> The apparent bounty on supermarket shelves, however, is in many ways a mirage that masks the crisis state of American agriculture.<sup>13</sup> Behind the towers of canned goods and freezer displays of choice cuts, we find the following realities:

*Soil erosion and degradation.* Despite Thomas Jefferson's exhortation to conserve the soil, postcolonial rates of soil erosion in the central United States varied from three to thirty-eight tons per acre per year.<sup>14</sup> Tilling the earth and planting row crops expose the soil to the eroding effects of wind and rain, and the fine soil particles that are displaced make their way into water systems where they can degrade streams, lakes, and estuaries. Cropland erosion is the single largest source of nonpoint pollution in the United States, responsible for an estimated 50 percent of suspended

<sup>12</sup> Michael Pollan, *The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals* (New York: Penguin, 2006), 243.

<sup>13</sup> The crisis is global in character. See Julian Cribb, *The Coming Famine: The Global Food Crisis and What We Can Do to Avoid It* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010); Lester Brown, *Full Planet, Empty Plates* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2012).

<sup>14</sup> Noel D. Uri, "Agriculture and the Environment—The Problem of Soil Erosion," *Journal of Sustainable Agriculture* 16 (2000): 71–94, at 72.

sediments.<sup>15</sup> Conservation measures encouraged by the Food Security Act of 1985 and the Federal Agriculture Improvement and Reform Act (FAIR) of 1996 decreased rates of erosion between 1982 and 2003,<sup>16</sup> but recent spikes in the prices of commodity crops have created pressure to increase production at the expense of conservation measures. New soil does form naturally—but only at a rate of one inch every five hundred to one thousand years. With erosion outpacing new soil production by a wide margin in the United States and across the globe, we are, geomorphologist David Montgomery observes, “literally mining soil to produce food.”<sup>17</sup> Soil also suffers from compaction by heavy farm machinery, which presses airy loams into hard surfaces that water and roots cannot easily penetrate, and acreage fertilized exclusively with chemicals suffers a loss of the organic matter necessary to its health. Sprawl is another threat to farmland, which is being lost to development in the United States at the rate of 2,880 acres a day.<sup>18</sup>

*Depletion of fossil water.* Only 2 percent of the water on the earth is freshwater, and agriculture currently uses 20 percent of this freshwater for irrigation purposes. In the Great Plains, one of the primary agricultural regions in the United States, farmers began tapping the Ogallala Aquifer to irrigate crops in the 1950s, and water levels have been declining ever since. The fall in the water table ranges from five feet in some regions to more than one hundred feet in others.<sup>19</sup> High Plains agriculture, explains Marios Sophocleous, is “essentially mining a nonrenewable resource in many areas.”<sup>20</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Judith D. Soule and Jon K. Piper, *Farming in Nature's Image: An Ecological Approach to Agriculture* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 1992), 15.

<sup>16</sup> P. E. V. Charman and B. W. Murphy, *Soils: Their Properties and Management*, 2nd ed. (South Melbourne, Australia: Oxford University Press, 2000), 14–15; Uri, “Agriculture and the Environment,” 89.

<sup>17</sup> David Montgomery, “Is Agriculture Eroding Civilization’s Foundation?,” *Geological Society of America* 17 (October 2007): 4–9, at 4. In 1991, scientists at the International Soil Reference and Information Centre (ISRIC) in the Netherlands estimated that humankind had degraded more than 7.5 million square miles of land, an area the size of the United States and Canada combined. Charles Mann, “Our Good Earth,” *National Geographic* 214 (2008): 80–107, at 81.

<sup>18</sup> Michael Pollan, “Farmer in Chief,” *New York Times Magazine*, October 12, 2008, 62–71, 92, at 68.

<sup>19</sup> See U.S. Geological Survey, “Water-Level and Storage Changes in the High Plains Aquifer, Predevelopment to 2011 and 2009–11,” [http://ne.water.usgs.gov/ogw/hpwlms/files/McGuire\\_gwlevels\\_2013\\_final.pdf](http://ne.water.usgs.gov/ogw/hpwlms/files/McGuire_gwlevels_2013_final.pdf).

<sup>20</sup> Marios Sophocleous, “Conserving and Extending the Useful Life of the Largest Aquifer in North America: The Future of the High Plains/Ogallala Aquifer,” *Ground Water* 50 (2012): 831–39, at 832.

*Loss of biodiversity.* The 2005 UN Millennium Ecosystem Assessment identified industrial agriculture as “the largest threat to biodiversity and ecosystem function of any single human activity.”<sup>21</sup> Biodiversity is diminished by the clearing of forests and plowing of prairies to open land to grazing and crop production. Industrial agriculture has also dramatically reduced the variety of species under cultivation. The industrial machinery that it employs needs standardization to function efficiently, and plant varieties are selected for uniformity and suitability for long-distance transport. In the twentieth century, 75 percent of crop diversity was irretrievably lost.<sup>22</sup> Fifteen plant varieties now provide 90 percent of the calories that feed the world, leaving our food supply vulnerable should blight or insect infestation afflict one of these major species.<sup>23</sup> In the United States, the corn hybrids that dominate rural landscapes originated from twelve lines inbred from a few open-pollinated varieties of just one of the two hundred landraces of corn once cultivated.<sup>24</sup> Already in 1915, Liberty Hyde Bailey lamented, “The commercial market ideals have come to be controlling, and most fruit-eaters have never eaten a first-class apple or pear or peach, and do not know what such fruits are; and the names of the choice varieties have mostly dropped from the lists of nurserymen. All this is as much to be deplored as a loss of standards of excellence in literature and music.”<sup>25</sup>

*Chemical pollution.* Large acreages of monocrops are highly vulnerable to pests. To protect crops in this context, farmers must wage a kind of chemical warfare. In 2009, eighty different pesticides were used on winter wheat alone.<sup>26</sup> These chemicals have ecosystemic effects. Scientists at Cornell University, for example, estimate that agricultural chemicals kill each year 67 million birds<sup>27</sup>—some of which are natural predators of the insects that threaten crops. In Salinas Valley, California, researchers found pesticides in

<sup>21</sup> Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, *Ecosystems and Human Well-Being: Current States and Trends* (Washington, DC; Island Press, 2005), 1:777.

<sup>22</sup> Christopher M. Picone and David van Tassel, “Agriculture and Biodiversity Loss: Industrial Agriculture,” in *Life on Earth: An Encyclopedia of Biodiversity, Ecology, and Evolution*, ed. Niles Eldredge (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2002), 96–14, at 100.

<sup>23</sup> Judy Soule, Danielle Carré, and Wes Jackson, “Ecological Impact of Modern Agriculture,” in *Agroecology*, ed. C. Ronald Carroll, John H. Vandermeer, and Peter Rosset (New York: McGraw Hill, 1990), 165–88.

<sup>24</sup> Soule and Piper, *Farming in Nature’s Image*, 19.

<sup>25</sup> Liberty Hyde Bailey, *The Principles of Fruit Growing, with Applications to Practice* (New York: Macmillan, 1915), 35.

<sup>26</sup> Sandra Steingraber, *Raising Elijah: Protecting Our Children in an Age of Environmental Crisis* (Boston: Da Capo Press, 2011), 92–93. The source of her data is the National Agricultural Statistics Service.

<sup>27</sup> Picone and van Tassel, “Agriculture and Biodiversity Loss,” 101.

the socks and union suits of children who live in homes near agricultural fields,<sup>28</sup> and a growing body of evidence indicates that pesticides put children at greater risk for neurodevelopmental disorders.<sup>29</sup> Studies also link neonicotinoids, a class of insecticides, with the collapse of bee colonies that began in the 1990s. Despite the widespread use of pesticides, moreover, the loss of crops to insects was greater in 1989 (13 percent) than in 1945 (7 percent).<sup>30</sup>

*Disruption of the nitrogen cycle.* In soils depleted of nitrogen, plants grow improperly or not at all, and the development of the ability to make nitrogen fertilizer from ammonia synthesized from natural gas is a foundation of today's agricultural production. The application of synthetic fertilizers, however, has a shadow side. Scientists estimate that at least half of the nitrogen applied to fields is not taken up by the crops for which it is intended, and the excess leaches into groundwater, polluting hydrological systems. Nitrates from the American heartland eventually find their way to the Gulf of Mexico, spawning vast dead zones where nitrate-induced algae blooms rob other marine species of the oxygen needed to sustain life. Globally, we have breached the boundaries of the earth's nitrogen cycle that must be respected if the planet is to continue to be a hospitable place for human life.<sup>31</sup>

*Energy inefficiency and fossil fuel dependence.* Industrial agriculture is astonishingly efficient and productive—if efficiency is measured in terms of the amount of food produced per farmer. If, however, we measure efficiency in terms of the number of calories of energy necessary to put one calorie of food on the table, industrial agriculture, Frederick Kirschenmann observes, is “one of the least efficient systems known to humankind.”<sup>32</sup> Studies indicate that an average of seven to ten calories of fossil fuel energy is required to produce only one calorie of food energy.<sup>33</sup> The fertilizers and pesticides without which vast monocultures of corn and soybean cannot grow are derived from natural gas and petroleum, and heavy farm machinery runs on oil. Our food system also requires transportation of food over long distances—each item on a grocery shelf has traveled an average of 1,500

<sup>28</sup> Steingraber, *Raising Elijah*, 69.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 197–207.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

<sup>31</sup> Johan Rockström *et al.*, “A Safe Operating Space for Humanity,” *Nature* 461 (September 24, 2009): 472–74.

<sup>32</sup> Kirschenmann, *Cultivating an Ecological Conscience*, 149.

<sup>33</sup> Martin C. Heller and Gregory A. Keoleian, *Life Cycle-Based Sustainability Indicators for Assessment of the U. S. Food System* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Center for Sustainable Systems, 2000), 42.



miles to reach its destination.<sup>34</sup> This method of feeding ourselves is simply not sustainable. Already in 2008 when oil prices spiked, there were food riots in thirty nations. As global oil production peaks and begins an irreversible decline, we are in a race against time to develop forms of agriculture that are not dependent on oil and natural gas.

*Climate change.* When combusted, the fossil fuels that power industrial agriculture produce carbon dioxide, a greenhouse gas that is a major contributing factor to climate change. Tilling the soil releases carbon into the atmosphere, and felling forests to clear land for grazing or crop production takes carbon out of sequestration. Ruminating sheep and cattle produce methane, another major greenhouse gas. All told, an estimated 37 percent of greenhouse gases originate from our agricultural and food systems.<sup>35</sup> The temperate character of the Holocene climate that we have enjoyed for the past 10,000 years enabled the emergence of settled human civilizations, and agriculture will be adversely affected by the destabilization of the climate to which it is contributing. The floods, droughts, heat waves, and temperature swings that will become more common in our warming world will take a heavy toll on our ability to produce food and necessitate the rapid development of forms of agriculture that are as resilient as possible.<sup>36</sup>

*Abuse of animals.* The large-scale industrialization of agriculture has dramatically changed the place of animals on the American farm. In the United States today, over 99 percent of boiler chickens are raised in facilities that house 100,000 or more birds in one building with no access to the outdoors. In these cramped quarters, poultry cannot establish normal patterns of social interaction, and they are subject to multiple health hazards, including respiratory problems and blindness caused by the ammonia that builds up rapidly in the air from their excrement. Over 90 percent of pigs are raised in cramped conditions, frustrating their natural desires to wallow in mud, root for food in the ground, build nests, and interact with one other. Beef cattle typically begin their lives on pasture but are then transferred to feedlots where they

<sup>34</sup> David Pimentel, Sean Williamson, Courtney E. Alexander, Omar Gonzalez-Pagan, Caitlin Kontak, and Steven E. Mulkey, "Reducing Energy Inputs in the U. S. Food System," *Human Ecology* 36 (2008): 459–71.

<sup>35</sup> Pollan, "Farmer in Chief," 69.

<sup>36</sup> On climate disruption and agriculture, see, for example, David S. Battisti *et al.*, "Historical Warnings of Future Food Insecurity with Unprecedented Seasonal Heat," *Science* 323 (January 9, 2009): 240–44; Richard W. Miller, "Global Climate Disruption and Social Justice," in *God, Creation, and Climate Change: A Catholic Response to the Environmental Crisis*, ed. Richard W. Miller (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010), 1–34, at 9–12.

are fattened on grain, which they are not evolutionarily well-suited to digest.<sup>37</sup> “[Animals] are God’s creatures,” stated Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger prior to his election as pope, “creatures we must respect as companions in creation. . . . This degrading of living creatures to a commodity seems to me in fact to contradict the relationship of mutuality that comes across in the Bible.”<sup>38</sup>

*Declining human health.* In 1947, Sir Albert Howard published *The Soil and Health*, a study that concluded that rich soil is the indispensable foundation of the health of plants, animals, and human beings.<sup>39</sup> Nearly sixty years later, our depleted soils are producing foods of inferior nutritional value. In addition, our dominant agricultural system is structured to support a diet high in meat, dairy products, sugar, and processed foods that is implicated in our high rates of type 2 diabetes, heart disease, hypertension, obesity, and diet-related cancers.<sup>40</sup> Two-thirds of Americans are overweight or obese, 25 percent of us have metabolic syndrome, and 54 million have prediabetes.<sup>41</sup> In the same period in which the percentage of our income spent on food decreased to 10 percent, the proportion of personal income spent on health care increased to 18 percent.<sup>42</sup>

*Economic hardship, the depopulation of rural America, and urban joblessness.* From 1962 to 2011, farms in the United States more than doubled their productivity, but net cash farm income fell by 9 percent.<sup>43</sup> Many farm families have survived only by working off-farm jobs, and others have abandoned farming altogether. This decline in the number of farmers has led to consolidation within the agricultural industry, a loss of diversity in agricultural practice, an increase in the acreage managed by absentee landowners, a breach in the intergenerational transmission of agricultural knowledge, and the ruination of rural communities. Matfield Green, Kansas, is a typical case.

<sup>37</sup> Peter Singer and Jim Mason, *The Ethics of What We Eat: Why Our Food Choices Matter* (Emmaus, PA: Rodale, 2006), 21–36. See also Singer and Mason, *Animal Factories: What Agribusiness Is Doing to the Family Farm, the Environment, and Your Health*, rev. ed. (New York: Harmony Books, 1990).

<sup>38</sup> Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *God and the World: A Conversation with Peter Seewald* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2002), 78–79. Literature on Catholic theology and humanity’s relation to animals includes Deborah Jones, *The School of Compassion: A Roman Catholic Theology of Animals* (Herefordshire, England: Gracewing, 2009).

<sup>39</sup> For a reprint, see Albert Howard, *The Soil and Health: A Study of Organic Agriculture* (Oxford: Oxford City Press, 2011). See also Michael Pollan, *In Defense of Food: An Eater’s Manifesto* (New York: Penguin, 2008), 169–70.

<sup>40</sup> See Pollan, *In Defense of Food*.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

<sup>42</sup> Kirschenmann, *Cultivating an Ecological Conscience*, 215.

<sup>43</sup> Ken Meter, “How Do We Grow a New Generation of Farmers?,” *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development* 2 (March 2012): 3–6, at 4.

“People have left,” Wes Jackson reports, “people are leaving, buildings are falling down, buildings are burning down. . . . I can see an abandoned lumberyard across the street next to the abandoned hardware store.”<sup>44</sup> The public policies and economic forces that have emptied farmsteads and rural towns have as their counterpart large urban populations with neither the land nor skills necessary to grow food. “We now have millions,” Wendell Berry laments, “on some kind of government support, grown useless and helpless, while our country becomes unhealthy and ugly for want of human work and care.”<sup>45</sup>

The Catholic bishops of the United States have for some time been calling our attention to the myriad ways in which our dominant agricultural system runs against the grain of the Catholic tradition. In 2003, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) issued the Pastoral Reflection “For I Was Hungry and You Gave Me Food: Catholic Reflections on Food, Farmers, and Farmworkers.” The USCCB emphasized that we must approach agriculture through the lens of faith “because so much is at stake in moral and human terms. Food sustains life itself; it is not just another product. Providing food for all is a Gospel imperative, not just another policy choice.”<sup>46</sup> Highlighting challenges that have only intensified over the past decade, the 2003 statement noted the loss of family farms and the consequent economic and cultural decline of rural communities, the inequities of federal farm support programs, the threats to the health and safety of agricultural workers, the questions posed by biotechnology, the degradation and erosion of soil, and the challenge of water shortages. The bishops invited reflection on these realities in light of the principles of the Catholic social tradition: human dignity, the social nature of the human person created for community, the justice and care due to the poor and vulnerable, the dignity of work and the right of all to earn a living at fair wages, solidarity, and respect for the gift of creation.

At a national level, the 2003 USCCB statement expressed concerns that bishops in many agricultural states had already voiced. In 1998, the bishops of North Dakota published “Giving Thanks through Action: A Statement by the Roman Catholic Bishops of North Dakota on the Crisis in Rural Life.”<sup>47</sup>

<sup>44</sup> Wes Jackson, “Matfield Green,” in *Rooted in the Land: Essays on Community and Place*, ed. William Vitek and Wes Jackson (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996), 95–103, at 95 and 97.

<sup>45</sup> Wendell Berry, *The Gift of Good Land*, 132.

<sup>46</sup> USCCB, “For I Was Hungry and You Gave Me Food: Catholic Reflections on Food, Farmers, and Farmworkers,” I, <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/agriculture-nutrition-rural-issues/for-i-was-hungry.cfm>.

<sup>47</sup> James S. Sullivan and Paul A. Zipfel, North Dakota Catholic Conference, “Giving Thanks through Action,” November 12, 1998, <http://ndcatholic.org/archives/thanks/index.html>.

In 1999, the Catholic bishops of Ohio issued “Parched Land, Perilous Times: A Call for Prayer and Legislative Actions for Farming Families,”<sup>48</sup> the Catholic bishops of Nebraska released “A Joint Statement on Economic Hardships Affecting Rural Life,”<sup>49</sup> and the Minnesota bishops issued a statement on the farm crisis particular to the people of their state.<sup>50</sup> From the Indiana Catholic Conference in 2000 came “Care for the Earth: A Statement on Ecology and the Family Farm.”<sup>51</sup> In spring 2001, the Catholic Conference of Illinois published “That Abundance May Flourish (Psalm 72:7): A Catholic Perspective on Rural Life in Illinois,”<sup>52</sup> and in 2002 the bishops of Kansas issued their own agricultural white paper. Bishops in these agricultural states expressed gratitude to God for the gifts of fertile soil and clean water and lamented the multiple threats to rural life in their dioceses. Drawing inspiration from the Catholic social tradition’s vision of just communities and creation stewardship, Bishops James Sullivan and Paul Zipfel of North Dakota called on the Catholic community to “show our thanks [for God’s gifts] through concrete actions addressing the crisis in rural life.”<sup>53</sup>

## II. The Need for a New Catholic Agrarianism

The vast scale and scope of the agricultural challenges we face are an indication that we cannot effectively respond simply by tinkering with components of the existing system, replacing one kind of machine with another or one variety of corn with a superior strain. The fact that we have created an agricultural system that is depleting soil, biodiversity, fossil fuels, and the health of animals and human communities is a sign that our very paradigms for thinking about agriculture are flawed. We need nothing less than a new

<sup>48</sup> Catholic Conference of Ohio, “Parched Land, Perilous Times: A Call for Prayer and Legislative Actions for Farming Families,” October 1, 1999, <http://www.ohiocathconf.org/statements/parchedland.pdf>.

<sup>49</sup> Nebraska Catholic Conference, “A Joint Statement on Economic Hardships Affecting Rural Life,” <http://necatholic.org/document/a-joint-statement-on-economic-hardships-affecting-rural-life/>.

<sup>50</sup> Diocese of New Ulm, “Bishops Speak Out on Farm Crisis,” January 25, 1999, <http://www.dnu.org/news/012599news.html>.

<sup>51</sup> Indiana Catholic Conference, “Care for the Earth,” [http://www.indianacc.org/bins/site/content/documents/Care%20for%20the%20Earth%20web.pdf?\\_resolutionfile=ftppath|documents/Care%20for%20the%20Earth%20web.pdf](http://www.indianacc.org/bins/site/content/documents/Care%20for%20the%20Earth%20web.pdf?_resolutionfile=ftppath|documents/Care%20for%20the%20Earth%20web.pdf).

<sup>52</sup> Catholic Conference of Illinois, “That Abundance May Flourish (Psalm 72:7): A Catholic Perspective on Rural Life in Illinois,” Spring 2001, <http://www.archdiocese-chgo.org/pdf/rurallifestatementversion811.pdf>.

<sup>53</sup> “A Joint Statement on the Hardships of Rural Life.”

*cultura* of the *ager* (“field” in Latin)—a fundamentally new way of understanding and enacting our relationship to the land and the production of food.

A new Catholic agrarianism can serve this cultural renewal. The term *agrarian* comes from the Latin root *agrarius*, meaning “pertaining to the land,” and the agrarian heritage includes voices from ancient Greece and Rome (Hesiod, Xenophon, Aristotle, Cato the Elder, Virgil), modernity (John Locke, David Hume, Georges-Louis Leclerc de Buffon, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, François Quesnay, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur), and the twentieth century (the Country Life movement and the Vanderbilt agrarians).<sup>54</sup> These diverse voices have been invoked to support both aristocratic and democratic forms of political organization, economic liberalization as well as economic protectionism, and agricultural modernization as well as a return to a simple life on the land.<sup>55</sup> Core to all agrarian traditions, writes Norman Wirzba, research professor of theology, ecology, and rural life at Duke Divinity School, is the commitment to hold together “in a synoptic vision the health of land and culture, recognizing that neither can flourish at the expense of the other.”<sup>56</sup>

Today, the foremost agrarian writer in the United States is surely Wendell Berry, the poet, novelist, and essayist, who farms his beloved Kentucky land with draft horses.<sup>57</sup> For Berry, agrarianism is “not so much a philosophy as a practice, an attitude, a loyalty, and a passion for life—all based in a close

<sup>54</sup> Assya Pascalev, “Agrarianism,” in *Encyclopedia of Environmental Ethics and Philosophy*, ed. J. Callicott (Detroit: Macmillan, 2009), 20–28. On the history of agrarianism, see also Victor Davis Hanson, *The Other Greeks: The Family Farm and the Agrarian Roots of Western Civilization*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995, 1999); William C. Havard and Walter Sullivan, eds., *A Band of Prophets: The Vanderbilt Agrarians after Fifty Years* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982); Allan Carlson, *The New Agrarian Mind: The Movement toward Decentralist Thought in Twentieth-Century America* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2000). On contemporary agrarian thought, see Eric T. Freyfogle, ed., *The New Agrarianism: Land, Culture, and the Community of Life* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 2001); Freyfogle, *Agrarianism and the Good Society: Land, Culture, Conflict, and Hope* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2007); Norman Wirzba, ed., *The Essential Agrarian Reader: The Future of Culture, Community, and the Land* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2003).

<sup>55</sup> Smith, *Wendell Berry and the Agrarian Tradition*, 14.

<sup>56</sup> Norman Wirzba, “Agrarianism after Modernity: An Opening for Grace,” in *After Modernity? Secularity, Globalization, and the Re-Enchantment of the World*, ed. James K. A. Smith (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2008), 241–58.

<sup>57</sup> Wendell Berry is the author of forty volumes of poetry, fiction, and essays, including *Collected Poems, 1957–1982* (New York: North Point, 1995); *Jayber Crow* (Washington, DC: Counterpoint, 2000); and *The Unsettling of America* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1986).

connection with the land.”<sup>58</sup> It is a practice grounded in an abiding affection for the particular places in which we live, a loyalty comparable to the bond of marriage, and an attitude of humility and reverence.<sup>59</sup> “The agrarian mind,” he emphasizes, “begins with the love of fields and ramifies in good farming, good cooking, good eating, and gratitude to God.”<sup>60</sup> It approaches farming “as the proper use and care of an immeasurable gift.”<sup>61</sup>

Agrarianism, explains Ellen Davis of Duke Divinity School, is at the very heart of the biblical tradition, which opens with a narrative that describes the first human being as an earth creature (*ādām*) created out of fertile soil (*’ādāmā*) (Gen 2:7). “YHWH,” the story continues, “took the human and set him in the garden of Eden *lē ’obēdāh ūlēsomērāh*” (Gen 2:15)—a verbal construction that is typically translated “to till it and keep it” (NRSV). Davis probes the meaning of the two Hebrew verbs *’-b-d* and *š-m-r* that underlie this translation and discovers that *’-b-d* in biblical usage does sometimes connote work on or with some material, typically soil (e.g., Gen 2:5; 3:23; 4:2). Much more commonly, however, the verb means “to work *for* someone as a servant or worshiper.” In view of the verb’s broader field of meaning, Davis reflects, “it is legitimate . . . to view the human task as *working for* the garden soil, serving its needs.”<sup>62</sup> *Š-m-r*, the second verbal form in the Genesis passage, is used in Scripture in reference to the land only in Genesis 2:15. Elsewhere it is used to describe the keeping of a flock (1 Sam 17:20), a household (2 Sam 15:6), or a brother (Gen 4:9). It is also used in a sense often translated as “observe”—as in the attentiveness necessary to the acquisition of wisdom (Ps 107:43; Isa 42:20), adherence to moral guidelines (Hos 12:7; Isa 56:1) and the rhythms of nature (Jer 8:7), and the keeping of the Sabbath (Exod 31:13). “So it may be,” Davis surmises, “that the human is charged to ‘keep’ the garden and at the same time to

<sup>58</sup> Wendell Berry, “The Whole Horse: The Preservation of the Agrarian Mind,” in *The Fatal Harvest Reader: The Tragedy of Industrial Agriculture*, ed. Andrew Kimbrell (Washington, DC: Island Press, 2002), 39–48, at 39.

<sup>59</sup> On relationship to the land as comparable to a marriage, see Wendell Berry, *Standing by Words* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 1983), 68–69.

<sup>60</sup> Berry, “The Whole Horse,” 45.

<sup>61</sup> Wendell Berry, *Citizenship Papers* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2004), 143–44. For a reflection on the theological significance of this position, see Matthew Philipp Whelan, “Prefiguring the Salvation of the World: The Eucharist and Agriculture,” in *God, Grace and Creation*, ed. Philip J. Rossi (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2009), 187–200. See also Mark E. Graham, *Sustainable Agriculture: A Christian Ethic of Gratitude* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2005).

<sup>62</sup> Ellen F. Davis, *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading of the Bible* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 29.

‘observe’ it, to learn from it and respect the limits that pertain to it.”<sup>63</sup> Indeed, as the biblical narrative progresses, the people of Israel are united to God in a covenant in which practices of observance are inextricable from relationship to arable soil (*’ādāmā*). The degradation of the land is a sign that humans have turned away from God (Lev 26:18–20; Deut 28:15–18), and the flourishing of the land a sign of fidelity to the covenant (Lev 26:3–6; Deut 28:2–5, 11–12; Isa 35; Ps 65, 72). The fertility of the land of Israel is the “best index of the health of the covenant relationship.”<sup>64</sup>

The fertile land of the United States was attractive to America’s first Catholic immigrants, who carried across the Atlantic a culture shaped by the agricultural and religious ethos of preindustrial Europe. “It was there,” David S. Bovée explains, “that the rural and religious values of love of God, love of nature (particularly, love of the soil), family integrity, neighborly cooperation, and hard work were first instilled into the peoples that were to migrate to America.”<sup>65</sup> They brought with them a colorful Catholic culture, including a variety of agrarian prayers, religious festivals, and processions.<sup>66</sup> Most Catholic immigrants, however, lacked the means to acquire land and settled in urban areas, where parishes, schools, and Catholic social services were concentrated. In the countryside, Catholics were far outnumbered by Protestants and often had limited access to the sacraments and religious education for their children.

“The future is with the Church that ministers to the country,” concluded Father Edwin Vincent O’Hara, after soliciting the views of rural Catholic pastors and church leaders in a 1920 questionnaire.<sup>67</sup> O’Hara was the last of eight children born to Owen and Margaret O’Hara on their farm in Lanesboro, Minnesota, and a former student of John A. Ryan, with whom he had studied moral theology at Saint Paul Seminary. In 1920, O’Hara was appointed to serve as the first director of the Rural Life Bureau, established within the National Catholic Welfare Council (NCWC) to strengthen Catholic rural life. In November 1923, he convened a national meeting in St. Louis, Missouri, of American Catholics interested in rural life issues, and this led to the establishment of the National Catholic Rural Life Conference

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid. On this point, see also Walter Brueggeman, “Land, Fertility, and Justice,” in *Theology of the Land*, ed. Bernard Evans and Gregory Cusack (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1987), 41–68.

<sup>65</sup> David S. Bovée, *The Church and the Land: The National Catholic Rural Life Conference and American Society, 1923–2007* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2010), 9.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 39.

(NCRLC). Its stated mission was to “promote the spiritual, social, and economic welfare of the rural population.”<sup>68</sup> The NCRLC developed in close tandem with the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine and the Liturgical Movement and emphasized the eucharistic foundation and sacramental character of rural Catholic family life. The liturgy, emphasized Dom Virgil Michel, OSB, is a school that teaches us to live as members of Christ’s mystical body.<sup>69</sup> Families who live on the land have an especially keen sense of the communion and interdependence of all creatures, and they live with intimations of Christ’s paschal mystery, keenly aware of the new life that buds forth from the soil each spring after the dead of winter. To address the economic struggles of rural families, the NCRLC drew principles from Pope Leo XIII’s *Rerum Novarum* and Pius XI’s *Quadragesimo Anno* to support the development of cooperatives and credit unions, initiatives that intensified after the stock market crash of October 1929 and the economic depression of the 1930s. The NCRLC also provided instruction in methods of soil conservation in the conviction that soil is God’s greatest gift to us and soil stewardship the “11<sup>th</sup> Commandment.”<sup>70</sup> Both the health of the nation and the vitality of the Catholic Church, NCRLC leaders believed, require a thriving and cultured Catholic rural populace.<sup>71</sup>

In the 1940s, the NCRLC advanced its mission under the leadership of Father Luigi Ligutti, who facilitated the formation of a village of thirty-two homesteading families in Granger, Iowa, and served as confessor and spiritual director to its twenty-one Catholic households. His campaign “Christ to the Country—the Country to Christ” was a plan for the evangelization of Catholic rural culture that would support Catholic families in the development of their God-given gifts and the liturgical celebration of agrarian life. A small farm, he believed, was a far superior place to raise a Catholic family than an industrial city, and a landed population a foundation of economic and political order and liberty. Together with John Rawe of Creighton University, he authored *Rural Roads to Security*, which decried the rootlessness of the nation’s eroding soils and landless people. During Luigi Ligutti’s term of service as executive secretary, the NCRLC continued to publish the *Catholic Rural Life Bulletin*, which became *Land and Home*

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>69</sup> Virgil Michel, “Liturgy: The Basis of Social Regeneration,” *Orate Fratres* 9 (1935): 536–45, at 541; see also Michel, *The Mystical Body and Social Justice* (Collegeville, MN: St. John’s Abbey, 1938).

<sup>70</sup> Michael J. Woods, *Cultivating Soil and Soul: Twentieth-Century Catholic Agrarians Embrace the Liturgical Movement* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2009), xxi.

<sup>71</sup> Timothy Dolan, *Some Seed Fell on Good Ground: The Life of Edwin V. O’Hara* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1992), 51.



(1942–47) and then *Christian Farmer* (1947–51).<sup>72</sup> The NCRLC exists today under the name Catholic Rural Life (CRL) and continues its mission to “apply the teachings of Jesus Christ for the social, economic, and spiritual development of rural America with responsibility for the care of God’s creation.”<sup>73</sup>

### III. The Potential Contribution of Catholic Higher Education to Agrarian Renewal

It is part of the mission of the Catholic college or university to reflect on the cultures that we have constructed, examine them critically in light of the truths that are known to us through human reason and divine revelation, and when reform is necessary, develop cultural forms that align our lives more closely with the voice of wisdom that calls to us at the city gate (Prov 8:3), the place of intersection between urban and rural life. Since the nineteenth century, the primary locus of agricultural education and research in the United States has been the land-grant university, an institution created by Congress through the Morrill Act (1862) that gave each state acreage that was sold to establish an endowment to support a college specializing in agriculture and mechanical arts. The intention of Justin Smith Morrill, author of the legislation, was to give farmers and other laborers an opportunity for education comparable to that available to those in other professions, and today there is at least one land-grant university in every state. In many of these institutions, the practices of industrial agriculture are deeply ingrained, but some leaders of more holistic approaches have emerged, such as the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture at Iowa State University. Most Catholic schools cannot realistically aspire to develop agricultural programs on the scale of large public universities, but they can make their own distinct contribution to agricultural education. Catholicism’s sapiential traditions, analogical and sacramental imagination, theological aesthetic, communitarian ethic, liturgical practices, and respect for the spiritual importance and dignity of agricultural work are fertile soil for the research and development of agrarian practices that can contribute to the flourishing of the land and the education of a new generation in agrarian arts.

The sapiential traditions of the Catholic heritage bring to agrarianism a commitment to interdisciplinary conversation grounded in the conviction that all that is true originates in the mystery of the triune God. The relegation of the study of agriculture to specialists in agricultural schools has meant the

<sup>72</sup> On Ligutti, see Carlson, *New Agrarian Mind*, 149–76.

<sup>73</sup> Catholic Rural Life, <http://www.ncrlc.com/>.

loss of cross-disciplinary exchange between agricultural studies and the arts, humanities, and full range of the sciences. Conversations that cross these boundaries are essential to ground the liberal arts and sciences in an agrarian ethos and to develop the new forms of agriculture that are so urgently needed. Interdisciplinary initiatives at Catholic colleges and universities can contribute to the redevelopment of agriculture beyond an industrial form of food production to a vibrant, complex form of human *culture*. “Agrarianism,” emphasizes Norman Wirzba of Duke Divinity School, “is not simply for or about farmers, but a comprehensive cultural force that has wide applications in the areas of economics, politics, education, medicine, and art.”<sup>74</sup>

The Catholic intellectual tradition also contributes to agrarian renewal an epistemology distinct from those paradigms of scientific rationality that approach nature as something that can be known through a process of reduction into discrete parts. One of the roots of our crisis, reflects Frederick Kirschenmann, is

an erroneous epistemology. We are behaving as if nature were simply a collection of objects that we can (or—as Francis Bacon put it—are *obligated* to) manipulate purely for the benefit of the human species. We seem to view the world as an assemblage of raw materials waiting to be manufactured into goods for the exclusive benefit of humans. We seem to assume, further, that we can isolate discrete parts of nature and modify them with minimal effect on the functioning whole as if there were no interdependent organisms, no interacting networks, no unintended consequences. All of this is contrary to discoveries in the science of ecology, the science of networks and evolutionary biology.<sup>75</sup>

It is also contrary to the wisdom traditions of Catholicism. Nature, in the words of Benedict XVI, “is not at our disposal as a ‘heap of scattered refuse’ (Heraclitus)” but is, rather, “a gift of the Creator, who gave it an inbuilt order and enables man to draw from it the principles needed to ‘till it and keep it’ (Gen 2:15).”<sup>76</sup>

Catholicism schools us to approach creation through what David Tracy terms the “analogical imagination,” an imagination that is able to perceive

<sup>74</sup> Statement on faculty website, <https://divinity.duke.edu/academics/faculty/norman-wirzba>.

<sup>75</sup> Frederick Kirschenmann, “A New Science for a New Agriculture” (paper prepared for the Mountain Sky Guest Ranch conference, “Evidence Based, Opinion Based and Real World Agriculture and Medicine,” October 10–15, 2004).

<sup>76</sup> Benedict XVI, “To Cultivate Peace, Protect Creation,” Message for the Celebration of the World Day of Peace, January 1, 2010; reprinted in *The Environment*, ed. Jacquelyn Lindsey (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 2012), 125.

connections and relationships between different dimensions of reality in the conviction that all creation originates in the hidden ground of God's love.<sup>77</sup> The "solutions" advanced for agricultural challenges, Wendell Berry laments, have often created more problems—like pesticides that result in resistant strains of potato beetles, or heavy machinery that increases short-term production but compacts soil. That we have solved for "X" problem without considering also "Y" and "Z," he writes, is due in no small part to a vision that "is so narrow as to be virtually false."<sup>78</sup> Good agriculture is fostered not by a singular focus on particular goals or problems but by a kind of thinking that understands patterns, harmonies, and the analogical integrities between every dimension of reality, from organelle to biosphere. It is attentive to "sequences of patterns that are formally analogous."<sup>79</sup> The farmer, Berry explains, "has put plants and animals into a relationship of mutual dependence, and must perforce be concerned for balance or symmetry, a reciprocating connection in the pattern of the farm," the result of which will be the good health of plants, soils, animals, and people, and a farm on which it is beautiful and pleasant to live.<sup>80</sup>

Beauty, indeed, has an important role within a new Catholic agrarianism. Francis Bacon's influential position that scientific knowledge is a means of control of the natural world eclipsed older cultural ideals of harmony, symmetry, balance, and order. Beauty, John Crowe Ransom observes, remained a matter of concern only to artists, resulting in a breakdown of the union of beauty with goodness and truth.<sup>81</sup> In Catholic intellectual culture today there is a renewed attention to the transcendental of beauty, due largely to engagement with the theological aesthetics of Hans Urs von Balthasar. The beauty of a lush green field of fescue and clover on which horses are pasturing bears a similarity—within an ever-greater dissimilarity—to the beauty of the hidden God that is manifest both in the work of art that is creation and in the self-revealing glory (*doxa*) of the cross. The study of agriculture in a context attentive to the glory of God would result in different forms of farming from those that are dominant today—forms such as Ignatius Farm at the Jesuit Centre of Guelph or the farm at Our Lady of the Rock Monastery, a Benedictine community of women in Washington State,

<sup>77</sup> David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination* (New York: Crossroad, 1981). The phrase "hidden ground of love" is from Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience and Social Concerns* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1985).

<sup>78</sup> Berry, *The Gift of Good Land*, 136.

<sup>79</sup> Berry, *Standing by Words*, 74–75.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 137–41.

<sup>81</sup> John Crowe Ransom, *The World's Body* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1938), 72.

where the practice of agriculture is inseparable from the prayer of the Liturgy of the Hours.<sup>82</sup>

Catholicism's metaphysical and epistemological traditions can be distinguished from paradigms of rationality that prioritize abstraction and objective detachment. To know with Ignatius Loyola "God in all things" is to cultivate a sacramental form of knowing that engages the heart as well as the mind and perceives all that is through the prism of God's love. Agrarian writers who probe the root causes of our failing agricultural systems note the limitation of forms of rationality that discount the importance of committed participation in that which we seek to understand.<sup>83</sup> There are some things, Wendell Berry reflects, that "can be known only by cherishing."<sup>84</sup> Frederick Kirschenmann marvels at the knowledge of his father, a prairie farmer in North Dakota with a sixth-grade education, whose agricultural decisions were guided by his passion to care for the land. The elder Kirschenmann shook his head at youth fresh out of agricultural colleges who had been schooled in value-free scientific methods and made essential decisions on computers—and then lost their farms. He himself survived "by immersing himself fully in that which he sought to know" and filtering "all of his knowledge through the screen of his passion."<sup>85</sup> This, notes his son, was his "unusual wisdom."<sup>86</sup>

Kirschenmann's analysis of the failures of our dominant agricultural paradigms includes a critique not only of secular epistemologies but also of the related worldview that imagines humans to be separate from nature. Nature, we have assumed, is a Cartesian *res extensa*, an inert stage on which human life is played out, a resource that is there simply for our extraction. We have failed to recognize that within the complexity of God's cosmic order our own lives are inseparable from all of creation. Catholicism's contributions to an enrichment of our worldview include the cosmic hymns of Colossians (Col 1:15–20); the theology of Maximus Confessor; the visions, music, and writing of Hildegard of Bingen; the witness of Francis of Assisi; the work of Jesuit paleontologist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin; and other voices in the

<sup>82</sup> See <http://www.ignatiusguelph.ca/csa/index.html>; <http://olrmonastery.org/the-farm/>.

<sup>83</sup> See, for example, Jackson, *New Roots for Agriculture*, 105; Norman Wirzba, *The Paradise of God: Renewing Religion in an Ecological Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 80–81.

<sup>84</sup> Wendell Berry, *Life Is a Miracle: An Essay against Modern Superstition* (Washington, DC: Counterpoint, 2000), 137.

<sup>85</sup> Frederick L. Kirschenmann, "On Being an 'Objective' Farmer," in *Black Earth and Ivory Tower: New American Essays from Farm and Classroom*, ed. Zachary Michael Jack (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2005), 224–30, at 225.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*

tradition.<sup>87</sup> The Catholic theology of the Mystical Body of Christ was the spiritual foundation of the communitarian ethic that shaped the NCRLC's approach to economics, and Iowan priest and NCRLC leader Luigi Ligutti believed that the communion of the mystical body includes not only our human sisters and brothers but also rain, sun, and the "millions of God's invisible creatures" that work in the soil to bring forth food for humanity and offerings for the altar.<sup>88</sup>

Catholicism also brings to higher education a long tradition of respect for manual labor. Despite Thomas Jefferson's avowal that agriculture is a science of the first order that should be accorded "primary dignity in the eyes of men,"<sup>89</sup> it is the common American perception that agriculture is menial labor that does not befit intellectually gifted persons. In our culture, poet Linda Hasselstrom observes, "education means not having to work with your hands,"<sup>90</sup> and this assumption has contributed to the exodus of youth from farming communities. Catholicism contributes to the renewal of agrarian culture an appreciation for the dignity of agricultural labor evident in multiple sources, including the Benedictine practice of *ora et labora* and the theology of Thomas Aquinas. The farmer, Aquinas wrote, cooperates in a unique way with God, who commanded us to "be fruitful and multiply" (Gen 1:28), releasing and directing the latent energies of the organic world and assisting its movement from potency to actuality. This Dominican patron saint of universities gave agriculture a higher place in the social order than both industry and commerce.<sup>91</sup> Agriculture, Pope Pius VII affirmed in 1803, is "the first and most important of all arts" and "the first and true riches of states."<sup>92</sup> *The Christian Farmer's Creed*, composed by Father Joseph Urbain, described farming as a noble Christian occupation, and the NCRLC's 1947 *Manual for Rural Retreats and Family Meditation* noted that although great artists may design a magnificent cathedral and masons build

<sup>87</sup> See, for example, George A. Maloney, *The Cosmic Christ: From Paul to Teilhard* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1968).

<sup>88</sup> Luigi G. Ligutti, "Sacrifice and Society: The Rural Problem," *National Liturgical Week*, (Ferdinand, IN: The Liturgical Conference, 1944), 124-5.

<sup>89</sup> Letter of Jefferson to David Williams, in Baron, *The Garden and Farm Books of Thomas Jefferson*, 189.

<sup>90</sup> Linda M. Hasselstrom, "Addicted to Work," in Vitek and Jackson, *Rooted in the Land*, 66-75, at 73.

<sup>91</sup> See George Speltz, *The Importance of Rural Life according to the Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas: A Study in Economic Philosophy* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1945), 52-62.

<sup>92</sup> Pope Pius VII, *Motu Proprio*, September 15, 1802; as quoted in Luigi G. Ligutti, "The Popes and Agriculture," *Commonweal*, March 1, 1940, 397-99, at 398.

beautiful altars, “if the farmer has not provided the wheat and the grape, there can be no Mass.”<sup>93</sup>

Catholicism’s sapiential and sacramental traditions and respect for the dignity and importance of agricultural work are fertile soil for the development of educational and research programs in the agrarian arts and sciences. Indeed, many Catholic colleges and universities have roots in agrarian practice. Saint Joseph’s College (Rensselaer, Indiana), Saint Mary’s College (Notre Dame, Indiana), and the University of Notre Dame are among the many schools founded by religious orders that originally cultivated much of the food that sustained their academic and religious communities on farms contiguous with their campuses. In 1895, fifty-three years after Father Edward Sorin and a community of Holy Cross brothers arrived at a mission cabin in northern Indiana, the campus of Notre Dame was encircled by twenty farm buildings, pastures, orchards, and more than 1,000 acres of crops.<sup>94</sup> Saint Mary’s also once produced most of the food for the college on land adjoining the campus, and Sister Madeleva Wolff, CSC, president of the college from 1934 to 1961, was a regular contributor of poetry to *Land and Home*, the journal of the NCRLC. On a campus tour for new students, Saint Mary’s alumna Miriam Marshall Hemphill recalls, Sister Madeleva “proceeded to show me how to slide down a haystack by doing it!”<sup>95</sup> Over the years, agricultural lands at Notre Dame and other institutions were sold or converted to other uses, but there is a heritage here that can be rejuvenated through the establishment of educational and research programs in the agrarian arts.

*Education in agrarian arts and sciences.* In 1917, Notre Dame became the first Catholic institution to establish an agricultural school, which supported seven degree programs until it closed in 1932. One of the unfinished projects on the desk of Virgil Michel, OSB, after his passing was a full four-year college curriculum for rural life, a program that he had intended to develop at Saint John’s University as a true living school, not simply an indoor classroom curriculum.<sup>96</sup> In 1942, John Rawe, the Jesuit coauthor of *Rural Roads to Security*, established the Creighton University Rural Life Institute, a program with much promise that ended abruptly when half of the class was conscripted into military service.<sup>97</sup>

<sup>93</sup> As quoted in Woods, *Cultivating Soil and Soul*, 146.

<sup>94</sup> Kerry Temple, “The Original Home-Grown Do-It-Yourself-Meal Plan,” *Notre Dame Magazine* 42 (Winter 2013–2014): 19.

<sup>95</sup> Laura Haigwood, ed., *Alumnae Memories of Sister M. Madeleva Wolff, CSC (1887–1964)* (Notre Dame, IN: Saint Mary’s College Center for Spirituality, 2014), 5.

<sup>96</sup> Woods, *Cultivating Soil and Soul*, 149 and 63.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 156.

Rejuvenating this heritage, some Catholic colleges and universities are again offering courses on agriculture in multiple disciplines. Biology professor Brent Blair of Xavier University, for example, offers an upper-division biology seminar on sustainable agriculture, and sustainability fellow and history professor Kathleen Smythe teaches agricultural history. At Saint Mary's College, in Notre Dame, Indiana, Megan Zwart offers a course in applied social philosophy that engages students in an ethical assessment of our food and agricultural systems, and, at Notre Dame, Margaret Pfeil teaches "*Synergoi: The Theological Ethics of Food Cooperatives*." Multidisciplinary classes such as these will contribute to the cultivation of a basic agricultural literacy within the American population and may also inspire the development of a new Catholic agrarianism.<sup>98</sup>

In addition to the development of courses that can enrich core curricula with an agrarian dimension, Catholic colleges and universities can institute new degree programs in the agricultural arts that combine formation in theology and the other liberal arts and sciences with internships on working farms that prepare students to enter agricultural vocations.<sup>99</sup> Our nation needs both a renewal of agrarian culture and a new generation of farmers. According to the Center for Rural Affairs, half of the farmers who remain on the land are over age fifty-five and will likely retire within the next decade, while the number of entry-level farmers has fallen by 30 percent since 1987. US Deputy Secretary of Agriculture Kathleen Merrigan is deeply concerned about our lack of a new generation of people skilled in agrarian arts.<sup>100</sup> Indeed, we need not only to replace farmers who enter retirement, but also to increase significantly the number of women and men who actively practice agricultural vocations.<sup>101</sup> Forms of agriculture that carefully steward the land and minimize the use of fossil fuels will require much more human participation than industrial farming. C. Dean Freudenberger estimates, for

<sup>98</sup> On the importance of agricultural education even for city dwellers, see, for example, David W. Orr, "The Urban-Agrarian Mind," in Freyfogle, *The New Agrarianism*, 93–110; Norman Wirzba, "Why Agrarianism Matters: Even to Urbanites," in Wirzba, *The Essential Agrarian Reader*, 1–22.

<sup>99</sup> A comparable Jewish model is Adamah, a teaching farm in Connecticut where Jewish youth who want to enter agricultural professions can learn distinctively Jewish agrarian practices. See <http://www.hazon.org/adamah/adamah-fellowship/>.

<sup>100</sup> "Average U.S. Farmer's Age Rising, Younger People Needed in Agriculture," *Huffington Post*, April 20, 2012, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/04/04/average-farmer-age-rising\\_n\\_1403542.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/04/04/average-farmer-age-rising_n_1403542.html).

<sup>101</sup> On women in agriculture, see, for example, Temra Costa, *Farmer Jane: Women Changing the Way We Eat* (Layton, UT: Gibbs Smith, 2010). On Catholic women and the Grail farm in Loveland, Ohio, see Janet Kalven, *Women Breaking Boundaries: A Grail Journey, 1940–1995* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), 26–103.

example, that instituting agroecology nationwide will require that at least 30 percent of our population engage in agricultural practice.<sup>102</sup> Skilled solar farming, writes Michael Pollan, will be a vital sector of the twenty-first-century post-fossil-fuel economy.<sup>103</sup> The future, projects David Orr, director of environmental studies at Oberlin College, will be “at least as much rural as urban,” and the re-ruralization of America “will require the adoption of a more liberal liberal arts education that includes food, agriculture, land, water, energy, shelter design, wildlife, and forests.”<sup>104</sup>

Farming with ecological integrity will require farmers with broader abilities than those necessary for industrial forms of food production. The new generation of farmers, Frederick Kirschenmann emphasizes, must be “highly skilled in ecology, husbandry, and evolutionary biology.”<sup>105</sup> The successful farmer of the future will need to orchestrate artfully the symbiotic relationships between soils, water, plants, insects, and animals. Many of the intellectually gifted students who attend Catholic institutions of higher education are inspired by their faith to choose careers that address challenges to human life and dignity, and interdisciplinary degree programs in the agrarian arts and sciences would prepare gifted and passionate young Catholic women and men to take on the challenge of agrarian renewal.

Xavier University in Cincinnati, Ohio, and St. Catharine College in St. Catharine, Kentucky, are, to my knowledge, the first Catholic institutions of higher education to develop programs of this character.<sup>106</sup> Xavier’s new LAND (Land, Farming, and Community) degree is a 125-credit program that prepares students to steward the health of soils and communities.<sup>107</sup> Xavier professor Kathleen Smythe worked in collaboration with other faculty to design this program, which includes seven science courses, four economics courses, electives in multiple disciplines, and an eighteen-month farm internship, all done in a Jesuit ethos of seeking wisdom.<sup>108</sup> St. Catharine, a Dominican college, is now offering a major and minor in

<sup>102</sup> C. Dean Freudenberger, “Implications of a New Land Ethic,” in Evans and Cusack, *Theology of the Land*, 69–84, at 78.

<sup>103</sup> Pollan, “Farmer in Chief,” 68.

<sup>104</sup> David Orr, “Re-ruralizing Education,” in Vitek and Jackson, *Rooted in the Land*, 226–34, at 231.

<sup>105</sup> Kirschenmann, *Cultivating an Ecological Conscience*, 22.

<sup>106</sup> The Sustainable Agriculture Education Association identifies seven private liberal arts colleges that offer degrees in sustainable agriculture, none of which are Catholic. See <http://sustainableaged.org/Projects/AcademicPrograms/tabid/86/Default.aspx>.

<sup>107</sup> *Xavier University Undergraduate and Graduate Catalog*, 2014–2015, [http://catalog.xavier.edu/preview\\_program.php?catoid=9&poid=1688&returnto=332](http://catalog.xavier.edu/preview_program.php?catoid=9&poid=1688&returnto=332).

<sup>108</sup> “Seeking Integration and Wisdom: The Xavier Way,” Xavier University website, <http://www.xavier.edu/mission-identity/heritage-tradition/Our-Jesuit-Catholic-Identity.cfm>.



sustainable farming and ecological agrarianism.<sup>109</sup> Programs such as these can enable a new generation to enter agricultural vocations and will also change public perceptions about agricultural work. “Enhancing the prestige of farming as an occupation,” Michael Pollan observes, “is critical to developing the sun-based regional agriculture we need.”<sup>110</sup> The institution of agricultural programs at prominent Catholic universities would increase the cultural and social recognition of a profession that is just as vital to our future as medicine, engineering, business, or law.

*Agricultural research.* Catholic research universities can also contribute to the multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary research needed to support agrarian renewal. When Jane Lubchenco served as president of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, she called on the scientific community to “devote their energies and talents to the most pressing problems of the day.”<sup>111</sup> No less than half of the problems she highlighted, Kirschenmann observes, “are directly related to agriculture.”<sup>112</sup> Research is urgently needed on multiple fronts. Kirschenmann emphasizes the importance of studies that will disclose the complex biological synergies of living systems that will, he believes, be the basis for forms of agriculture that are ecologically sustainable and free from dependence on fossil fuels for energy or nutrient inputs.<sup>113</sup> This research must take place simultaneously in different regions of the country, as the agriculture of the future will take different forms in different bioregions.

Catholic research universities can also support the critically important work taking place at the Land Institute in Salina, Kansas, where Wes Jackson is leading a team of scientists in the development of perennial strains of cereal grains that will be ecologically superior to the corn and wheat that must be reseeded annually in a process that puts the plow to the soil and exposes the land to erosion.<sup>114</sup> Jackson and his colleagues are striving to develop a form of agriculture modeled on the wisdom of the prairie, where fields of richly diverse perennial plants build soil, sequester

<sup>109</sup> “Berry Farming and Ecological Agrarianism Program,” Department of Earth Studies, St. Catharine College, [http://www.sccky.edu/academics/arts-sciences/earth-studies/sustainablefarming\\_ba.php](http://www.sccky.edu/academics/arts-sciences/earth-studies/sustainablefarming_ba.php).

<sup>110</sup> Pollan, “Farmer in Chief,” 71.

<sup>111</sup> Jane Lubchenco, “Entering the Century of the Environment: A New Social Contract for Science,” *Science* 279 (1998): 491–97.

<sup>112</sup> Kirschenmann, *Cultivating an Ecological Conscience*, 303.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 76 and 98.

<sup>114</sup> <http://www.landinstitute.org/>. See also Jackson, *New Roots for Agriculture*; and Jackson, “The Necessity and Possibility of an Agriculture Where Nature Is the Measure” *Conservation Biology* 22 (2008): 1376–77.

carbon, fix nitrogen, protect each other from diseases and pests, provide habitats for birds and beneficial insects, and develop deep roots that enable plants to survive periods of drought. Collaboration with this effort on multiple sites in different bioregions could increase the scale and pace of a research program that has tremendous potential to heal soils and prevent famine. The Land Institute already collaborates with the University of Georgia, the University of Minnesota, Kansas State University, and research institutions in South Africa, Mali, Ethiopia, and India.

Research is also needed in the disciplines of political science and economics in order to develop policies that can help young women and men begin agricultural careers, ensure that farmers receive just compensation for their labor, and construct the infrastructure that will be necessary for the transition from a system in which food is transported over long distances to a system that prioritizes local and regional food production. We cannot, Kirschenmann emphasizes, leave it to farmers themselves to create the support services essential to the rebuilding of local farm communities or the infrastructure necessary to the regional processing, storing, and distribution of grains, fruits, vegetables, meats, and dairy products. Unless we create this infrastructure, “farming as we have known it—with food produced by independent entrepreneurs within rural communities, with land cared for by local owners, and with local people empowered to hold local practitioners accountable for local land use—will likely disappear.”<sup>115</sup> There is also important theological work to be done. In 2014, for example, the University of St. Thomas and Saint Paul Seminary collaborated with Catholic Rural Life and several other organizations to sponsor the conference “Faith, Food, and the Environment: The Vocation of an Agricultural Leader.”<sup>116</sup>

#### IV. The Agrarian Contribution to Catholic Higher Education

The integration of agriculture into the curricula and research programs of Catholic colleges and universities can contribute significantly to the renewal of agrarianism within the Catholic community and society at large. In turn, this engagement will enhance the quality and character of Catholic education. Students who participate in experiential agricultural learning will have opportunities to exercise simultaneously their minds, hearts, and bodies—an education of the whole person that is fundamental to Catholic pedagogy. Experiential agricultural learning also provides opportunities for the cultivation of virtue, and engagement with agrarian practice can enrich

<sup>115</sup> Kirschenmann, *Cultivating an Ecological Conscience*, 139.

<sup>116</sup> “Faith, Food & the Environment,” <http://faithfoodenvironment.org/about/>.

Catholic culture, grounding our arts, sciences, and liturgical life in the dust from which we came and to which we shall return (Gen 3:19).

*Education of the whole person.* Touching sweet-smelling healthy black earth, witnessing the life that springs forth from a tiny brown kernel, tasting a ripe red tomato fresh from the vine, sweating in the August sun while turning compost, and using one's muscles to the point that they ache are important to the holistic education of mind, heart, and body. This is particularly true in our era of "virtual reality" and the Internet culture that dominates the lives of so many youth today. In Fred Bahnson's *Soil and Sacrament*, a narrative of his exploration of several agricultural projects and communities, he recounts a conversation with Dismas, a monk at Mepkin Abbey in South Carolina, whose day is spent praying the Divine Office and hoisting columns of mushroom-growing medium onto metal hooks. Dismas joined the Trappists after four years of study of academic theology that left him unsatisfied. "I needed to put the faith in *my hands*," he explained. "He had learned," Bahnson comments, "that certain mental and spiritual problems could not be resolved intellectually; they needed to be worked out physically, with one's own body. Manual labor was the ancient monastic cure for many a spiritual ailment."<sup>117</sup> Courses that include opportunities for sustained labor in campus gardens and academic programs that include internships on working Catholic farms would provide students with the opportunity to taste this ancient monastic medicine.

Internships on working farms can contribute not only to an education holistic in its integration of spirit and body but also an education that cultivates broad qualities of mind. It is today uncommon to find someone like the father of David Kline, an Old Order Amish man from Holmes County, Ohio, who was a skilled farmer, thresherman, sawyer, orchardist, mechanic, blacksmith, and plumber. "The more serious loss," comments David Orr, "is the decline of the qualities of mind that permit a wide range of skills to flourish. A mind that

<sup>117</sup> Fred Bahnson, *Soil and Sacrament* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2013), 35. These ailments are not limited to but do include sexual temptation, and work on farms or gardens can provide youth with a constructive way to channel their generative instincts. "A friend who was in graduate school," writes Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, for example, "confessed that he was overwhelmed by sexual temptation. When he described thoughts he had while reading in the library, it became clear that his real problem was boredom. Though he had been driven to study by the love of learning, the leisure afforded him for the purpose of scholarship was more than his young body could handle. He needed some work to do. We invited him to weed our garden for an hour every evening. He reported that the sexual temptations subsided and he actually enjoyed reading again." Wilson-Hartgrove, *The Wisdom of Stability: Rooting Faith in a Mobile Culture* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2010), 120.

knows how to do many things well has a complexity, agility, and resilience unknown to the specialist (what Nietzsche called an inverted cripple—that is, one with a single, overdeveloped faculty instead of an impaired one). It is a mind capable of shifting from one material to another, from one set of tools to another, and from mechanics to biology to animal husbandry all in the same day.<sup>118</sup> A Catholic liberal arts education cultivates this broad quality of mind and can do so in new ways by combining formation in theology, philosophy, and literature with apprenticeships on diversified farms.

*The cultivation of virtue.* Agrarian practice has long been associated with the cultivation of virtue. “Those who labour in the earth,” penned Thomas Jefferson, who preferred his life as overseer of his extensive farmland to his days as president of the United States, “are the chosen people of God, if ever he had a chosen people, whose breasts he has made his peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue. . . . Corruption of morals in the man of cultivators is a phenomenon of which no age or nation has furnished an example.”<sup>119</sup> Examples, in truth, are not hard to find. “I know that this town and the surrounding farms and ranches did not sponsor perfect people,” writes Wes Jackson of what remains of Matfield Green, Kansas. “I keep finding whiskey bottles in old outhouses and garages, stashed between inner and outer walls here and there. . . . I hear the familiar stories of infidelities fifty years back. . . . The human drama goes on.”<sup>120</sup>

Many testify, nonetheless, that agricultural practice can contribute significantly to an education that cultivates a virtuous character. “Caretaking of the earth,” writes Norman Wirzba, who works with his students on Duke University’s campus farm, “leads directly to the formation of moral and religious virtues that are proper for human development.”<sup>121</sup> Foremost among these are the virtues of humility and gratitude, qualities of character that can easily be suffocated by the power of our technological culture.<sup>122</sup> Witnessing green shoots pushing through black soil or losing peach blossoms to an early frost, one is reminded that we are wholly dependent on the mysterious gift of God’s creation. The very physical posture that we take when working with the earth, notes Wirzba, signifies “a humble disposition that is prepared to learn from creation and is willing to be taught by it in the ways

<sup>118</sup> Orr, “Re-ruralizing Education,” 228.

<sup>119</sup> Baron, *The Garden and Farm Books of Thomas Jefferson*, 178.

<sup>120</sup> Jackson, “Matfield Green,” 97.

<sup>121</sup> Wirzba, *Paradise of God*, 31.

<sup>122</sup> Rowan Williams, “On Being Creatures,” in *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 63–78. See also Norman Wirzba, “The Art of Creaturely Life: A Question of Human Propriety,” *Pro Ecclesia* 22 (2013): 7–28; Wirzba, “The Touch of Humility: An Invitation to Creatureliness,” *Modern Theology* 24 (2008): 225–44.

of interdependent living.”<sup>123</sup> Attuned to the drama of the soil, we learn that our “lives are maintained by a beneficence and grace that [we] neither understand nor control” and that we “live by God’s good gifts.”<sup>124</sup>

Arkansas farmer Ragan Sutterfield notes the common root of the words *humus* (soil) and *humilitas* and testifies to the way in which his own practice of farming has honed his humility and frugality.<sup>125</sup> “If farming is anything,” Tim Crews reflects on his experience at Prescott College’s Jenner Farm, “it is humbling.”<sup>126</sup> Farms have sprouted up at no less than 120 schools around the country, ranging in character from Berea College in Kentucky to Yale University, and participants in educational programs at these campus farms testify that agricultural practice cultivates not only an appreciation of our creaturehood but also an awareness of our common humanity. “When people work in small groups engaged in humble labor,” observes Josh Slotnick of the University of Montana’s Program in Ecological Agriculture and Society, “. . . the social barriers that naturally separate us from one another quickly erode. . . . The humility of the task creates common ground.”<sup>127</sup>

Lady Humility, wrote Hildegard of Bingen, is the queen of the virtues, and charity, Thomas Aquinas affirmed, is virtue’s most excellent member. Charity is a participation in the very life of God who is love (1 John 4:16) and the greatest of the theological virtues (1 Cor 13:13). It is also, Wendell Berry emphasizes, a practical virtue. “The requirements of this complex charity,” he explains, “cannot be fulfilled by smiling in abstract beneficence on our neighbors and on the scenery. It must come to acts, which must come from skills. Real charity calls for the study of agriculture, soil husbandry, engineering, architecture, mining, manufacturing, transportation, the making of monuments and pictures, songs and stories.”<sup>128</sup> Graduates of Catholic colleges and universities skilled in the stewardship of soil and the cultivation of food are prepared to exercise charity as both a theological and a practical virtue. “In order to be good,” Berry continues, “you have to know how—and this knowing is vast,

<sup>123</sup> Norman Wirzba, “The Dark Night of the Soil: An Agrarian Approach to Mystical Life,” *Christianity and Literature* 56 (Winter 2007): 253–74, at 263.

<sup>124</sup> Wirzba, *The Paradise of God*, 31–32. For one of Berry’s many reflections on humility, see, for example, Berry, *Standing by Words*, 71.

<sup>125</sup> Ragan Sutterfield, *Farming as a Spiritual Discipline* (Indianapolis: Doulos Christou Press, 2009), 19–21.

<sup>126</sup> Tim Crews, “Prescott College (1996): Agroecology as the Cultivation of Soil and Mind,” in *Fields of Learning: The Student Farm Movement in North America*, ed. Laura Sayre and Sean Clark (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2011), 219.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, 237.

<sup>128</sup> Berry, *The Gift of Good Land*, 274.

complex, humble and humbling; it is of the mind and of the hands, of neither alone.”<sup>129</sup>

*The enrichment of Catholic culture and the praise of God.* The absence of agriculture from the curricula and life of most Catholic colleges and universities has been a loss not only to the discipline of agriculture but also to Catholic culture. At the root of the complicated linguistic history of the very word *culture* is a Latin term having to do with the care and tending of crops and animals,<sup>130</sup> and humanity’s development of the cultural practices that came to distinguish us from other primates is inextricably wedded to agricultural practice. The oldest extant artifact containing written forms of human language is a baked clay tablet from Uruk dated to 3000 BCE marked with cuneiform indentations that signify matters pertaining to agriculture and food allocation.<sup>131</sup> It was the establishment of agriculture that enabled settled societies to develop theology, philosophy, and literature, and these and all other dimensions of our cultural life will be enriched when academic communities are engaged with agrarian practices or at least working in an environment where agrarianism is a part of the interdisciplinary conversations that animate college and university life and the ethos of a campus culture.<sup>132</sup> Divorced from the soil without which we cannot live, our language, music, art, poetry, and political and economic reflection lose a foundational source of their vitality.

Our liturgical life suffers as well. Soil, Michael Woods observes, must be cultivated (*colere*), and from the root *cultus* comes the liturgical term *cultum divinum*.<sup>133</sup> The greater the integration of agriculture, culture, and liturgical worship, the more holistic—the more *cath-’olikos*—is our relation to God.<sup>134</sup> On the campus of a Catholic school with a community garden or small farm, campus liturgies could begin to reincorporate agrarian dimensions of the liturgical calendar, including the ember days of fast and abstinence that mark the beginning of each of the four seasons; the rogation

<sup>129</sup> Ibid.

<sup>130</sup> Raymond Williams, *Keywords* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), 76; Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 3.

<sup>131</sup> David Montgomery, *Dirt: The Erosion of Civilizations* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 38.

<sup>132</sup> For one account of agrarianism within the academy, see William H. Major, *Grounded Vision: New Agrarianism and the Academy* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2011).

<sup>133</sup> Woods, *Cultivating Soil and Soul*, 193.

<sup>134</sup> For Monsignor Joseph Gremillion’s reflections on the importance of agriculture and rural life within a church that is *katholikos*, see Woods, *Cultivating Soil and Soul*, 237–47.

days of fasting in prayer for a good harvest;<sup>135</sup> the blessing of seed and soil on the feast of Saint Isidore, patron of farmers; the blessing of herbs and flowers on the feast of the Assumption; blessings of seeds and seedlings on September 8, the birthday of the Blessed Virgin Mary; and liturgies of gratitude for soil and harvest at Thanksgiving. Offerings at the altar of fruits from campus fields cultivated by students would exemplify what Michael Woods describes as the *lex orandi*, *lex credendi*, and *lex vivendi* of Catholic agrarian traditions as they were intended to be celebrated.<sup>136</sup>

### Conclusion

A university, wrote John Henry Newman, is “a seat of wisdom, a light of the world.”<sup>137</sup> The world urgently needs today the wisdom and light of a renewed Catholic agrarianism. The dominant forms of agriculture in the United States are harming soils, waters, animals, and human health and communities. They are diminishing biodiversity and contributing to the instability of the climate, and they are unsustainably dependent on fossil fuels. If Catholic colleges and universities continue to leave the study of agriculture to public land-grant universities, we will miss an opportunity to exercise our mission to serve the common good, to bring our distinct perspective to bear on the agricultural challenges that our nation faces, and to participate in the development of a new agrarianism that can enrich the life of the entire church. It is evident, Wes Jackson observes, that a new agriculture is necessary. “I believe it can and must be done,” he continues, “and that when it is underway, it will rank as one of the greatest human ventures of all time, requiring more imagination and truly joyful participation than any of us can now imagine.”<sup>138</sup> The distinctive contributions of Catholic colleges and universities to this joyful enterprise include our wisdom traditions, our analogical and sacramental imagination, our theological and liturgical traditions, our communitarian ethic, and a profound respect for the dignity and spiritual quality of agricultural work. Through the incorporation of agrarian arts in our courses and research programs, we can enhance the quality of Catholic higher education and contribute to the development of a new

<sup>135</sup> On the history and retrieval of the practice of rogation days, see Sharon K. Perkins, “Blessing Fields and Repelling Grasshoppers: Rogation Days in American Catholic Rural Life,” in Rossi, *God, Grace, and Creation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010), 201–21.

<sup>136</sup> Woods, *Cultivating Soil and Soul*, 112.

<sup>137</sup> John Henry Newman, *Rise and Progress of Universities and Benedictine Essays* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001), 16.

<sup>138</sup> Jackson, *New Roots for Agriculture*, 65.

agrarianism. “If we Christians truly treasure the hope that one day we, like Adam and the penitent thief, will walk alongside the One who caused even the dead wood of the Cross to blossom with flowers,” writes Vigen Guroian, “then we must also imitate the Master’s art and make the desolate earth grow green.”<sup>139</sup>

<sup>139</sup> Vigen Guroian, *Inheriting Paradise: Meditations on Gardening* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 17.