

Rural Catholics

By BRO. HENRY BARTHELEMY, O. P.



NUMERICALLY and socially the Catholic Church in America is predominately urban. When the latest Official Religious Census was taken in 1916 four-fifths of the total Catholic population was urban, whilst in 1919 ninety per cent of the organized Catholic schools were in the cities. In all our large cities we can find Catholic institutions performing corporal and spiritual works of mercy among the poor, the crippled, the sick and the unfortunate outcasts of society; but in the country districts the number of such Catholic institutions is a negligible quantity.

All social and industrial problems arising out of the conflict between capital and labor affect the urban population, which is better organized than the unorganized rural population to make known the wrongs it is suffering. The unorganized rural population, which some say presents the WHOLE social problem of the nation, surely commands the attention of the Church.

Besides the urban problem there is a rural problem, too, which is one of the most important of our national social questions and until recently the least considered.

The cities are only the branches of the tree of national life, the roots of which go deeply into the land. Agriculture provides the means of livelihood to more than one third of the population and the means of living to all. . . . It is true that not by bread alone does man live, but it is also true that food commodities are not the chief things which the farm produces. It produces a type of citizen which has been in every civilization the substantial foundation of the stable social order. It is from the country with its prolific population and its fertile fields that the city must draw both its sustenance and its people.*

"The rural problem," writes Rev. Edwin V. O'Hara, LL. D., director of the Rural Life Bureau of the N. C. W. C., "is the problem of maintaining on the land a sufficient population effective and prosperous in production and happy and content by reason of a highly developed social and cultural status."

The problem, then, is a national one, of how to stop the cityward trend by making the farmer happy and contented to remain a tiller of the soil. It has many aspects and is engaging

* Program of Catholic Rural Action, by Rev. Edwin V. O'Hara, LL. D.

the serious attention of those who are deeply interested in our national well-being. The Church, by reason of her peculiar fitness to cope with all social problems, affords a valuable aid to the nation in the attempt to solve the problem. But the Church also has a vital private interest in the matter because the question concerns the harvest of souls. The prolific birthrate in the country means an increasing number of souls who need the graces, sacraments and benefits which the Church is divinely appointed to bestow. It means, moreover, that the Church in addition to her spiritual gifts to our rural population can likewise minister to the social and cultural needs of these people.

Looking at the question from the spiritual viewpoint the country population by reason of its high birthrate offers fertile soil for planting the seed of Faith. Every institution that hopes to prosper should be at the source of population. From this point of view the Federal Census of 1920 (Vol. II, Table 18, p. 371) furnishes us with statistics that are not clothed with any too wholesome flesh for us Catholics when we remember that only about twenty per cent of the Catholic population can be classed as rural.

	Total population.	Under 5 years.
Urban.	54,304,603.	5,275,751
Rural.	51,406,017.	6,279,478.

Thus the cities had 2,898,586 more people than the country, but nevertheless the country had 1,003,727 more children under five years of age than the city. Let us push the argument one step further to find out the comparative birthrate of the white urban and rural population.

	Urban		No. of children per 100 adults
White	Under 19 yrs.	Over 19 yrs.	
Native	9,869,555	14,687,174	67.0+
Foreign and mixed.....	7,564,379	8,241,993	91.7+
Total	17,433,934	22,929,167	76.0+
	Rural		
Native	16,529,593	17,335,635	95.2+
Foreign and mixed.....	3,106,944	3,872,888	80.2+
Total	19,636,537	21,208,523	92.5+

Thus every hundred native-born city people had sixty-seven children; every hundred native-born country people had ninety-

five children; every hundred of the city's foreign and mixed population had ninety-one children; every hundred people of the country's foreign and mixed population had eighty children. And grouping the native and foreign population, we find that the country had ninety-two children to every one hundred adults while the city had only seventy-six. On the strength of these statistics and considering the present restrictive immigration



Neatly Improvised Altar

bill, it is not improbable that in one hundred years forty rural families would have a greater progeny than sixty urban families in the same time.

These figures offer a patent conclusion; namely, that is to the interest of the Catholic Church to encourage the rural Catholic to remain on the land. To accomplish this result the Church must cope with the age-long handicaps to a contented and happy rural population; and chief among these handicaps, which have caused the rural population to dwindle from 59.5 per cent in 1900 to 48.6 per cent in 1920 are: isolation, drudgery and the lack of educational opportunities.

During the past generation these hardships have been notably diminished. Improved roads, automobiles, daily delivery

of mail, rural telephones and radio sets have brought farmers into closer social relations with their neighbors living miles away than are actually enjoyed by city people living in adjoining flats. The drudgery of farming has been mitigated to a great extent, thanks to the invention of efficient but high-priced modern machinery. And finally, the movement towards the consolidation of district schools has improved the secular educational opportunities.

But for the rural Catholic merely to remain on the land will by no means increase the future numerical strength of the Church unless we minister to the spiritual needs of these people. And here is the most serious aspect of the problem; for schools, churches and priests have heretofore been all too scanty for the proper care of the needs of the rural Catholic population. For the most part religious instruction of the rural child is left to the good Catholic parents and the weekly catechism class conducted by the pastor. In ninety cases out of a hundred if a Catholic farmer wishes to give his children a more extensive Catholic education he is forced to send them to some parochial school in the city where they are educated according to a curriculum adapted to the needs of city life. In many instances these sons and daughters of the soil eventually take up some profession instead of using their brains and energy to build up a Catholic rural civilization. Our urban Catholic schools, like powerful magnets, are continually drawing rural Catholic families to the cities, where the father skilled in farming but in nothing else usually helps to swell the ranks of unskilled labor.

An even more telling loss to the Church arises from the lack of Catholic high schools in the rural districts. In most Catholic countries a high percentage of vocations, both to the priesthood and the sisterhood, comes from the country. Nor should this be surprising. Rural life has fewer distractions and the absence of commercialized amusements presents a favorable field for the development of religious vocations. In no other life are children so constantly under the vigilant care of their parents. From youth the country boy and girl works out an apprenticeship under the guidance of their God-given teachers—their parents. Nowhere else are the social interests of the father, mother and children so nearly identified. In this fertile field many worthy vocations are sown which, sorry to say,

never mature, because there are practically no rural Catholic high schools to span the gap between the grades and the college course.

A further important result of the scarcity of laborers in the Lord's vineyard is that countless rural Catholics, scattered throughout the length and breadth of the United States, have drifted into religious indifference. And from this lamentable state they have gradually slipped into the ranks of the "left-footers" and the "back-sliders." As a result, we find many Irish Catholic names among our Protestant neighbors; and are further humiliated by the fact that a "Patrick Murphy" is bishop of the Mormon church. If we were to ask these people why they fell away from the true fold many of them would answer something like the baptised Indian Chief of Northern Minnesota who had not seen a priest for eight years. "We Indians need instructions. I changed to Methodist because no priest came. If a priest were here one day a week I would come back."

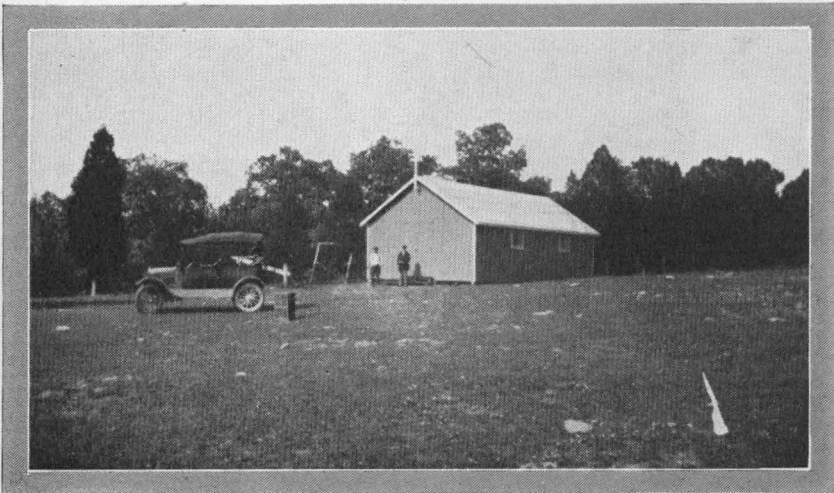
From the standpoint of numbers this dearth of priests and Catholic schools in rural districts has constituted one of the Church's greatest leakages both in rural and urban Catholic population. Since many of our urban citizens are the sons and daughters of rural parents, it stands to reason that if the Church in the past had a greater number of her fold among the prolific progeny of the rural population her numbers in the city also would be much greater today. How many urban Catholics can trace their ancestry back three or four generations to city-born stock? The comparatively few that can answer this question in the affirmative brings us to the conclusion that the Catholic Church in America by ministering to the spiritual needs of the rural congregations is assured of a future in the city as well as in the country.

The present woeful lack of schools and churches, and the hardships under which missionary priests and nuns labor is strikingly illustrated by a certain seminarian, who has accompanied several priests on their journeys from mission to mission.

One Saturday I accompanied a priest to a small settlement where on the following day, Sunday, he was to celebrate the first High Mass in the history of the parish. Saturday there were many things to accomplish: the choir had to be instructed; the two boys who were to serve the Mass were directed to do only what the priest would tell them; the church had to be swept; the altar washed; the pews dusted; and here and there a

little carpenter work. Sunday morning the entire congregation was present because it had been announced that a High Mass was to be sung. Many had not attended a High Mass since they had journeyed West. After the Mass a catechism class was held which most of the congregation, old and young, attended.

When our work here was finished a Ford was waiting to take us to a small mission, mostly of farmers. At one time a priest had been stationed there. The little room behind the altar had served as sacristy, home and office. There were the remains of by-gone days, a stove, bureau, canned goods of every description, sugar, flour, etc. There was a wardrobe in which were kept the vestments, some discarded clothes of the former



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pastor; a few books lay on a table in the center of the room; a washstand in one corner with a broken bowl and a dilapidated pitcher; but amid these discarded articles was a covered chalice, reminding one that in a short while Christ would come down from Heaven and be present on the modest altar just as truly as He would be present on the most expensive altar in the finest church in this country. The congregation was made up mostly of women and small children. The men and larger children were working on the farms as this was the thrashing season. I served the Mass and nearly all present went to Holy Communion although they had been up many hours and it was nearly noon.

But amidst the uniformly solemn little scene there was a harmless touch of the ludicrous. A dog, taking possession on the middle aisle, walked up and down like a lion in a cage. And every time I would ring the little bell, at the Sanctus, Communion, etc., the dog would let out a long howl and try to leap over the Communion railing.

On another occasion we left town at four in the morning; drove one hundred and thirty miles to a mission; said Mass, etc., and then drove twenty miles to another mission. This may be said to be an extreme case, but there are quite a few extreme cases in the West.

Father John Halloran of Stanley, N. D., tells us about the hardships his poor parishioners at one of his four missions undergo in the performance of their religious duties.

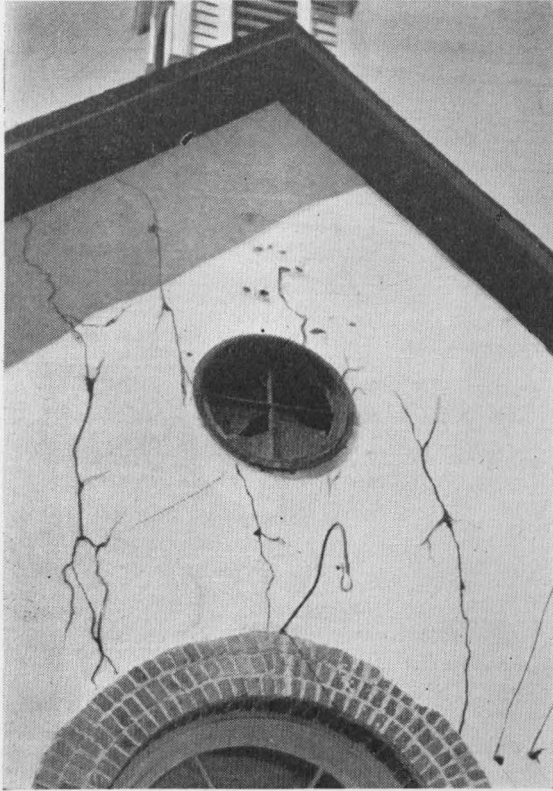
My mission at McGregor is attended by eight families; the nearest drives three miles, and the farthest twelve miles to hear Mass once a month. Three families have autos; four, lumber wagons and one has no means except a "bustrated" buggy. Five families have eight to ten children. All but two families are practically broke, if the bankers choose to foreclose, and these two have considerable trouble keeping "above board." Their little church has a five year mortgage on it—\$600—with three years' interest due. I paid the other two years' interest out of money collected for salary. Last year I received \$50 with expences for salary and for nine months this year (1923) \$40. I had to drive fifty miles to attend this mission and as I said two Masses on Sunday I would say my second Mass at a similar mission sixteen miles away.

I have another little mission, White Earth, N. D., which will help me to answer some of your questions. I was there yesterday. I drove from Stanley (22 miles) getting there at nine thirty. First I built a fire in a lidless stove. I had stopped on the way to search a dump pile for a cover for the stove and found a substitute for the lid. I soon had a fire, after scraping a little coal from the heap of last year's supply which was in the open. My parishioners, four families and a school teacher—the only Catholic in the town—arrived about ten thirty. There is an old trunk which serves as a vestment case and there is not even a table in the curtained-off sacristy. The altar is the remnant of a burned church and is itself scorched. It is of rude woodwork, covered with white cloth, on which rest the shelves of an old side altar. And as to the question about the number of parochial schools: in our whole northwest North Dakota we have but one and it is on the point of closing.

From Idaho, famous for its gold, silver, copper and lead mines, Father H. E. Heitman writes:

My mission at Eagle is located twenty-one miles east of Caldwell—where I hang up my hat when not on the road caring for my scattered flock. Our good Bishop Gorman gave me permission to dedicate a little structure, formerly a small residence, as a church; it was named St. Mary's. About three families attended the regular Mass said twice a month; this was three years ago. Yesterday I said my first Mass there with fourteen families present at the early hour of eight. The second Sunday in November I conducted the Thirteen Hours' Devotion in Eagle. Thirty-five received Holy Communion; all day the good Eaglites "thronged," yes, thronged the little church to pay homage to their Eucharistic King; and at the closing devotions scheduled at eight in the evening they were all there a half-hour before time. It was the best attended Thirteen or Forty Hours' Devotion I ever had the pleasure to witness. Despite the fact that I acted as the choir, chanted the Litany of the Saints and answered it, heard confessions before Mass, gave an appropriate sermon, drove to Caldwell

twenty miles away for my Mass there, then returned to be with the children for their hour of adoration at three o'clock, and conducted the closing devotions with singing, chanting, procession, sermon and Benediction; despite all this, I say it was a pleasure to heart and soul, although fatigued in mind and body. Such incidents, such exemplifications of live faith in these simple people, make it possible for a priest to love to be and to labor in their midst.



Arizona Church Falling Apart

I have said nothing descriptive of the poor buildings used as churches. I wish to avoid a litany of petitions. I need not appeal to the emotions to expose my case; the above are facts. But if you would ask me what I need most, I would answer: a parochial school. It is the aim of my life to build and maintain a school for my children in Caldwell.

A certain writer once said: "That the seeker after heroes of romance in these days must go to the missionaries for material.

Almost all of the romantic figures of the past are gone, but the missionary remains, a pioneer in the far lands, a hero in the battle which rages continuously." And this is as true today as it ever was. Here is just one incident to prove the point. In the Diocese of . . . a priest left home early one Sunday morning on a freight train for his mission twenty miles away. The train was wrecked twelve miles from his destination. It was mid-winter and a few feet of snow lay on the tracks; but the priest knew that his people would be waiting for him in order to hear Mass. He picked up his little grip and walked that twelve miles in the snow, with the mercury far below the zero point. He arrived in town; rang the little church bell; his congregation were surprised because they had heard of the wreck and did not think he would try to get to them. The mission had the reputation of being a small one because so many of the families lived far from the church and ordinarily only half of the congregation would be present at the Sunday Mass. The sermon of this priest on the precept of hearing Mass spread far and wide to Catholic and non-Catholic. After that sermon the little church was crowded at every Sunday Mass. That sermon was the cause of many conversions, for the people reasoned, that if a priest would suffer such hardships to get to his flock, there certainly must be something worth while in the Catholic religion.

Although the obstacles to the spreading and fostering of the Catholic faith on the western missions at times test the strength of a Goliath, still efforts are being made to alleviate the deplorable conditions. Since Monsignor Kelly, now bishop, founded the Extension Society eighteen years ago, 2352 buildings, mostly churches, have been erected for the poor missions. The great need, however, is for more priests. Accordingly the Extension Society has taken up the task of educating priests. The Extension Society also has three chapel cars in operation. One is stationed as a church and priest's house in the State of Washington, while the other two are constantly in use taking the Gospel to sparsely settled districts. The church goods department of the Society last year distributed not only vestments, but also linens, cassocks, ciboria, pictures, lamps, travelling Mass outfits, missals and many other articles. When American Church

history is written the history of the Church Extension Society will be written in letters of gold.

Among scattered Catholics the religious educational problem is very hard to solve, but a great deal is being done in this direction. In outlying districts religious instruction of the children is left solely to the parents and the busy missionary priest. The



Interior of Chapel Car—The Seats are Made in the Form of Pews

“Correspondence Course in Christian Doctrine” published by Monsignor Victor Day, V. G., Helena, Mont., is also making a noble effort to save the Faith among scattered Catholics. The fact that teaching religion by mail has found its way into twenty-eight states of the Union, Alaska, British Columbia, Alberta and Saskatchewan is enough to prove the merits of this method of teaching religion. Too much cannot be said in praise of Monsignor Day’s pioneer work in this field. One zealous

missionary priest converted his Ford into a portable Catholic school. On certain days of the week he visited the district schools in his parish; clustered his little catechism class in and about his car while he taught them the fundamental Catholic truths.

In the Diocese of Duluth we find two agencies that are helping the zealous Bishop and his hard working priests to make the Catholic religion a part of the daily lives of rural Catholics. The first agency for good is the Holy Name Society. Through the medium of this society rural Catholics of that diocese, as elsewhere in many other dioceses, have made the belief in the di-

vinity of Christ and reverence for His Holy Name something vital in their simple country homes. The second agency for good is the Dominican Third Order Sisters of the Corpus Christi House. These truly apostolic Sisters go out into the highways and byways of rural districts to teach catechism, to bring back fallen away Catholics, to make converts and in fact to do anything and everything to save souls for Christ.

The great need of the rural districts and more especially of the western missions is more priests. However we are glad to say that many priests and seminarians of the East and Middle West have voluntarily shouldered the yoke of missionary life on the home missions. In conclusion, let us ask how we Catholics, blessed with the manifold consolations of religion at home, can help the home missions. First of all, some dioceses have a surplus number of religious vocations. It would be a splendid work of charity to pay for the education of these vocations to the priesthood for the home missions. In many of our large city parishes there are sodalities of women, the membership of which in some cases is over a thousand. Much could be done to supply the missions with vestments and altar linens if every member would ply a needle for this purpose. Lastly, in the basements of very nearly every parish church can be found all kinds of cast-off church goods. The church goods department of the Church Extension Society makes a specialty of expressing these articles to the needy missions.

