

HOME ON THE FARM

RAYMOND SMITH, O.P.



BACK TO THE LAND" is a slogan that seems to appear in cycles. Unlike "Go West, young man, go West," it is repeated so often because so few pay any attention to it. One wonders why they say *back* to the land in the first place. The average urban American has passed his life walking on cement. It would seem just as sensible to tell the modern housewife to go back to baking her own bread, as to expect city dwellers to return to the land they never were on. Those born in cities will, for the most part, live and die there. For vacations they may head for the seashore or a few weeks in the country, but no one should look for an exodus to the land while the city offers jobs, any more than expect housewives to bake bread when the grocer sells it already sliced. The unfortunate thing about both cases is the lack of penetrating thought. The fellow who asks whether Grandma's homemade bread was better than the standard grocery product, is an unusual chap indeed. Concerning the land, at least there seems to be more reason for us to consider its possible superiority over the city. We still have the land!

From the Catholic point of view, the problem of the land presents two aspects. First it is necessary to keep the Catholics already in the rural sections convinced that they serve themselves and the community better by remaining there, and secondly, and this is the only aspect to be stressed in this article, to arouse interest in young Catholic couples now in the city of the advantages of a home on the farm. Horace Greeley did not get the boys to follow his advice merely with a slogan. The man had something to sell—there was gold in those Western hills, or if there wasn't, a little muscular activity and smart thinking would turn everything into gold. If Catholics, contrary to the counsels of Christ, are seeking the materialistic advantages offered by the pioneer yellow journalists, then "back to the land" is bad advice. If they are desirous of a better life, a more Christian way of living, the suggestion is worth a hearing.

THE TRUE LIFE

For Catholics, marriage is not an excursion into sensuality on a ticket to satisfy passion, and terminating the moment the road be-

comes bumpy. Matrimony is a Sacrament and the wedding bells announce a new and permanent way of life for the bride and bridegroom. Previous to the nuptial day the young man and his future wife have had a courtship. They have become friends in a most intimate way. A common bond of interest has united them. Plans for the future and dreams of things to do have occupied their thoughts and flowed out into their conversations. Love is grand right now! Everything is ideal! This walking on clouds can only last a limited time. The sad part of it is, nothing real may come from it.

To such young couples a mutual undertaking deepens their friendship and builds it upon solid foundations. To these men and women of the urban sections with no previous experience on the land, a life away from the city is a challenge. It means a study of the rudiments of the life and a test by actual experience, such as during a summer vacation, to decide whether they can make the grade or not. Colleges and Universities in many of the states provide correspondence courses for those desirous of such information. This very study is in itself a great force for securing the future happiness of the couple. So great a challenge when undertaken by the two unites them and gives them a boldness they would never otherwise possess. Thus even before beginning the life of rural dwellers, they have an advantage. Instead of passing their evenings in a movie house or in senseless gibberish, they already have a problem which serves to bring them closer together, to help them unfold their thoughts and the secrets of their hearts to one another. This solid groundwork of today guarantees the strength of their bond of love for tomorrow.

Actually they are seeking the true life, an enigma to the modern mind because it does not know truth nor understand life. An integral part of the true life will be the family. This is of utmost importance since "full family life must be the acid test of any system calling itself civilization."¹ If this is true, the advantages of the farm over the city are so staggering in proportion that one wonders what delays couples in turning to the land. Merely from an economic point of view, the wife and children take on a new aspect. They are both needed to work the farm. If the wife in the city prefers a job outside the home, it can often be traced to her awareness of being economically a burden on her husband's budget. He is literally supporting her, and if there are no children, her purpose in life seems frustrated. She is reduced to a mere luxury the husband can afford. She may,

¹ McNabb, Vincent, O.P., *The Church and the Land*, Burns Oates & Washbourne Ltd., London. 1926. p. 165.

as Father McNabb so bluntly states it, have learned "all the arts (or tricks) for becoming a wife; and none of the secrets of being a mother."²

On the farm, the man and woman are united the whole day, at least in being within earshot of one another. Their work is mutual and their interests and love grow with the years as they coöperate on the reality which has become their life. A number of reasons have been advanced for the higher birth rate on the farm, a sign in itself of good family life. "1. Farming is a domestic occupation and is much dominated by home ideals and attitudes, which invariably include children. 2. In the country there is comparatively little social competition in consuming goods which tends to reduce the number of children per family. 3. A larger proportion of rural people marry, and they marry younger than is the case in cities. 4. It costs less to rear children in the country, partly because a child's labor on the farm makes him an economic asset after an age of eight or ten is attained."³

REAL SECURITY

As mother and father, those on the land see family life in its full richness. The unity of the family is fostered by the very circumstances of farm life. "The first condition of wholesome family life is unity. The forces of modern industry threaten the family with disintegration. On the farm alone, among contemporary industries, the economic forces work for the unity of the home. Father, mother, and children are there engaged in the same intellectual interests, make the same social contacts. In the city the business man is away from his family; his occupation often is unintelligible to his wife and a mystery to his children."⁴ With this element of unity safeguarded, the young couple on the farm are truly building a home.

Nowhere does the institution of private property have such significance as for those on the land. So necessary for their security, it stands as a bulwark against the vicissitudes of the times. While in the city, workers strike for higher wages and unemployment endangers their income, with the consequent harm to the health of the family, or even encourages the sin of birth prevention, the land always produces at least enough to supply the needs of the family. A digression on the kind of table a farmer's wife can provide is not necessary.

² *Ibid.*, p. 41.

³ *Handbook of Rural Social Resources*, as quoted in *The Church and the Country Community* by Edwin V. O'Hara. Macmillan Company. 1927. p. 25.

⁴ O'Hara, Edwin V. *op. cit.*, p. 34.

Being at the source of supplies, a well-managed farm fulfills all the demands of healthy appetites. As long as it is recognized that "the worker on the land and his family possess the first right to the fruits of their toil,"⁵ there is little danger of want for those who have made their home on the farm.

THE SPIRITUAL SIDE

The material advantages thus far enumerated would be of little value if they were to prove destructive to the fostering of the religious spirit. Such is not the case. The truth of the matter has been summed up by the Right Reverend Msgr. Luigi Ligutti. "When homesteads disappear, men begin to lose the supernatural, because with the loss of homesteads men are losing the natural basis for the supernatural."⁶ One source of great blessings is the Family Rosary. This glorious and fruitful custom flourishes with greater sureness in the farm home because the distractions of the city are not present to draw away members of the family circle almost every night in the week and thus gradually kill the practice. Indeed, if one considers the Liturgy with its constant reference to crops and the processions prescribed at the change of the seasons, one almost concludes that the mind of the Church favors the land.

Looking to Rome for direction on this subject, one discovers that the weight of Papal authority is in favor of more people on the land. It has been pointed out that the principle of Pope Leo XIII in *Rerum Novarum*, namely, that the "law . . . should favor ownership and its policy should be to induce as many as possible to become owners," is best realized by a return to the land.⁷ Pius XII reaffirmed this idea in his Pentecostal address commemorating the social encyclicals of Leo XIII and Pius XI.⁸ "Of all the goods that can be the object of private ownership none is more conformable to nature . . . than the land, the holding in which the family lives, and from the products of which it draws all or part of its subsistence. . . ." The Most Reverend Aloisius J. Muench, D.D., Bishop of Fargo, has expressed the vocation of the farmer in these profound words: "The

⁵ "Man's Relations to the Land," a statement of Catholics, Jews, and Protestants interested in religion and agriculture. Press release August 24th, 1945.

⁶ Ligutti, Luigi G., Rt. Rev. Msgr. "The Farmer and Social Reconstruction" in *The Catholic Mind*, March 22, 1942. Reprinted from THE CATHOLIC CHRONICLE.

⁷ cfr. McNabb, Vincent, O.P., *op. cit.*, p. 3.

⁸ cfr. Ligutti, Luigi, *op. cit.*, p. 12, 13.

farmer's calling is a sacred calling . . . because he is collaborator with God in continuing the work of His creation."⁹

RURAL ROADS TO DESTINY

What America's leaders do in the next few years will determine the future of our country. The end of the war has not been the beginning of peace. The battlefield has been switched from Europe and the Pacific right into our own front lawn. What Catholics do today with help also to shape the America of tomorrow. Loyalty to our Faith and to our Country demands that we consider the rôle we can play for best advancing the stability of these United States. A departure from the city and a life on the farm seems to be one way that young Catholic couples could further the good of their country and the cause of religion.

It would be misleading to overlook the need of proper training and false to paint the farm as a utopian form of life, just as it is foolish to ridicule the city as a den of iniquity. The latter attitude antagonizes those who might otherwise consider the land movement; the former is unjust to those who accept the challenge only to face disillusionment. Farm life has more than its share of difficulties. There is, besides, a paucity of many of the conveniences one takes for granted in the city. "The farmer may lack some of the material things of city life. What does it matter? There can be culture without comfort, beauty without luxury, machines without enslaving factories, science without worship of matter."¹⁰ Those are strong words and not all are willing to surrender their comforts and luxuries. Men, after all, are like children. All the theoretically sound and powerful arguments in the world will not induce a child to take a dose of castor oil. The only thing that concerns the youngsters is its bad taste, and that was not mentioned in the arguments advanced. Sometimes the only object in the life of a man is the easy road to security, a false worldly security, and that has not been mentioned as a fruit of farm life.

Indeed, a successful return to the land must not offer the life too many have sought since the Reformation. A transfer of big business ideas from the city to the farm is always disastrous. "Farming will be a much more successful business if it be borne in mind that it is not primarily a business at all . . . farming is primarily a mode of life, and only secondarily a commercial business. Its ultimate suc-

⁹ cfr. *The Catholic Mind*, September 8, 1941, p. 3.

¹⁰ Muench, Most Rev. Aloisius J., in *The Catholic Mind*, September 8, 1941.

cess will be secured by producing for the family living on the farm, instead of producing an agricultural speciality and buying the necessities of life for the rural home. For the agricultural industry as a whole diversified production and a self-sufficing economy is the far-seeing policy."¹¹

Perhaps before any large number of young Catholics will accept the invitation to a life of hard but valuable labor on the farm, their hearts will have to be changed. Materialism has infected the best of us. Our sense of values has been distorted. We cannot see beyond today to the end of life ever pressing upon us. The Faith has ceased to be vital and the dangers to it are ignored. The threat of Communism is strongest in our cities. A Catholic farm population could stabilize us against its encroachments on the land, while an aroused and articulate laity held the fort in the city. The urban birth rate is constantly dropping and this constitutes another hardship for the Church. A Catholic increase from the farm could offset this decrease in the city until some adjustment is finally made. The most crucial danger of the city lies in the fact that the roots of spirituality are drying up there. More and more cities are becoming atheistic. The power of man is too evident to its inhabitants for them to look beyond to God. Hence, to the farmer we must turn, for the golden wheat reminds him of the Eucharist; the grapes, not of wrath, but of the Saviour's Blood. As we await a new world we look to the soil, for from it comes life, perhaps this time the life of a new and better world.

¹¹ O'Hara, Edwin V. *op. cit.*, p. 71.