

Relation to Nature

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One reason the social relationships discussed in the last section are out of whack is because we human beings have forgotten where we fit into the whole picture of God's Creation. We see ourselves as separate from, *above* the rest of creation. In fact, we are *part of* creation, with functions to carry out in cooperation with God's other creatures. The image of the body that St. Paul used applies here too: "The eye cannot say to the hand, I do not need you, any more than the head can say to the feet, I do not need you. Even those members of the body which seem less important are in fact indispensable (I Corinthians 12:21-22)." Our function is made clear in Genesis 2:15: "[We were] settled in the garden of Eden to cultivate and care for it." But the spirit of division which our society fosters — and which we have already seen at work both inside ourselves and among us as human beings in the last two parts of this series — is at work cutting us off from the earth and the rest of the its inhabitants. Of all the divisions

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in our lives, this is the least noticed, but it the most pervasive. It is the most damaging, too; it leaves us rootless, weakened, prey to all kinds of evil. The worst part of it is that we think that rootlessness is *freedom* from nature (a silly idea — dare I say an "unnatural idea"? - that can only arise when we forget we did not make ourselves). It means we are *free* to ravage creation to satisfy our greed, even prepare to turn Earth into a lifeless, radioactive planet.

The Catholic Worker has always seen that we need to put down roots if we are going to transform society in the light of the Good News. Peter Maurin used to say, "I'm neither bourgeois nor proletarian. I'm a peasant. I have roots." From these roots grow the third point of the Catholic Worker platform of Cult, Culture, and Cultivation, and the third tool for building the platform, farming communes.

Another peasant, Pope John XXIII, expressed the importance of cultivation in his encyclical *Mater et Magistra*. He wrote, "Farmer's work is the most noble because it is undertaken in the majestic temple of creation; because it is concerned with the life of plants and animals, a life inexhaustible in its expression, inflexible in its laws, rich in its allusions to God, Creator and Provider. . . . Work of this kind, moreover, possesses a special nobility because it requires farmers to understand well the course of the seasons and to adapt themselves to it. It requires that they await patiently what the future brings; that they appreciate the importance and seriousness of their duties; that they remain constantly alert and ready for new developments."

All this stands in strong opposition to the independence and self-sufficiency that infects us in our modern and industrial

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world. Not only does rural life make clear the interrelatedness of Creation, it short-circuits the increasing specialization of our age. Farmer can't get by just doing one or two things. Farming requires a wide variety of skills and knowledge.

Just going back to the farm is not enough, however. Our modern agriculture has been infiltrated by the false picture of our relationship to nature that I described before. Since we put ourselves apart from other creatures, we think we can exploit them, abuse them, dispose of them according to our whim. We poison the earth so we can extract more profits; we use up resources that can never be replaced; we exhaust the soil or let it be washed away into rivers or disappear on the wind. We tear up good farmland to extract minerals or pave it over for shopping malls. We condemn whole species to extinction. This arrogance is a far cry from the divine mandate to "cultivate and care for" the earth.

But we have committed an even worse obscenity. Not only have we prepared weapons which can make the soil incapable of producing food, perhaps for generations; now we have decided to make food itself a weapon. The farmer, whose life is bound up in nurture, is turned into a war contractor. Wendell Berry has written, "The militarization of food is the greatest threat so far raised against the farmland and the farm communities of this country. If the present attitudes continue, we may expect government policies that will encourage the destruction, by overuse, of farmland."

In the same way, our refusal to explore kinds of energy that are in harmony with creation, and our continued insistence on using up nonrenewable fuels as fast as they can be torn from the earth, have brought us to the point where we have actually

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gone to war to protect our sources of these fuels. And in our world, any war could be the occasion of the final destruction of this planet.

This is how far our lordly attitude toward God's Creation has brought us. Yet, we are people who believe that Creation is so sacred that God, the Maker of it all, became a creature to save the cosmos from the consequences of our disobedience. Remember, too, that disobedience was in the use of one of God's fruits that God did not intend us to use. In that moment, Milton says:

Earth felt the wound, and Nature from her seat
Sighing though all her works gave signs of woe,
That all was lost.

The remedy is likewise shared by all Creation, as another Christian poet, Prudentius, wrote 1200 years earlier:

At the Nativity, O Lord
All hard unfeeling things were stirred
The unrelenting crags grew kind
And clothed the flinty stones with grass.

We are not the makers of Heaven and Earth. God is. St. Thomas Aquinas teaches that "human beings have a twofold competence in relation to material things. The first is the title to care for and distribute the earth's resources. . . . [The other] is to use and manage the world's resources. Now in regard to this, no one is entitled to manage things merely for himself or herself. Each must do so in the interest of all."

In 1980, the bishops of the 44 Midwestern U.S. dioceses reaffirmed the Church's teaching that we are stewards of Creation, not masters, in a joint pastoral letter called *Strangers*

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and Guests. The title is from Leviticus 25:33: "The land must not be sold in perpetuity, for the land belongs to me, YHWH, and to me you are only strangers and guests."

"We too must be strangers and guests," the bishops declare. "We must keep in mind the land's inherent status as a gift from God for the human family — God's children — and our own responsibility to be God's stewards upon it for the benefit of all people. The future of the land, of its inhabitants and of all who depend on its resources will be affected by what we do in the present."

The first draft of this document laid out the steps clearly: "Farmers should practice humility in their relationship with the land. They should farm with elegance, rotating crops, using tillage practices which minimize erosion, returning organic residues to the soil, conserving water." To this we add that we must all (not just farmers) consider our dependence on technology that uses vast amounts of energy. We should look hard at the tasks to be done and use an appropriate level of technology. A smaller machine, or even a hand tool, may do the same job more cheaply, with less damage to the balance of nature and less waste of nonrenewable fuels. A Quaker anthropologist, Trudy Huntington, has shown that just such a philosophy has enabled Amish farmers to thrive where modern agribusiness has failed.

Many people over the years have dismissed Peter Maurin's concern for Cultivation as a naive, romantic yearning for some past agrarian dreamland. Many others tell us that we will never get everybody out of the cities so we'd be better off not wasting time setting up farm communes. We are convinced that even city-dwellers must come to an awareness of their dependence on the rest of Creation for food, clothing and

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shelter and of the effects their way of life has on that Creation.

This cannot happen as long as city-dwellers continue to believe working the earth is beneath them. Rural people in this country are as despised as they are indispensable. The cultural value of the family farm is dismissed. The *New York Times* justified the wholesale theft of farmland during the 1980s, when banks and insurance companies acquired vast holdings while transforming free farmers into tenants, as a "rationalization" of an industry mired in backwardness. This contempt amounts to a kind of sickness. It has gone so far that U.S. trade negotiators are even willing to see the downfall of their hopes for a new capitalist world order rather than allow European or Japanese or Korean government policies that protect small farmers by subsidies and tariffs.

City-dwellers blame farmers, for instance, for the price of food when their demand for more suburbs and freeways takes rich farmland out of cultivation and makes the remaining farmland prohibitively expensive. Useful land within the cities is wasted. Community gardens in vacant lots in the inner city not only let urban people regain contact with the land, but also go stewardship one better by taking poor soil and enriching it by removing bricks and glass and replacing them with manure and mulch. Thus the land is left in better shape than before.

In other words, community garden plots in the cities are better taken care of than plots which are held for purposes of speculation alone. This care for God's creation is the keynote of *Strangers and Guests*. "Stewardship," the bishops declare, "implies that civil title to a portion of the earth does not confer absolute ownership of it. That belongs to God alone. Civil title does confer responsibility for the land, for the use to which it is put and the care with which it is treated."

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This idea is very much like Native American notions of our relationship to the rest of nature. In fact, *Strangers and Guests* pays tribute to the First Nations in the clearest terms: "Respect for the land and gratitude for its bounty were characteristic attitudes of the Native Americans who inhabited the heartland long before the first European settlers arrived. These American Indians tried to live in harmony with nature and within individual tribes shared the land and its gifts as public benefits rather than as private property. We believe that the people of the heartland might learn from American Indian ways of living in harmony with the land, and thus of fulfilling their own responsibility as stewards."

It would repay all of us to make ourselves more familiar with the beliefs and social arrangements of those who lived before us on this continent. Their communitarian approach bears a strong resemblance to the Catholic Worker's ideas about common ownership and mutual aid. Their land tenure certainly calls into question traditional European ideas about private property — ideas that led St. Birgitta to exclaim, "Property is to damnation as the spark is to the flame."



Moving in ever increasing circles from our inner selves to the harmonious life of all species on earth has also led us back to our starting point, the question of property and economic systems. Even if I have made nothing else clear in these five sections, I hope that I have given a taste of how Catholic Workers see all aspects of life as intertwined, all injustices linked, all questions to be studied through the eyes

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of faith. And I hope that I have given you a taste of how we deal with them in the daily lives of our communities. St. Maximus the Confessor warns us, after all, that "theology without action is the theology of demons." Our action may not bring forth much visible fruit; but after all, it is God who causes the seeds of our works to germinate. Our task is to sow those seeds faithfully and trust the future to God's might and wisdom.

So I cast these words into the furrow. May they bear fruit in your hearts and minds, dear readers. And "may the words of my mouth, and the meditations of my heart always be acceptable in your sight, O God, my Strength and my Redeemer." - R. Cleaver, 1992