

FRUITS OF THE EARTH AND HUMAN LABOUR *A socio-economic contract with the rural world*

1 Agriculture plays a key role in the social, economic, environmental and cultural domains. Its basic mission consists in cultivating our fertile earth, nourishing people, and providing a reasonable living for the men and women who work the land. *The soil is the source of life; its wealth belongs to everyone, to the present generation and those that will follow.*¹ The *Commission sur l'avenir de l'agriculture et de l'agroalimentaire au Québec* (CAAAQ) has just submitted its report [*Agriculture and Agrifood: Securing and Building the Future – Proposals for Sustainable and Healthy Agriculture*]. In its May 1st message which commemorates International Workers' Day, the Social Affairs Committee of the AQCB presents its reflections on the inherent difficulties faced by farming communities in Québec.

THE EFFECTS OF INDUSTRIALIZATION

2. Before 1960, agriculture was a way of life. People lived according to nature's rhythms which taught them to care for and respect the earth. The landscape was dotted with numerous family farms. With the introduction of new technologies and production methods, industrialization brought important changes to the rural world. Over the years, these changes have had considerable repercussions on farmers, soil cultivation, animal husbandry, the environment, the size of farms, and commercialization of agricultural products. Needless to say, many farms have been abandoned and regional economies have suffered.

¹ Drainville, Gérard, *Espoirs et défis dans le Québec d'aujourd'hui*, Assemblée des évêques du Québec, February 1985.

3. The requirements for specialization and high productivity to ensure profits have played key roles in the loss of a significant number of families and farms throughout rural communities. Specialization promoted a narrow focus for agricultural and agro-food businesses. According to the CAAAQ report, the agricultural population of Québec represents only 6.4% of the rural population, which itself is 19.6% of the total population of the province of Québec (Statistics Canada Census 2001).

The Influence of Agricultural Politics

4. Agricultural policies have favored and encouraged specialization in crops and animal husbandry to respond to global market demands. These transformations have resulted in a concentration of agricultural businesses in the Montérégie, Central Québec and Beauce-Appalachian regions. What followed was a further concentration of jobs in new agrifood enterprises in the Montreal and Montérégie regions. With this focus, the peripheral, rural regions suffered a steady economic decline which has threatened the feasibility of their public and private services. As Jacques Proulx noted: *Until now the programs that were supposed to support agriculture have contributed to a great extent to increase regional disparity rather than develop employment opportunities throughout Québec.*²

Women and Agriculture

5. In this context, women have increasingly become associates, partners, and owners of agricultural businesses. Their goal is to achieve a more equitable perception of their status in this profession. As women focus on the quality of family life, they are calling for programs that will provide aid and financial assistance tailored to the needs of an agricultural way of life.

The Next Cohort

6. It has become more difficult for young people to establish themselves in the agricultural sector. Though they may have technical or university education in this domain, they still face many obstacles. First of all are the demands of a profession that will tie them down seven days out of seven, particularly in animal husbandry. Also the market value of farms has increased considerably. Prospective farmers need to have substantial funds to buy a farm, whether through a property transfer or as co-owners in a family business. In order to be eligible for an agricultural business subsidy, applicants must also meet very demanding criteria. Some young people will postpone plans to establish themselves on farms to gain experience and will return to the land with a different vision of a developing agricultural model.

² Jacques Proulx, President, Solidarité rural du Québec, in his *Discours devant la CAAAQ, August 27, 2007.*

Challenges to Agricultural Land

7. Industrialization has also transformed farm machinery and methods of cultivating the land in response to the needs of specialized products and markets. Certain practices have had harmful effects on the ecosystem, the environment, and ultimately on our health. We have a striking example in the practice of single crop cultivation on vast agricultural lands and excessive use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides to increase yield. Another disturbing practice is the increased use of genetically modified and patented seeds that are controlled exclusively by multinationals.

Uses of Agricultural Soil for Other Purposes

8. With the rising price of oil, the cultivation of several vegetable substances to produce bio-ethanol has increased substantially in response to consumers' energy demands. We have lost good, fertile land to profitable urban development, including the construction of super highways and mega shopping centers on the periphery of these towns. Another troubling aspect is that for several years, agricultural land and wooded areas of various regions in Québec have been taken over by marijuana cultivators for the burgeoning drug market, without the knowledge of the farmers themselves.

Agricultural Crisis

9. There is a crisis in agriculture marked by huge farm debts, market instability, free market conditions, animal diseases such as “mad cow” and scrapie (mad sheep), climactic changes, environmental regulations, and encroaching urbanization. These result in serious consequences which affect the quality of family life.

Psychological Distress

10. During this time, society's expectations of farmers have not only increased dramatically but become more complex. Taken as a whole, these factors have created psychological distress among an increasing number of agricultural workers. According to a recent survey, “one respondent out of two (50.9%) presented an elevated level of psychological distress in comparison to 20.11% of Québécois. More than one farmer in 20 has contemplated suicide in comparison to one in 25 individuals in the Québec population.”³ We cannot ignore such alarming human statistics. These structural changes have been thrust upon people and pose great challenges for agriculture in Québec.

Food Sovereignty

11. By food sovereignty, we mean “the right of people to define their own food and agricultural policies, to protect and regulate production and national agricultural exchanges

³ LAFLEUR, Ginette et al. *Enquête sur la santé psychologique des producteurs agricoles du Québec*, University of Moncton, 2006, p. 77.

in order to achieve sustainable development objectives; to determine their degree of food autonomy and to eliminate *dumping* on their markets”.⁴ To achieve these objectives, agriculture must play a role in securing agricultural stockpiles and offering quality produce to nourish the population. However, the *Union des consommateurs*, while sympathizing with the concept of food sovereignty, believes that “behind this concept there are several crucial and covert issues that affect the future of humanity: hunger, the control of agriculture and food production by several multinationals, serious threats to public health and the environment, encroaching urbanization, the disappearance of farms, and finally the loss of the communities’ control over their agriculture and food production.”⁵

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT PRACTICES

12. Positive changes have taken place for many farmers which will relieve the deadlock caused by industrial agriculture and market globalization. We are witnessing the emergence of agricultural soil management that is eco-friendly. This method considers soil, water, plants, and animals as components that must function as a whole.

Uniting Farmers and Consumers in a Common Cause

13. It is imperative to bring agriculture back to its primary and basic function: to nourish local and national communities. To achieve this goal we must reestablish solidarity between producers and communities. Only a sincere and viable partnership will ensure indispensable co-habitation and guarantee the survival of the rural population. If the primary stakeholders in this partnership cannot agree, then we will see an increase in health consequences for the whole population.

New Initiatives

14. Immigrants and a growing number of urban households want to live in the country and enjoy the beauty of nature. Often they bring capital which they invest in new, small-scale agricultural and breeding techniques and produce specialty products such as cheeses, ciders, wines and meat. The outcome of this agricultural entrepreneurship could result in small market-gardener and animal husbandry cooperatives and ultimately public regional markets. These initiatives promote contacts between consumers and agricultural producers while encouraging and developing local networks to promote their produce.

⁴ *D’abord nourrir notre monde*, passage from the statement on September 7, 2007, during a summit of food sovereignty proponents.

⁵ Union des consommateurs, *Pour une nouvelle vision des politiques en matières agroalimentaire*, Brief presented to CAAAQ, June 2007, p. 5.

Participants in Social Change

15. We are all affected by the realities that the agricultural world is experiencing. The stakes are high at local, regional, national, and global levels. Agriculture is the basis of our nutrition. It plays an integral part in rural development policies, viable farming options, and regional economies. World markets increasingly influence our local markets and multinationals exert enormous control over our nutrition. We need a social contract *that would involve the State, citizens, and farmers, rather than merely providing service to the farming industry. The Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food must re-appropriate its power to influence agricultural development.*⁶ Our choices concerning agro-food consumption are important to safeguard our agriculture, ensure quality of life for people who work the land, conserve agricultural zones, and protect the environment. We are all invited to become active participants in social change.

Civic Responsibility

16. The agro-food market is global. Our food has often traveled a long way to reach our plates. As consumers we must think about the operational methods of the entire agro-food chain and question our purchases. When we make our food choices, our selection criteria must include environmental, social, cultural, ethical and political issues (*Union des consommateurs*). Throughout the course of history, human beings have always questioned their values, practices, and relationships with others and considered how they would affect their survival and that of future generations.

Perspective

17. In the passage on creation, Christian tradition teaches us that God entrusted men and women with caring for the earth and the mission to make it flourish for the good of all. This plan of love for creation was sealed by a Covenant between God and his people dating from the time the Israelites were freed from slavery in Egypt.

18. This Covenant requires ethical solidarity between the earth and its people. This is expressed by three socio-economic recommendations that are practiced during a Jubilee year, which is celebrated after seven sabbatical years. These are: rest for the land, freedom for slaves, and forgiveness of debt. In return, God promised abundance and security for his people, while emphasizing the connection between caring for the environment and the well-being of humanity. *The land will yield its fruit, and you will eat your fill and live on it securely* (Leviticus 25:19).

⁶ Op. cit. Jacques Proulx.

19. The Jubilee invites us to inhabit not to dominate the earth. In the New Testament, the four Gospels reveal how Jesus perfected this Covenant between God and humanity. The core of Christ's commitment was to free marginalized people and enable them to discover God's love and mercy through his parables, cures, and miracles.

20. The 2008 International Eucharistic Congress, which will take place in Québec City from June 15th to 22nd, will be another occasion to remember that the Mass invites us to share the fruits of the land and respect the work of human beings. We are stakeholders and our commitment of solidarity must be to protect the earth and its inhabitants.



Social Affairs Committee

Bishop Gilles Lussier, Bishop Roger Ébacher, Bishop Jean Gagnon, Bishop Pierre-André Fournier, M. Pierre Côté, SJ, Mme Andrée Cyr-Desroches, Mme Denise Martel and Mme Rolande Parrot.

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1225, boul. Saint-Joseph Est

Montréal, QC H2J 1L7

Email: aecq@eveques.qc.ca

Website: <http://www.eveques.qc.ca>

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