NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://www.ncronline.org)

Food and faith: possibilities for parishes (Part 2)

Charles Morris | Sep. 14, 2011 Eco Catholic

In yesterday's blog [1] I stated: As Catholic Christians, we are called to read the signs of the times and make, if necessary, a counter-cultural witness. It is the urban poor who have the least access to fresh and organic food. It is the poor who suffer the most from diet-based degenerative diseases such as obesity and diabetes.

In the United States the National Catholic Rural Life Conference [2] (NCRLC) has been a fierce advocate for the rights of the small farmer and a more just food system. I have been active for a number of years with the Michigan Catholic Rural Life Coalition [3]. The NCRLC has wonderful material for small faith sharing groups on the church's teaching on food and faith and sustainable living.

Beyond study, parishes are called to be living witnesses of the Gospel in our local communities. As I have discovered, during my years I served as pastor of St. Elizabeth Parish in Wyandotte, Mich., models abound that can enhance our witness of a more just and sustainable world through the promotion of local and organic methods of food production:

- Parish garden: Adjacent to the garage next to the rectory we had a lot devoted to organic gardening. Not only did we plant heirloom seeds of crops ranging from tomatoes to Swiss chard but we used organic methods of weed control such as wood chips and of pest control such as pepper spray and the introduction of lady bugs. Each week parishioners were invited to take food produce home after Mass. Other produce was donated to the local soup kitchen.
- Community Supported Agriculture (CSA): Mary and Henry LaFrance, a couple in our parish, owned five acres adjacent to their suburban home, which they farmed. Mary and Henry were part of the Community Supported Agriculture movement. People would pay a set fee each year to join the CSA. They would then put a set number of hours each week to work the farm. The members of the CSA were free to take what they needed each week and, outside of the CSA membership and the sweat equity, paid nothing extra for the food they helped to grow.
- Farmer's market: For a couple of years each Sunday during the summer months after the last Mass, we had a farmer's market in the parking lot of the church. We advertised the farmer's market to neighboring parishes and across the city. This gave our parishioners access to locally grown food and the opportunity to build relationships with local farmers. The good news is that the city of Wyandotte and the neighboring cities of Lincoln Park and Riverview now have their own weekly farmer's market. This explosion of farmers' markets has taken place over the past couple of years.
- Food co-op: For more than 20 years, St. Elizabeth hosted a food co-op. Amish meats and companies that serviced health food stores and Whole Foods would deliver food products to the parish bi-weekly. Parishioners would volunteer to slice the meat and shelve product. The parishioners would then purchase the products at discount.
- Cow shares and farmer cooperatives: Readers of *The Omnivore's Dilemma* and viewers of "Food, Inc." are familiar with Joel Salatin and Polyface Farm. Richard Hebron, a farmer from southwest Michigan,

heard Joel speak and began Family Farms' Cooperative [4]. Richard has collaborated with organic farmers in his area. Each farmer contributes food ranging from free-range eggs and grass-fed beef to raw milk (via a cow share) from an Amish farmer to raw honey, kefir, produce, etc.

The farmers at Family Farms' Cooperative are committed to traditional methods of fertilizing. I have visited Richard's farm. Like Polyface, chickens are given open access to the pasture to feed. The chickens provide natural fertilizer for the field and the cows eat grass as a kind of natural mower.

Richard is in Chicago on Mondays. On Friday mornings he is in Ann Arbor. Friday afternoons he rotates between stops at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Birmingham and, when I was pastor, at St. Elizabeth in Wyandotte. One pays an annual fee to join the cooperative. One e-mails ahead of time one's order. Each week Richard would set up tables in the St. Elizabeth school hallway while folks came in and made their purchase. In this model a direct relationship is established between the farmer and the customer. All of the profits go directly to the farmer.

The role of Catholic parishes

Each of the models enumerated result in a lower ecological footprint and deepen the People of God's real relationship with the earth and with those who grow our food. Each of the above models of relating food to faith is doable.

If we are to have real social change in our nation and a more just food system I believe that parish life is where different possibilities can be realized. Preaching is essential. Good liturgy reflective of creation care is essential. Adult education is essential. Asking the big questions, such as from where does our food come, is essential Advocacy is essential. But if we are to be the sermon we preach then might not parishes themselves take the lead to demonstrate in our lived reality how a different world might look?

There is another kind of food revolution where the faith community has been critically involved, especially here in Detroit: the urban farming movement. But that requires its own blog.

Source URL (retrieved on *2016-05-30 04:02*): http://www.ncronline.org/blogs/eco-catholic/food-and-faith-possibilities-parishes-part-2

Links:
[1] http://ncronline.org/blogs/eco-catholic/food-and-faith-possibilities-parishes-part-1
[2] http://www.ncronline.org/www.ncrlc.com
[3] http://www.ncronline.org/www.michigancatholicrurallife.org
[4] http://sites.google.com/site/familyfarmscoop