French farmers drive their tractors in a go-slow operation in Compans Jan. 27, 2024, near Roi

French farmers drive their tractors in a go-slow operation in Compans Jan. 27, 2024, near Roissy Charles-de-Gaulle Airport in a protest over price pressures, taxes and green regulation, grievances shared by farmers across Europe, (OSV News/Reuters/Benoit Tessier)

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France's bishops stand in solidarity with farmers protesting across the country. After days of protests in the local provinces, farmers were determined to block the main roads leading to Paris, with spectacular traffic jams of tractors and farm vehicles they formed Jan. 29 across the French capital.

Protesting farmers aim to pressure the government over the future of their industry, which has been shaken by repercussions of the Ukraine war.

Protesters hoped to create what they described as a "siege" intended to squeeze more concessions from the government, led by new Prime Minister Gabriel Attal, less than a month into the job.

While trying to increase food production and yet reduce the impact of agriculture on the environment, the farmers are faced with rising costs, including soaring energy prices. They feel they are being unfairly accused of going against ecological concerns by the European Union.

At the same time, a global food crisis caused by the Russian invasion on Ukraine — called "the world's food storage" for its fertile land — has made prices for fertilizer, energy and other inputs for growing crops and feeding livestock much higher, and consumed the farmers' income.

Those protesting on the Paris highways Jan. 29 held signs with messages such as "No food without farmers," and "The end of us would mean famine for you."

The church did not think twice about backing the farmers in their fight, and several French bishops issued statements, expressing solidarity with their struggle.

Bishop Jean-Marc Micas of Tarbes and Lourdes, the diocese of the famous Marian shrine, in the Pyrenees, personally visited the roads blocked by tractors to greet the protesters.

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"The farmers we know are responsible people, sensitive to issues linked to climate and the environment," Micas said in his Jan. 24 statement.

The bishop expressed his "compassion," "solidarity" and "commitment alongside those who suffer."

"I invite the faithful of the diocese to do so in a sincere and determined manner, seeking to understand what pushes farmers to express themselves as they do, to know the reality of their daily life, to support their work by allowing its fair remuneration," Micas wrote.

Further east, near the Mediterranean Sea, the bishops of the Montpellier province, which includes the Archdiocese of Montpellier and four dioceses, are calling for "justice and consideration" for the farmers, saying they understand their "legitimate concerns." "The cup is full," they said, denouncing the fact that imported products are exempt from the administrative, sanitary and economic constraints imposed on

French farmers.

"Faced with rising costs that are crushing you," they wrote to farmers, "ever more restrictive standards imposed on you, constant controls, excessive administrative procedures, you are suffering to the point of crying out in despair," the bishops, led by Archbishop Norbert Turini of Montpellier, wrote Jan. 25.

"The constraints imposed by climate change and the need to protect the planet also mean additional costs for production," they added, calling for "urgent measures," at the national and European levels, in response to the "just cause" of the protesting farmers' demands for "decent" incomes. They pointed out that some farmers commit suicide because of a "spiral of over-indebtedness."

The bishops of Brittany wrote in the same tone, adding fishermen, alongside farmers and breeders, to their statement. They denounced an unfair competition from "production from abroad where environmental standards are not binding, or even do not exist."

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Meanwhile, Archbishop Jean-Paul James of Bordeaux, a region famous for its wines, addressed the wine world, which has been hit hard by the crisis in a specific way. "The French have changed their wine-consumption habits," he pointed out, and "exports are not providing the hoped-for outlets." He called for general solidarity with winegrowers, at a time when the need for them to change practices and reduce production, represents a serious threat to those who will fail to cope with these changes.

"We wish to express the Catholic Church's compassion for all those who devote their lives to working the land and raising animals to feed us," emphasized Bishop Philippe Christory of Chartes, a lowland region some 60 miles from Paris, which is a major economic area in French agricultural production.

"Our visits to farms and agricultural businesses give us an insight into the day-to-day efforts of everyone involved. We would like to thank the farmers who commit themselves unreservedly to this demanding profession, where they do not count the hours, where they face unpredictable weather conditions, where they have no control over selling prices," the bishop said. “We understand 'how difficult their daily lives are, and the anxiety that often grips them."

The bishop also expressed his grief over the deaths of a 35-year-old mother and her 12-year-old daughter killed in Pamiers — the largest city in the Ariège department in the Occitanie region in southwestern France — when a car crashed into the tent where farmers gathered at a roadblock early morning Jan. 23. The woman's husband and the girl's father was severely injured.

The tragic accident "touched our hearts and upset us. We are overcome with emotion and we wish to express the compassion of the Catholic Church towards all those who dedicate their lives to working the land and raising animals to feed us," Christory wrote.