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## Food and faith: possibilities for parishes (Part 1)

by Charles Morris

Eco Catholic

One need not have read *The Omnivore's Dilemma* or have seen the movie "Food, Inc." to know that something is seriously out of kilter with the American food system. With the dominance of agri-business, the quaint image of the family farmer with cows out in the pasture who is growing a cornucopia of crop varieties has, in recent years, become something of an anachronism.

Rather, with the rise of agri-business our food production system has several disturbing characteristics:

- **Monoculture:** As author (*The Omnivore's Dilemma*) and food justice advocate Michael Pollan has stated, the average American has more corn in her/his system than the average Mexican. Two crops now dominate American agriculture -- corn and soy. We live on processed high-fructose corn syrup. This has contributed to the epidemic of obesity and diabetes among our youth.
- **Genetically modified organisms (GMOs):** More and more of the crops we grow [e.g. 90 percent of all soy crops] are being tampered with through the use of gene splicing by agri-business. Although the stated intent is to develop crops that are drought and pest resistant, authors such as Jeffrey Smith, in books such as *Seeds of Deception* and *Genetic Roulette*, document study after study of potential adverse health effects -- ranging from allergies to increased probability of organ defects.
- **Patenting of seeds:** The U.S. Supreme Court has given the green light for the patenting of seeds by companies such as Monsanto and ADM. As films such as "The World According to Monsanto" and "Food, Inc." have documented, farmers across North America have been successfully sued and driven off the land when their traditional seed has been contaminated by exposure to patented seeds.
- **Concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs):** Thousands of cows and chickens are forced to

live shortened lives in the most brutish conditions. Where cows in their natural habitat eat grass and chickens are omnivores, in CAFOs they are force fed corn and other grains for which their digestive systems are ill equipped. Chickens' beaks are broken to keep them from pecking one another. Cows are made to stand in their own manure. Americans' hunger for fast food has accelerated the pressure for more and larger CAFOs. The tons of manure that CAFOs produce seep into the ground and is carried by rains into our water system.

- Food safety in processing: Nearly every month I hear of spinach or meat that has been recalled due to e-coli contamination. As fewer and larger food processing operations have dominated the food preparation market, quality control ranging from CAFO runoff in irrigation water to poor sanitary conditions in the food processing plant has resulted in an epidemic of foodborne pathogens.
- Conflict of interest for oversight: As "Food, Inc." devastatingly demonstrates, there has been for several generations a revolving door between administrators at the Food and Drug Administration and executives at Big Agra. This has resulted in a compromising of the oversight responsibilities that the FDA has on behalf of the public good.
- Transportation of food and impact on climate and fossil fuel use: The average American salad travels 1,500 miles to make its way to my table. In order for me to enjoy blueberries in January my blueberries are grown in Chile. The American food system, buttressed by an extensive transportation system and by agri-business' intense dependence on petroleum based fertilizers, contributes to stressors on climate and addiction to foreign oil as we enter a period of peak oil.

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.

Watch Eco Catholic tomorrow for a blog about the models that can enhance our witness of a more just and sustainable world through the promotion of local and organic methods of food production, especially focusing on what parishes can do.

[Fr. Charles Morris is a priest of the archdiocese of Detroit. He is public policy representative for and a former director of Michigan Interfaith Power & Light. He teaches courses in sustainability at Madonna University in Livonia, Mich. Fr. Morris won the Michigan Green Leaders Award this year.]

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